Critique Equals Suffering Plus Society? Towards a New Approach to Critique

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While science is typically expected to be neutral and objective, critical approaches have their established place in the social sciences. All social scientists are aware of the critical difference that their research can or should make in society, and some pursue an explicitly transformative agenda. The social sciences have always critically reflected on the objects they investigate as well as on themselves. And their critical engagements go back to the first and second traditions of Enlightenment (i.e. the philosophes and the work of Karl Marx).

Yet “critique” can mean different things and I would like to broadly distinguish between two types: “hot” critique, which puts science at the service of a political idea or a social movement, and “cold” critique, which wants to account for critique as a social fact which needs to be accounted for theoretically and empirically.

**Hot and Cold Critique**

“Hot” critique is probably closest to the common-sense understanding of critique. When we perceive a problem, we criticize it and we may join others to overcome it. Science has long been used as a resource in political struggles such as when the Russian narodniki of the 19th century went the countryside to educate illiterate peasants or think of French positivism (e.g. Saint-Simon), which has understood itself as serving a political cause since the Revolution.

Since the post-war period, academics committed to hot critique have been increasingly inspired by the Left but we shouldn’t overlook the politically engaged social theorists, especially in the 19th and early 20th century, who were committed to liberal and right-wing ideas and one should be aware of early conservative social theorists such as Edmund Burke and G.W.F. Hegel, Herbert Spencer and Carl Schmitt, or, more recently, Friedrich Hayek and Francis Fukuyama.

Yet there is no doubt that the most important model for hot critique has been, and continues to be, Karl Marx. Marx and his early followers defended a critical project which was both political and theoretical: the analysis of contemporary capitalism and its critique on behalf of the working class. His main work, *Das Kapital* (Marx 1993) is critical in that it subjects economic theorists to a critique (in the sense of analysis) with the broader aim of a critique of the status quo in society and the articulation of a political alternative.

Hot Marxism entered the political world through the SPD in the 1890s and then became the official doctrine of many workers’ parties around the world, most notably the Russian bolshevists and the Chinese Communist Party, which have used Marxism as an ideological weapon and to consolidate their authoritarian and anti-democratic regimes. There is no way one can claim that hot critique from Europe hasn’t had a very powerful impact over the last two centuries!

A great deal of Western social theory has developed as a reaction to Marxism. A first generation of European social theorists have put forward explicit alternatives to Marxism, most prominently perhaps Max Weber, who insisted on the *Werturteilsfreheit* of science.
(1988). Werturteilsfreiheit has often been translated by “objectivity” but Weber’s position is in fact much more nuanced than defending a “neutral” scientific stance. In Weber’s view, science could not and should not justify a certain set of values, which is what actors of the political realm, the activists do. Weber rejected the moralizing stance of the “engaged” social scientist and he probably also had in mind colleagues who preached the nationalist and conservative cause. Modernity had broken cosmological ideas of a universal value consensus of earlier eras. As a response, the fledgling post-Weberian social sciences have had to look for a place of enunciation where scientific work could be pursued in relative autonomy from ongoing struggles over values in society. In this view, science is not free of values; instead, it aims to offer views on such struggles no matter what is the observer’s value orientation.

The post-Weberian social sciences didn’t cease to be critical but critique changed its character. Social scientists reflected on their value commitments so that they could have conversation with others who didn’t share the same value. As a consequence, critique cooled down as social scientists now seized critique as a phenomenon inherent to society (and science!), which needed to be accounted for like other sociohistorical phenomena.

Many Western Marxist social scientists followed this tendency, and the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory is one example. The emphasis on social theory was no longer to help political activists bring about certain changes. It now cited Marxist ideas to engage in a critical reflection on the possibility of critique in society. One can see this in Theodor Adorno, who made the case for immanent critique (1966), or even more so in Jürgen Habermas, who turned to linguistic theory to enquire into the conditions of normative claim making (1981). If cold critical theorists turned away from critique as an inspiration for activists to a reflection on the social or theoretical conditions of critique, this of course didn’t mean they no longer expressed their political viewpoints or engaged in the political struggles of their days. But critique was now an object of theory, something to be gazed at, dissected and justified, rather than the subject of investigation, the lens through which the world was seen and understood.

Frankfurt school Critical Theory is not the only paradigm to have led the turn towards “cold” critique. Poststructuralism, too, is known for its cold critical gestures: Derridian critique, for instance, aims at destabilizing a conceptual system by laying bare its inherent tensions and contradictions (Salusinszky 1987). And Foucaldians offer a resolutely historical view on truth as a discursive game imbricated in power practices. And one may also cite many other critical projects, such as Bourdieu’s practice theory (1997) or the New Pragmatism, which rediscovers the actor as a source of moral knowledge (Boltanski and Thévenot 1991). Cold critique has resonated with some disciplines more than with others, and if it has been led by post-Weberian sociology, it also dominates humanity fields such as Cultural Studies and literary criticism.

Yet hot critique has remained dominant in many other disciplinary areas, especially in the educational field. Hot critique usually is committed to a certain set of values which it intends to impart. While educationalists want to train good citizens, theorists committed to an activist cause speak on behalf of a social movement. For these “hot” critics, science has a
political or moral mission, to sensitize readers to social injustices, to criticize discriminatory practices towards excluded social groups, to disseminate true knowledge and to lead people to emancipation. One example is the educator Paulo Freire (1974), who, during the Brazilian dictatorship, articulated the political experience of precarious and indigenous groups while raising moral outrage against exploitation and violence in society. Freire invites them to educate themselves as a path to (self-)liberation. Sometimes resonating with left-oriented theology, such humanist educational projects have been established in education as “action research”. Action research wants to influence participants in positive ways. Unlike empirical research, it is driven by pedagogical objectives and a sense of developing their human potentials. Critical Discourse Analysis or the normative branch of rhetorics are other examples of fields with a value mission at their core. CDA is a label for an eclectic field of investigation that engages in linguistic and social analysis in order to respond to a social problem (e.g. Wodak and Meyer 2004) CDA’s critique is hot in that it relies on external moral standards such as human rights to assess the normative quality of the object of investigation. One is most likely to encounter hot critique in fields such as education and linguistics.

Critique and Social Suffering

While hot and cold critical tendencies have been well established, and entrenched, in their respective disciplines, there haven’t been many opportunities for them to explicitly challenge each other’s epistemological assumptions. Benno Herzog invites us to engage in this debate by laying out a theoretical framework to re-think critique in society (Herzog 2020; 2021). Herzog is imbued in Frankfurt-style Critical Theory and he starts from its classical topoi, especially Adorno’s plea for immanent critique and the problematic of recognition, as introduced by Honneth (1992). Those with a background in cold critique will appreciate Herzog’s carefully crafted case for reflexive critique that takes its point of departure from the normative standards immanent in society. Yet Herzog points out the limits of such reasoning: how to account for the perspectives and experiences of the participants themselves? What if those who are mistreated don’t recognize they are mistreated?

This is where Herzog introduces the key notion of “social suffering”, which takes the experiences of the participants centre stage. In this movement, Herzog joins theorists like Boltanski, who insist on the actors’ emotional and moral expertise. Herzog invites us to take the subjects’ point of view and to start our analysis from what the actors feel and perceive as they enter the social arena. Humans are the experts when it comes to all things humans, and somebody suffering needs to be taken seriously by the critical theorist. Suffering should, therefore, be taken as a clue for an underpinning sociomoral problem. Indeed, society may engender structures and practices that are not up to the normative standards that have been brought forth in and by the very same social structures and practices. And the perceived suffering of the individual as the moral Geiger counter of such ills and contradictions.

The consequences of Herzog’s critique are clear: take the experiences of actors on their own terms and empathize with their pains. While the theorist points out the nexus of individual experience and social norms, the theorist can’t take a privileged point of view on society’s
contradictions. Social suffering is an experience of the members of society and that’s why critique needs to account for the point of view of those on whose behalf it is articulated. Critique needs to be grounded in the experience of people suffering from social exclusion.

While one finds few explicit exchanges with “hot” critical activists in Herzog’s work, I’m sure they will gladly accept Herzog’s invitation and link their critical projects with the experience of social suffering. But isn’t Herzog opening the doors to a moral anything goes by turning to the actors’ perspectives? While Herzog insists on social suffering as an experience in society, i.e. as socially constructed, engendered and mediated by society’s structures and practices, individuals will only concur in the way they see moral problems, and react to them, if they are subject to the same set of constraints and expectations, which Herzog summarily groups together within the term “society”. Herzog, in other words, needs a strong idea of society as governed overarching moral standards. Yet for lack of a systematic empirical account of any given society, one is left wondering how precisely individuals are coordinated as members of a society.

Herzog’s implicit idea seems to be of society as a rather stable framework and transparent space whose contradictions individuals need to live out morally. In line with a Marxian tradition of placing critique within the horizon of the sociohistorical totality, he presupposes an underlying logic at work that explains what all members of a society do, think and feel. It is such logic which gives society its structural coherence and moral cohesiveness. Yet, if Herzog’s idea of critique needs such a strong idea of society, the latter notion remains theoretically underelaborated and empirically underspecified. We should expect more about what “society” is in a world where many are connected through rapid global flows and even more remain disconnected? Where society no longer offers a stable place inside or outside a given social entity since heterogeneity and superdiversity have become the norm? Where the very notion of the actor gets blurry as the boundary between the human and the non-human is contested?

If in Marx’s times society could still be seen as a structured territory defined by the struggles between antagonistic groups, in our contemporary imaginary, it has become a more fluid albeit hierarchical space (Angermuller 2015, 83ff). The social is not open in the sense that some areas are easier to navigate than others and sometimes the free flow of the social is blocked by hard barriers. The social is not an integrated space either, where every area is seen, compared, valued in the same way. In Deleuze/Guattari’s terms (1980), the social is a striated space that no longer allows for a universal morality. It is split into so many cités de justification (Boltanski and Thévenot 1991) where critique responds to local circumstances and mobilises their criteria of valuation. In the post-societal era of the social, who can still claim to address the normative problems of the social totality?

So in a nutshell, Herzog’s theory of social suffering brings the problem of critique back on the agenda of contemporary social theory and in ways that critical theorists can relate to no matter whether they come with a cold or hot background. While he insists on the nexus of the individuals’ critical energies with their society, the social remains precisely a placeholder that still needs to be filled. Reassessing the critical potentials of the members of society is an
important step towards putting critique on the intellectual agenda again. But what can critique look like in our contemporary world where a sense of totality has been lost and critique is an activity within a social space whose heterogeneity can no longer be ignored?

References