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Sociology of Critique or Critical Theory?

Luc Boltanski and Axel Honneth in Conversation with Robin Celikates[1]

Luc Boltanski, Axel Honneth, and Robin Celikates (Translated by Simon Susen)

The 'sociology of critique' and 'critical theory' offer different perspectives on the phenomenon of critique. The former approach has been developed by Luc Boltanski, as well as by other members of the Groupe de Sociologie Politique et Morale (GSPM), with the aim of providing an alternative to Pierre Bourdieu's 'critical sociology'. The latter approach has been developed further by Axel Honneth, who proposes a 'theory of recognition', and whose work descends from the tradition of the Frankfurt School. Is critique, first and foremost, an achievement of 'ordinary' actors or a task of theory? What is the relationship between theory and practice? How can theory be critical and, at the same time, draw upon actors' experiences and interpretations? These questions, as well as the – partly complementary and partly conflicting – answers given by the aforementioned approaches, both of which are crucial to contemporary debates in social philosophy, play a pivotal role in the following conversation.

I

Robin Celikates: Let us begin by reflecting upon the genesis of the two approaches. How have the *sociology of critique* and the *theory of recognition* developed as distinct paradigms? What role have diverging currents of thought, empirical issues, and specific intellectual constellations played in this respect? On the one hand, we have the tradition of *critical theory* and particularly its recent reorientation, proposed by Jürgen Habermas, as well as a certain dissatisfaction with the formal-pragmatic strategy, which suffers from a significant degree

of 'de-substantialization' and 'de-sociologization'. On the other hand, we find Pierre Bourdieu's *critical sociology* and the confrontation with empirical problems, which have led to the development of a new theoretical vocabulary aimed at making the description of certain social phenomena possible in the first place.

Luc Boltanski: I struggle with grand theoretical lines of development, especially at the moment, because – to borrow an expression used by Albert Hirschman – I am immersed in a phase characterized by a 'propensity to self-subversion'. It is nonetheless possible to suggest that the conceptual horizon of my works reflects a project that I will probably never be able to accomplish, namely the development of a theoretical framework that integrates French *critical sociology*, which for me – as one of Bourdieu's long-standing research assistants – has been a key source of inspiration, and the so-called *pragmatic sociology of critique*, which I, together with some of my colleagues, have been developing since the 1980s. The dogmatization of theory in the social sciences should be avoided. The kind of scenario to which this can lead is something I have directly experienced in the Bourdieu circle. Bourdieu himself sought to offer a closed theoretical edifice. Yet, this is not a good idea, because a theory must always remain *open*, *incomplete*, and *underdetermined*.

   Bourdieu's oeuvre is the burden we have to bear, just as the Frankfurt School is the Frankfurter's burden. We cannot simply follow the prescribed path; but, at the same time, we cannot brush these intellectual traditions aside. We should never forget, though, that *sociology* is never exclusively about *theory* but is always also about *politics* – this is especially true for these two traditions. Nevertheless, my critique of Bourdieu is a theoretical, rather than a political, one. The sociology of critique is not aimed at the dismissal of critique, as, for instance, demanded by Bruno Latour, who seeks to break with the post-Marxist project altogether.[2] It seems to me that the point is to acknowledge that we need to take some kind of detour, in order to understand the practice of critique and, thus, comprehend why it is so difficult to criticize.

Robin Celikates: What exactly is your main point of criticism regarding Bourdieu's framework?

Luc Boltanski: Bourdieu's approach is characterized by the tension between the positivist belief in science and his genuine indignation regarding the existence of social inequalities. As in Marxism, in his writings we are confronted with an antagonism between *positivism* and the pursuit of *emancipation*, as witnessed in the eighteenth century. In Bourdieu, however, there is not even any space for the possibility of people becoming conscious of

their situation, let alone for revolution. On the contrary, he always emphasizes the role of people's *unconscious*. Similar to many other theorists of the 1960s who defend a combination of Marxism and Durkheimianism, Bourdieu takes the view that actors never act consciously. At the same time, he implies that they are equipped with a kind of internal computer system, which enables them to make strategic calculations and provides them with particular praxeological options. These two assumptions lead to a 'theory of the split actor': on the one hand, a totally unconscious actor, whose motives, especially those of a moral nature, do not have anything to do with reality; on the other hand, a kind of 'inner man' (as Adam Smith once affirmed), who functions like a computer and constantly makes calculations. Similar to the theory of the avant-garde, this perspective creates an enormous *discrepancy* between, on the one hand, *unconscious and deluded actors*, and, on the other hand, *conscious and critical sociologists*, who – owing to their science and their methods – are capable of unmasking the truth and thereby enlighten other people.

The practice of mutual admonition and correction – which corresponds to this view and which is, for example, common amongst monks – also existed in Bourdieu's circle: after a meeting, it could happen that a colleague would come and say: 'You talk about Adorno, but the truth is that you have no clue! What you are saying is the product of your proletarian "class habitus". My task, as a social scientist, is to help you control the situation.' On this account, social scientists have a monopoly on truth, and this is what secures them their avant-garde position. There is another problem arising from the attempt to combine Marx with Weber – an undertaking that is crucial to Bourdieu's oeuvre. What Bourdieu learned from the pessimistic Weber is that every aspect of society is permeated by *relations of domination*. Such a diagnosis, however, implies that the project of critical theory is beset with major difficulties.

Of course, it is possible to uncover concealed structures of domination in a particular setting and to enlighten actors. Yet, after every unmasking process, new and other structures of domination will emerge, which have not yet been grasped. Hence, *the relationship between sociological description and critique is an extremely complicated one*, especially because Bourdieu is not prepared to attribute an important role to *morality* in this context. Unlike Marxism, Bourdieu does not endorse a specific version of the philosophy of history, which could provide a foundation for the description of *immanent contradictions*. In fact, these contradictions simply do not exist in his universe. He describes a world permeated by mechanisms of domination, which are reproduced in largely *unconscious*, but nonetheless *strategic*, ways. What is the point of criticizing, however, if the world is 'naturally' like this and if, therefore, the most admirable revolutionary and moral intention can be reduced to an effect of false consciousness and is doomed to failure?

Robin Celikates: In addition to emphasizing the importance of this tension, your critique of Bourdieu takes issue with his tendency to underestimate the various competences with which actors are equipped, notably with regard to their *reflexive capacities*.

Luc Boltanski: In the Durkheimian tradition, there is a strict separation between *actors*, who are mere agents of social structures and who can be studied like savages living on an exotic island, and *social scientists*. The scientist is a kind of Sherlock Holmes: you give him or her a hint or some information, and he or she knows immediately what matters and is able to provide a class-theoretic analysis. This is not a particularly fruitful form of fieldwork! Good fieldwork presupposes the *acceptance of uncertainties* and of the fact that, often, one does *not* know what is going on. The belief in the clear-cut distinction between actors and scientists should have been lost no later than in the 1970s and 1980s. In this period, social reality was literally swamped with social-scientific schemes of thinking; in this sense, society became reflexive. When I embarked upon my fieldwork for *The Making of a Class: Cadres in French Society*,[3] I went to talk to various associations and asked them about their respective definitions of manager [*cadre*]. They responded: 'What? Have you not read Bourdieu and Touraine? Go and ask them!' In other words, actors themselves had begun to use the works of sociologists as resources for the construction of their own group.

Robin Celikates: What impact did this 'discovery' have on your own theory formation and empirical research?

Luc Boltanski: The interplay between *'ordinary' actors*, including the cognitive 'tools' they use in everyday situations, on the one hand, and *sociological schemes of thinking*, on the other, became the main object of examination in the studies I carried out together with Laurent Thévenot. In these analyses, we were confronted with actors' highly developed social competences, which enable them to participate in *processes of criticism, dispute, and the exchange of arguments*. I was particularly interested in the social form of 'affair', in which the denunciation of injustice is at stake. In this regard, *paranoia* plays a pivotal role. When I ask my daughter to take the mail out of the letterbox, I do not normally follow her, in order to check whether or not she embezzles any of the letters – but, actually, why not? The question of whether we are dealing with a justified doubt or with a pathology is not easy to answer. The same applies to denunciations of injustice. In order to get to the bottom of this, I examined thousands of letters which were addressed to the newspaper *Le Monde* and in which people complained about all sorts of things.[4] Afterwards, I asked

a group of people to classify these letters according to a scale ranging from 'normal' to 'crazy'. What became evident from this study was that in situations in which issues of justice are crucial we find a sort of *grammar of normality* – a grammar that is used not only by those assessing the letters but also by those who wrote them.

The question of normality plays a central role in everyday life, especially when claims to *recognition* and *justice* are at stake. It is difficult to imagine the force of the corresponding behavioural control mechanisms, even in places – such as universities – which are supposed to stimulate free exchange. The most effective way of rejecting a claim is not to argue against it, but to relegate it to the sphere of 'the abnormal'. More radical demands are always in danger of being regarded as unreasonable, because, rather than fitting into the given reality, they draw upon personal experiences. If one cannot share them with other people, one is quickly perceived as 'insane', 'perverse', or 'paranoid'. Thus, the problems of social injustice and critique must be conceived of in connection with the issue of psychiatry, as has been illustrated by the first generation of the Frankfurt School.[5] Considering the rise of cognitive science in the present age, this is more urgent than ever before. Our theory, however, aims to operationalize not only our sense of normality but also our sense of justice. Therefore, in *On Justification*, we have tried to demonstrate that – contrary to Bourdieu's view – *actors are not always deluded but – in certain situations – capable of using sociological arguments, of participating in practices of justification and criticism, and of developing an awareness of social reality*.[6]

II

Robin Celikates: Critical theory is confronted with problems that are similar to those described by Luc Boltanski in relation to Bourdieu's sociology. To be exact, in critical theory there is also a *tension between the diagnosis of a total system of domination and the objective of emancipation*. This tension can easily evoke the danger of paternalism. What role does this problem play in the further development of critical theory, especially with regard to the paradigmatic turn proposed by Habermas?

Axel Honneth: It becomes more and more obvious to me that Luc Boltanski's description of his relation to Bourdieu is somewhat homological to Habermas's relation to early critical theory, rather than to my relation to Habermas. One of the main reasons for Habermas's turning away from Adorno and Horkheimer's approach is to be found in their depreciation of ordinary actors' competences. Their view of domination and instrumental reason obliges them to ignore the common

knowledge of participants. As a consequence, theoretical critique can hardly be justified. If it is impossible to relate to actors' knowledge and perspective, then it is unfeasible to justify one's own critique in an *immanent* manner, since one is forced to take an *external* perspective. Habermas has always had the suspicion that early critical theory is incapable of formulating its own critique as a form of immanent criticism, because it manoeuvres itself into an external position.

Total critique, according to which everything is domination and actors are governed by unconscious forces, poses the question of the justification of critique and illustrates that a different starting point is required. This is one of the reasons for Habermas's paradigm shift, and this is why he began to search for theoretical resources allowing for a different interpretation of the structures underlying social life and social reproduction. The engagement with pragmatism – notably with John Dewey and with Hannah Arendt – has permitted him to analyse not only *instrumental* and *strategic* forms of reason, as well as the unconscious reproduction of domination, but also *communicative* forms of action, based on another type of rationality, which is embedded in linguistically mediated practices. Language, then, appears – primarily – not as an instrument of domination (as, for instance, in Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man*),[7] but as a medium of communication and, hence, as a source of nonviolent action coordination.

Robin Celikates: How has this configuration shaped the formation of your own conceptual framework?

Axel Honneth: For me, exposure to this Habermasian approach was already so formative during my studies that I perceived the project of the early Frankfurt School as a theoretical impasse. As far as I was concerned, there was no going back to the time before Habermas's 'communicative turn'. With the benefit of hindsight, it would be fair to suggest that, in my case, the development of a distinct approach has been an intensification of, rather than a break with, the Habermasian model. Perhaps we can say that my relationship to Habermas is comparable to that of the Left-Hegelians to Hegel. This is a significant difference with respect to the relationship between Boltanski and Bourdieu. Another important dissimilarity consists in the fact that my theoretical development has not been determined by empirical studies. I have sought to overcome the aporia of the Habermasian approach solely on the basis of theoretical reflections.

I became aware of my discontent with Habermas only when I sought to identify the limitations of early critical theory myself. In a way, Habermas regards a *sociological* limitation of early critical theory as the main problem:

Adorno and Horkheimer create an utterly distorted picture of society, since they fail to understand that people act communicatively and participate in practices of justification. It took me some time to realize that precisely this criticism can be levelled against Habermas himself. His focus on the linguistic structure of communication and on its underlying rationality means that he pays insufficient attention to the social experiences with which they are entangled. People's everyday experiences have no place in Habermas's theory. An important objective of *The Critique of Power*[8] is to shed light on this limitation in early critical theory, in Foucault, but also, of course, in Habermas.

Robin Celikates: How have you, in your reformulation of critical theory, tried to ascribe a more prominent role to human experience? How is it possible to avoid the decoupling of communication and quotidian experience, which appears to be part and parcel of Habermas's universal pragmatics?

Axel Honneth: What goes missing in the formalization of language is the *moral dimension* that is built into communicative processes. To my mind, the consideration of moral experience is essential to an accurate understanding of communicative action in particular and of social life in general. In addition to Hegel, social and historical studies – such as Barrington Moore's *Injustice* and Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb's *Hidden Injuries of Class* – were central to the development of my own theoretical framework.[9] At that time, I even conducted a small empirical research project, which was inspired by insights borrowed from symbolic interactionism. It focused on the young working class in Berlin, and we asked ourselves how and where its members would situate themselves within the structure of society. It soon became clear that social shame is one of the most important motifs for adolescents. They did not find it easy to talk openly about their place in society. This illustrates that *social hierarchy* and *relations based on recognition* are intimately intertwined and that, furthermore, social theory needs to engage with experience of injustice and with the pursuit of recognition.

   To be sure, this does not mean that Habermas's 'linguistic turn' needs to be *reversed*; it does mean, however, that it needs to be *revised*. For me, the key to a proper understanding of communicative relations has been Hegel's account of the 'struggle for recognition', which I discovered in the early Habermas.[10] Ironically, then, an idea that Habermas himself has abandoned enables me to radicalize his approach. Yet, Hegel's approach permits us not only to do justice to the central role of moral experience based on recognition, but also to demonstrate that conflict, rather than coordination, is a constitutive feature of communicative action. Communication is a form of moral conflict. Hence, *the*

paradigm of recognition replaces the paradigm of communication, thereby opening up a differently structured field of associations: what is decisive is the mutual attribution of normative status – that is, the fact that I grant others a particular normative authority by recognizing them. On this account, recognition is a process that, unlike the process of communication, necessarily involves moral experience.

Robin Celikates: What role does conflict play in this theoretical framework? One may think that there is a *tension* between a perspective that focuses on the centrality of *conflict*, on the one hand, and a view that emphasizes the importance of *moral experience*, on the other.

Axel Honneth: The concern with the struggle for recognition is linked to a revision of classical conceptions of conflict. For what is crucial in this context is the connection between 'the conflictual' and 'the peaceful'. Conflicts over forms of sociality lie at the heart of human life forms. What is at stake in these conflicts is not distance in relation to others, or domination over others, but the desire for belonging, the desire to be a fully fledged member with equal rights. In this light, the concept of conflict acquires a meaning that is utterly different from the sense it is given in most conflict theories. To the extent that the interest in 'being respected' and the interest in 'being part of a community' are fundamental to conflict, we are dealing with *conflicts over inclusion*, rather than with conflicts over exclusion. In this regard, it is possible to draw not only on Hegel but also on Bourdieu, for whom the conflict over symbolic orders – despite his assumptions about something along the lines of a context of 'delusion' – is central.

Moreover, what we find in Bourdieu's work is the intuition that these conflicts revolve around *normative* status, rather than economic interests, even if he goes on to analyse conflicts from an economic point of view, thereby reducing them to their utilitarian dimensions. This reductive interpretation dismisses the fact that, in reality, we are confronted with *moral* conflicts, in which normative dimensions – such as shame and recognition – constitute motivational driving forces. What my theory of recognition seeks to achieve, therefore, is not only to avoid certain Habermasian abstractions, but also to allow for an alternative understanding of the communicative infrastructure underlying social life. These revisions, however, all take place *within* the Habermasian paradigm; in this sense, they can be conceived of as a form of 'internal radicalization'.

Robin Celikates: What are the consequences of this radicalization for the project of social critique and for debates on the normative foundations of critique?

Axel Honneth: For Habermas, critique is possible only as *immanent criticism*. On this view, society as an object of critique already contains the type of reason that can serve as the standard for critique of existing social relations. Communicative reason realizes itself in historically developing forms of communication, from which we, as social theorists, can extract the yardsticks of critique. In this sense, Habermas's *The Theory of Communicative Action*[11] is an attempt to reconstruct rational forms of communication, which serve as the basis for the critique of existing social pathologies. Surely, this is a variant of immanent criticism; 'immanent' in this context, however, implies that critique draws not upon actors' *actual experiences* but upon *institutionalized principles*. Hence, 'immanence', in this sense, does not mean what it used to mean in the intellectual tradition of the Frankfurt School; namely, that one has to refer to human experience in order to be able to justify critique. A less abstract and less formal conception of immanence requires us to engage with people's competences and experiences. Social critique can be grounded not in communicative mechanisms of action coordination, but, rather, in experiences that are interrelated with certain forms of communication, such as recognition.

Robin Celikates: Considering Habermas's intellectual development since the publication of his *The Theory of Communicative Action*, one gets the impression that, owing to his strong Kantian orientation, the concern with phenomena such as ideology, social pathologies, paradoxes, and contradictions has disappeared into the background. If I am right, your radicalization process is combined with a return not only to the early Habermas but also to particular ideas and intuitions of the early Frankfurt School. This relates not only to your interest in the aforementioned phenomena, but also to your theory's strong engagement with social struggles for recognition, which reflects a commitment to locating theoretical criticism in the concrete realities shaped by social movements. You and Habermas appear to have gone down two very different paths.

Axel Honneth: Yes, this is certainly true. What has turned out to be crucial to the process of developing the model of the struggle for recognition is the thorough engagement with other disciplines, especially with psychoanalysis, moral psychology, and moral sociology. This is accompanied by a defence of 'the earlier – Hegelian – Habermas' against 'the later – Kantian – Habermas', as well as by a new interest in the early Frankfurt School. We can distinguish two forms of early critical theory: the *functionalist* version (developed especially by Horkheimer in the 1930s) and the anti-functionalist, *normativist* version (advocated particularly by somewhat marginalized theorists, such as Erich Fromm and Walter Benjamin). According to the second stance, society cannot be understood as a total context of

delusion; rather, it is traversed by diverse fractures. On this account, actors are not totally dominated, but they are able to make other – non-integrable – experiences. For Fromm, these are *interactive* experiences; for Benjamin, these are *revolutionary* experiences. And even in Adorno we find *subversive* forms of subjective experience. It is possible to draw upon these intuitions. Habermas and I have developed in two opposite directions: in his case, the sources of his own theory gradually fall into oblivion, *Kant* and *Rawls* take centre stage, his theory becomes more and more normative and, at the same time, less and less sociological; in my case, I seek to develop a radically *Hegelian* – that is, not only normative, but also profoundly 'social-theoretic' – approach.

III

Robin Celikates: What are the commonalities, as well as the most important differences, between the sociology of critique and the theory of recognition?

Luc Boltanski: The idea of 'regimes of justification' or 'orders of justification', developed in *On Justification*, is certainly comparable to the distinction Honneth draws between various 'spheres of recognition'. Yet, we are interested – primarily – in the problem of order and hierarchy, as well as in their justification. Given the existence of *diverse* claims to recognition, the question is *how* one should be recognized. One can be recognized as 'significant' or 'insignificant', as 'big' or 'small'; and even if one is considered 'small', one has a place in society, although one may be dissatisfied with it. Thus, we need to examine not only recognition processes within a particular world, but also the ways in which they are related to issues arising from *position*, *hierarchy*, and *order*, which define *how* one is situated in this world. In other words, recognition is not the end of the conflict; on the contrary, it leads to new *indeterminacies*, *disputes*, and *clashes*. If one takes actors – including their demands and arguments – seriously, then *uncertainties* come to light in their quarrels. For instance, what may be discussed is the question of whether or not the dismissed employee was indeed irresponsible, or the question of whether or not a worker who may be hired is really competent to do the job. We do not know. This is why socially institutionalized *tests* are necessary: they make it possible to reduce the uncertainty experienced by human actors; and, in the best-case scenario, they may resolve a dispute.

Robin Celikates: What role does *common sense* play in a theory that puts people's reflexive capacities at centre stage?

Luc Boltanski: Wittgenstein, pragmatism, and ethnomethodology accord an important role to common sense, and I have been strongly influenced by them.

To a large extent, though, I have remained a Durkheimian: *I believe less and less in common sense*. In the social sciences – notably in social and cultural theory, but also in game theory – it is customary to attach great importance to people's spontaneous capacity to come together, to understand one another, and to develop – literally – a common sense. Habermas, for example, places too much faith in language and the possibilities of action coordination presumably derived from it.

The orders of justification [*cités*] that we analyse in *On Justification* are a way of limiting common sense: within the context of a *cité*, certain arguments are permitted and relevant, whereas others are not. We are dealing with historical constructions in which language can be used in very different ways and in which the same word – for instance, 'just' or 'fair' – can acquire utterly different meanings. In this sense, our approach is also *structuralist*, rather than simply pragmatic. Moreover, orders of justification are not purely cognitive formations, but always *grounded in objects* related to them. Hence, the micro/macro issue presents itself in a new light. Are actors thrown into an already constructed world, in which possibilities of action are extremely limited (as in structuralism)? Or, should we start from the actors' perspective and their situational world-constitutive practices (as in pragmatism and ethnomethodology)? Both descriptions are correct. Of course, actors experiencing concrete situations are not only exposed to an already constructed world, but they also change it. Integration of these two approaches, however, remains to be undertaken.

Robin Celikates: One can get the impression that, in a way, the sociology of critique proceeds in a *positivist* manner and that, therefore, it deliberately abandons the claim of being 'critical' itself.

Luc Boltanski: It is true that the attempt to move away from Bourdieu has led to a strong positivist position. Initially, all we sought to achieve was to offer the best possible *description* of a particular type of social situation. In order to accomplish this, we have borrowed ideas from Noam Chomsky's linguistic model: we need to understand that *ordinary actors*, rather than sociologists, are equipped with genuine sociological knowledge and with competences that enable them to navigate their way through the social world. This knowledge, however, is largely *implicit*. As is widely recognized, it is impossible to speak and, simultaneously, reflect upon grammatical rules – and the same applies to social action. Similar to the grammarian, the sociologist is confronted with the task of *operationalizing* and *formalizing* the competences that are partly cognitive and partly shaped by everyday experience. The model has to be both developed and tested on the basis of research in the field. Such a conception of theory has little to do with critique, politics, or even with practice alone.

Some people were quick to misrepresent our model and to use it with the aim of disqualifying critique or attributing value to the project of democracy. It is for this reason – but also for moral and political reasons, which have to do with the hegemony of neo-liberalism and with the social crisis in France – that I did not remain satisfied with this positivist self-limitation of theory for very long. The book *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, which I co-wrote with Ève Chiapello, was meant to contribute not only to *the theoretical amplification of this model* – from an ahistorical and static approach to a historical and dynamic one, which takes account of the role of power relations – but also to *the practical aim of renewing the critique of capitalism*.[12] Consequently, we abandoned a merely positivist-descriptive position by re-establishing a link between sociology and critique, but without thereby completely dropping the theoretical framework developed in *On Justification*.

Robin Celikates: To what extent can this revision be interpreted as a paradigmatic shift towards critical sociology?

Luc Boltanski: In order to do sociology, one has to occupy an *external position*. If one stays within the social world, one is an expert (who, for instance, may be able to give hospitals advice on how to improve the way they deal with their patients). Sociology is a complicated endeavour: one has to act as if the social world were totally contingent and as if it could also be completely different. Starting from this assumption, it is possible to reconstruct the constitutive elements that allow for its coherence and robustness. The possibility of critique – or, to be exact, of metacritique, articulated by sociological theorists – presupposes that one has a description of something; otherwise there would be nothing to criticize. This requires an external position, a *first-order exteriority*. The entanglement between description and critique requires a *complex exteriority*, which makes it possible to assess a particular state of affairs and thereby take a *normative stance. Real sociology must always be critical.* What would be the point of producing a merely descriptive theory? People expect from sociology that it facilitates critique and that, by doing so, it contributes to the betterment of society. The normative underpinning of this critique cannot consist of a locally anchored – cultural, religious, or moral – viewpoint (which is often the case in everyday criticism). For sociology makes a claim to being universal. Its normative grounds have to be sufficiently precise to make critique possible and, at the same time, sufficiently general to avoid being reducible to one particular set of moral principles. Now, does this mean that the sociology of critique – including its operationalization of the critical practices generated by actors – results in a normative and critical position? At the very least, it is possible to support the critique of factual orders of justification and of tests, for instance,

in the context of a local election in which all candidates belong to the same family. This is a reformist critique. Such a critique, however, is not particularly exciting; and sociology should be exciting! *In everyday life, people are realists and have realistic expectations.* Whilst a waiter working at a café may feel completely alienated because his colleague gets more time off than him, he may be indifferent to the fact that he is a waiter, rather than a university professor – *c'est la vie*!

Social reality can be stronger or weaker, more rigid or more open. The decisive experience made in 1968 is the attenuation, and thus the opening, of social reality. Back then, people had dreams, not just expectations, and their dreams changed their expectations. In today's world, this has ceased to be the case, and this is where critical sociology needs to come into play and turn against the dominant realism.

IV

Robin Celikates: From the outset, the theory of recognition has deeply critical aspirations. How does it answer the question of the normative criteria of critique? Can it go beyond actors' expectations, which are often all too realistic?

Axel Honneth: The replacement of the paradigm of communication by the paradigm of recognition is meant to provide access to the immanent standards of social critique. For in social reality there are experiences of injustice and misrecognition, upon which critical theory needs to draw. Yet, a twofold problem arises in this context.

On the one hand, the notion of a struggle for recognition suffers from an *analytical limitation*. Contrary to what I used to think, the distinction between particular expectations and forms of recognition cannot be based solely on an anthropological conception of personhood and of the distinctly human need to develop an integral identity. Such an approach is too psychological and insufficiently sociological.

On the other hand, we are confronted with a *normative limitation*. Notably in the debate with Nancy Fraser, I began to realize that the attempt to locate the normative standards of critique in the experiences of misrecognition involves the risk of regarding all expectations as justified.[13] Obviously, this consequence would be absurd; there are enough strange, insane, and idiosyncratic expectations that are not justified. This is why we need theoretical resources that permit us to distinguish between justified and unjustified expectations and needs for recognition.

The three dimensions of recognition identified by myself – 'legal equality', 'love', and 'individual achievement' – do not suffice to accomplish this, although what follows from them is that only those expectations are justified

which can be derived from principles related to these three aspects. It seems to me that this is an issue that has been largely ignored by French readers. The feeling of injustice is not enough to provide a solid foundation for critique. Both the tendency towards *over-psychologization* and the problem of *normative limitation* have – in light of my critical exchange with Fraser – led to internal corrections and improvements of my approach.

In the course of this 'social-theoretic turn', the institutional orders of recognition have become the focus of my attention. Hence, far from being embedded in an ahistorical conception of personhood, the three above-mentioned dimensions of recognition are realized in historically given and evolving orders of recognition. These orders are institutionalized expressions of what human beings can legitimately expect in terms of recognition. What is central in this regard is the question of *normative status*, rather than the question of identity. We need to face up to the fact that the respective orders define people's normative status. Against this background, expectations about recognition are justified only insofar as they represent articulations of the orders in which they are embedded. This picture is a sort of combination of Hegel and Durkheim: in the context of socialization, individuals assimilate the different orders and vocabularies of recognition; they learn to speak the language of love, of individual rights, and of performance; in addition, they obtain the capacity to justify their normative demands in relation to these principles. Subjects are socialized into the grammar of recognition, including their institutional manifestations. Yet, this is the case only in modern societies.

Robin Celikates: Where do you think lies the main difference between *orders of recognition*, which you have just described, and *orders of justification*, which Boltanski and Thévenot examine in their works?

Axel Honneth: It seems to me that there are two principal differences. *First*, orders of justification are organized in a meritocratic way. It appears, then, that our normative world is oriented primarily towards achievement, when, actually, our social reality has a much richer normative structure. *Cités* are different articulations of the principle of social esteem. The principles of love and respect, however, are constructed very differently and speak another normative language. *Second*, an important point of divergence concerns the problem of normative orders. In *On Justification*, it is assumed that all possible principles of justification have been pre-formulated by the classics of political philosophy and that, therefore, they can simply be revisited. In this sense, we are dealing with a hermeneutic, rather than sociological, conception of normative orders. In my case, by contrast, the analysis of normativity follows the logic of a particular understanding of historical sociology: we need to

reconstruct the differentiation of different normative orders of justification. This corresponds to a kind of *Hegelianism without a philosophy of history*. The three spheres of recognition are elements of our conception of modernity; they permit us to describe the normative structure of modern societies, which is certainly reflected in the classical texts of modern social theory and political philosophy.

Robin Celikates: That said, how would you define the tasks of social critique? And how do you make sense of the role of social theory in relation to the understanding that actors have of themselves?

Axel Honneth: We can identify various tasks to which social theory, based on social critique, needs to attend.

First, social theory reconstructs a particular *historical narrative* and *image of modernity*, which transcends the articulation of implicit knowledge accomplished by actors. This reconstruction, however, has to be reflected, at least partly, in the *perspective of social actors*, because, ultimately, they are socialized into the modern world and are – at least implicitly – able to distinguish between the different *normative orders* that I reconstruct as a theorist.

Second, social theory needs to be understood as an endeavour that is capable of re-articulating actors' *legitimate expectations* by relating them to their corresponding *normative principles*. It must be possible for social theory to address expectations about recognition, which are justified to the extent that they are formulated within these orders of recognition. All of this takes place at the level of re-description, rather than at the level of explicit criticism. The re-description aims to illustrate the *moral dimension* that is *built into social conflicts*. Since, however, we can observe a tendency towards false and one-sided self-descriptions in our societies – and since, furthermore, the prevailing positivism promotes these technocratic and utilitarian self-misunderstandings –, this alternative description, which is theoretically motivated, is already critical itself, even if it articulates only the implicit significance of social phenomena. Nowadays, for example, the demands of trade unions are articulated predominantly in the language of interest, of pay increase, and so on and so forth. Social theory needs to provide another description of workers' expectations, given that these are no longer expressed in the language of trade unions. We are dealing with false articulations of the normative dimension underlying social conflicts. And the more our social world is shaped by positivism and utilitarianism, the more it tends to describe itself and its conflicts and practices in such a reductive fashion.

Third, it is the task of social theory to expose the *moral character of articulated expectations* as clearly as possible. This does not mean that all of these

expectations are justified; this does mean, however, that the implicit moral reference points of expectations and articulations need to be elucidated. In this sense, all critical theory does is to provide a contribution to public debate. On this account, which draws upon Dewey, social theory is concerned with supporting actors as participants in public debate and, hence, with assisting them to articulate their (often implicit) normative expectations and demands. In democratic societies, the task of justification is always a public task, rather than a theoretical undertaking; and this is why social theory can fulfil its critical mission only in the *public sphere*.

Fourth, the critical task of social theory, understood in the narrow sense, consists in ensuring that the principles of recognition are constantly open to further and more radical interpretations. By definition, principles acquire a kind of surplus value in relation to the existing order. An order that is institutionalized in the name of one of these principles always falls short of something, because the meaning of terms such as 'love' and 'justice' is not conclusive; in principle, it is always possible that new aspects, which have not yet been considered, come into play. Theory needs to call attention to this surplus value – that is, to this *unrealized normative potential*, and it has to do so in a visionary manner. This, of course, leads to further problems, such as the question of whether the distinction between particular spheres of recognition is simply given and, moreover, the question of whether theory can proceed critically only within this framework, or whether there is a more extensive, transcending critique.

Luc Boltanski: First of all, I wish to stress that I agree with the aforementioned critique of *On Justification*. In order to prevent it from being misinterpreted as a *complete* description of the social world, directly after its publication I wrote a book on love.[14] At the moment, I am working on a primarily sociological project, which is connected to *On Justification*, but which, at the same time, goes far beyond it, insofar as it is itself meant to provide a sort of metacritique.[15]

When we are dealing with the clarification of legitimate demands – to which, undoubtedly, critical theory can make important contributions – we find ourselves in situations of *radical uncertainty*, which display a certain similarity to Hobbes's state of nature, at least with regard to its semantic dimensions. *Nobody knows what exactly is going on.* Is this here, for instance, a gathering of three friends or a seminar? We are confronted with the problems of *classification* and *judgement*. With what kind of beings or entities are we dealing? And what is their respective worth?

I distinguish between two types of situation: 'practical' and 'metapragmatic' ones. *Situations of practical interaction* can be analysed in terms of Bourdieu's theory of practice. What I describe as the 'regime of love' is a radicalization

of the 'regime of practice'. Actors cooperate in these situations, in order to interpret a given context and tolerate one another, in order to avoid having to undertake a test and to engage in a dispute. Let us consider the example of having to do the washing-up after a meal with friends: one of them continues to talk about sociological issues, a woman kisses her partner, and a third person starts clearing the table, but all of them *pretend* everything is in order. Equivalences are cast aside, and calculations are suspended. The participants try to ensure that they do not need to make any calculations. This allows for a condition of peace, as often prevails in small groups. The problem does not arise until the views of the situation begin to diverge substantially and/or the actors involved find themselves increasingly distanced from one another. In this case, what becomes necessary is *another form of regime*, which I characterize as 'metapragmatic', because it exploits the metalinguistic potential of natural language – that is, the possibility of speaking *about* language *through* language.

Against this background, we face two possibilities. On the one hand, there is the possibility of *critique*: 'You want to call this a conversation?' On the other hand, there is the possibility of *confirmation*: 'This is a conversation in the actual sense of the term.' Here, my argument is anti-Habermasian: language is never capable of allowing different perspectives to converge; because human actors have a body, they are spatio-temporally situated, they have interests, they have different desires, and so on and so forth. This is why there is no reason to assume that one person can say, on behalf of another, that this is a bottle, rather than simply a piece of plastic. This is a general problem, especially if one steps out of the 'regime of practice', finds oneself in disagreement with others, and searches for a definition of what is actually the case.

Now, the solution to this problem proposed by members of society consists in delegating the task of ascertaining what is going on ('this is a bottle', 'this is a seminar') to a *bodiless entity* – and this entity is what we call an *institution*. For this reason, I consider the following analytical distinction to be crucial: organizations address the problem of coordination by inventing rules; administrations are in charge of dealing with the problem of the police – that is, they ensure that rules are followed; institutions serve, above all, a semantic function – that is, they tell us what the situation is; and, in order to do so, they produce the necessary classifications ('he is Professor at Frankfurt', 'she is a waitress at a café', 'this is real feta cheese'). Hence, the *semantic function of institutions* consists in continuously *confirming* what is going on in the world and, therefore, in *stabilizing* the world. This is *indispensable*, because otherwise everything would be uncertain and in a constant state of flux.

Robin Celikates: What role does critique play in relation to institutions, notably in relation to their stabilizing – and, if I may say so, conservative – function?

Luc Boltanski: Institutions always provide answers to expressed criticism. This is why there is a *permanent dialectic between institutions and critique*. For the problem is that a bodiless entity cannot act upon the world; it cannot even speak. Owing to this limitation, institutions need speakers with a body or, to be exact, with two bodies. We can observe how speakers change their voice and their habits when they speak on behalf of an institution. This opens the possibility of suspicion regarding the question of whether it is really the bodiless entity that speaks and says what is going on, or whether, essentially, we are dealing with the speaker's private opinion. It is for this reason that I am not convinced by Habermas; a change of perspective may allow for compromises and practical agreements, but it never results in the stabilization of a particular situation.

Let us consider the following example, which has been examined by one of my students. A woman comes under the influence of a sect, and her friends want to help her. After a short period, both sides accuse one another of manipulation. Nobody actually knows, however, what a sect is and who manipulates whom in this case. This is what I call 'hermeneutic contradiction', and this contradiction is the precondition for the possibility of critique. If the world were just a conglomerate of institutions confirming what the case is, then there would be no critique. In fact, such a scenario would be tantamount to a situation of total domination.

In this context, it is possible to distinguish between three forms of test [*épreuve*].

First, there are 'truth tests', which are developed by institutions in order to confirm the definition of a particular situation. Drawing upon Bourdieu, we can say that, in this case, we are dealing with the symbolic order whose task is to *stabilize* reality, often in the form of tautologies, such as 'God is great'. 'Reality', in this particular sense, is to be distinguished from the 'world'. Whether or not 'reality' – as declared by institutions – concurs with the 'world' is an open question.

Second, there are 'reality tests', by virtue of which it is possible to examine which claims are *justified*. If, for instance, I assert that I am capable of using a computer, we can check this immediately. As all sociologists of past decades have demonstrated, reality is constructed, but reality is *not* the world. The distinction between 'reality' and 'world' is central to metacritical processes. As Wittgenstein says, the world is everything that is the case. But obviously we do not know what the world is; and yet, it is always there, and we can always relate to it.

Third, there is a type of test – in the sense of the double meaning of *épreuve*: at once, 'test' and 'challenge' – to which I refer in terms of 'existential tests': in these tests, *experience* is measured against established *truths*. Reformist critique

presupposes only the two levels of institutional 'truth tests' and 'reality tests'. They can point to the fact that reality – think about the foregoing example of manipulated choice – does not correspond to the prescribed format. What is more, radical critique needs to make reference to existential tests. In this context, *art and literature* play a pivotal role, since they do not depend upon demands for justification and coherence. They can push things from the world into reality by producing instances that do *not* match the definitions underlying reality. Nevertheless, they still need to establish links to other persons; for, if one relies solely on oneself, one is simply insane, a 'weirdo', paranoid. Thus, this critique in the name of the world works only to the extent that it can relate to shared experiences.

Robin Celikates: What exactly does critique have to oppose to the existence of institutions? Presumably, institutions are indispensable, are they not?

Luc Boltanski: In the 1960s and 1970s, sociological studies tended to focus on the *repressive* function of institutions – that is, on their capacity to establish and stabilize the symbolic order; the fact that there is no society without institutions was disregarded. *The stabilizing function of institutions is indispensable.* At the same time, institutional demands are often exorbitant, especially when they are linked to the state as a large-scale system of domination (police, administration, etc.) or to capitalism. This leads us to a practical-political problem: whilst the attempt to abolish institutions (an undertaking shared by Bourdieu, Foucault, and others) is pointless, we need to conceive of them differently – that is, as *fragile establishments*, which *can* be relatively close to human beings and *can* be both transformed and criticized. Yet, how is it possible for this to come about?

Robin Celikates: Are you implying that there are 'good' and 'bad' institutions?

Luc Boltanski: Yes, strong institutions are bad institutions. The worst institutions are those that have lost all connection with reality – that is, with people's experiences, which are – by definition – historical and local. We need go no further than to consider the Catholic Church under Pope Benedict and the Soviet Union. It is only through reformist critique that institutions can learn something about reality. Without critique, they simply lose their connection with reality. Slightly less bad – but still bad – are those institutions that are based on the assumption that 'reality' and 'world' concur.

Let us consider the example of economics: along with sociology, this science is in charge of the construction of our reality. It decides what the case is; it

decides what happens. For many economic institutions, or those influenced by economists, there is practically nothing that goes beyond the scope of their – self-defined – reality. These institutions are bad. Now, a good institution is not an institution incapable of providing us with a sense of security; indeed, this would be a mere mess, rather than an institution. *A good institution is an institution which is aware of its limitations and recognizes them, which is open to the world and to the innovative processes deriving from itself.*

The question of whether or not we accept in reality what emanates from the world is a continuous problem. To illustrate this issue with a straightforward example: terrorism *also* originates in the world. Nevertheless, radical theory needs to convert itself into an advocate of the world. The new form of domination – and, in this sense, the early Frankfurt School was on to something – is no longer a form of domination on the symbolic level. The era of ideologies and big ceremonies is over. Nowadays, we are dealing with domination over reality. This is why *what is at stake today is the struggle against reality – that is, the possibility of making reality more fragile.*

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Axel Honneth: I would like to reach a better understanding of this reorientation of the sociology of critique. The earlier programme proposed by the sociology of critique was premised on radical scepticism about the possibility of formulating a critique of society from a theoretical perspective that could claim to be superior to the critical practices of participants. What followed from this was the conviction that sociology needs to be conceived of, first and foremost, as a *descriptive*, rather than a critical, endeavour. This self-limitation has led to a certain disenchantment, because it leaves no room for a more radical conception of sociology. In essence, the development of a new conception of metacritique is a way of reacting to this situation. Yet it appears that, in this context, there are two theoretical options, which are fundamentally different.

According to the *first* option, the actors' chances of making use of their *critical capacities* are *unequally distributed* and are *subject to social constraints*. On this view, the task of metacritique is to analyse these constraints. This would convert the 'sociology of critique' into a 'critical sociology', which analyses social reality and institutions from a *metacritical perspective*, in order to find out whether they restrict or enhance the empowering competences of actors. In this regard, the overlaps with critical theory would be obvious.

The *second* option relates not primarily to constraints to which individual actors are exposed, but, rather, to *subjacent socio-ontological conditions*. In situations of crisis and critique, there are two possible metapragmatic forms of reaction:

either the transcending of factual social interaction and the adoption of an external perspective (this is exactly what Habermas calls 'discourse': the disruption of normal practice and the adoption of a reflexive attitude); *or* delegation to an institutional authority and the reliance upon its definition of reality (for Habermas, this belongs to the lifeworld). Institutions always offer solutions to practical problems by providing definitions, descriptions, and classifications of reality. On this account, the task of critical sociology consists in examining whether these institutions are sufficiently flexible, or whether they are enclosed and ossified. The metacritical perspective has an interest in the flux and development of social life; it opposes unduly rigid institutional constraints. Thus, the criterion is as follows: do institutions include the world, or do they exclude it? Strictly speaking, this second option does not constitute a normative critique. What is crucial in this regard are not injustices but *social pathologies*, which have to do with the functionality or dysfunctionality of institutions – that is, with the fact that social reality cuts itself off from the world and, in addition, with the fact that it becomes one-dimensional and overly institutionalized.

Hence, we can distinguish between two forms of critique. A *reformist critique* ensues within the given institutional horizon and is aimed at enhancing the functioning of existing institutions. A *radical critique* would question the social and existential, as well as the ethical, quality of these institutions. The reference point of such a critique can be found not in social injustices, but in social pathologies, which concern the relationship between social reality and the world. This means, however, that one moves away from the first option, which relates to the sociology of critique and, by analysing the social conditions and constraints impacting upon the development of critical capacities, bestows upon it a 'critical turn'.

Luc Boltanski: Without a doubt, the problem of inequality between actors – particularly in terms of their unequal access to critique – is an issue we need to take very seriously. This, however, is not the point in which I am interested at the moment. Perhaps I can elucidate my current question as follows: according to Thomas S. Kuhn's analysis, in a laboratory, many things that do not make sense happen; it is only when this occurs too often that these things have to be taken seriously and have to be considered more carefully. In these cases, we do not know what exists in reality, let alone what exists in the world; it is only when the gap between the two becomes too big that a real problem emerges.

This applies also to the sociological perspective. My wife once told me how she became a feminist. She was a member of a Maoist group, in which women always had to be in charge of the unpleasant tasks, such as cooking, putting up posters, and so on and so forth. At some point, its female members decided

to have a meeting in order to discuss the situation. Thereafter, they could say 'as a woman …'; before, they could say only 'as a Maoist …'. The problem existed in the *world*, but not in the *reality* of Maoists. And this is precisely what changed due to their conversation.

Axel Honneth: Well, this is a problem of the *description* one choses to use. According to *your* description, your wife has invented a new language for something in the world that the world exposes in social reality. One could *also* suggest that it articulates an implicit experience, which is normative itself, and that it refers to exactly those normative principles that are already recognized within the group. *The language of justificatory practices is an alternative to the world/reality-vocabulary.* My own understanding of the metacritical role of critical theory is much closer to the first – normative – vocabulary than to the second – rather non-normative – socio-ontological description.

Luc Boltanski: Perhaps Marx is the only one who has tried to provide solid foundations for critique, not in terms of a particular morality, but in terms of immanent social contradictions. I do not want to sound presumptuous, but I wish to stress that I search for an *immanent contradiction* that allows for the grounding of critique compatible with a pragmatic and interpretive approach. This is why I speak about a *hermeneutic contradiction*: an immanent contradiction between the necessity of institutions and their limitations. This is a contradiction that is built into social reality. What I mean by 'hermeneutic contradiction' is not a contradiction between different interpretations, but a contradiction *inherent* in the very task of interpreting. Surely, it can have moral implications, but it is not itself grounded in morality. And this is why the critique that is based upon this contradiction is not a normative critique in the narrow sense of the term. It relates to the world as something that always goes *beyond* the scope of reality.

Axel Honneth: I ask myself, though, if this view involves the risk of losing sight of moral-sociological questions. For this perspective focuses on the semantic performance of institutions, rather than on their moral and normative function. One could, however, describe institutions in a different way and put the emphasis not on the semantic task of establishing and stabilizing reality, but on the normative role of institutions. *Institutions fix people's normative status and link them to sanctions.* Critique should also contribute to this function.

Luc Boltanski: Why do I suggest that the difference between 'world' and 'reality' is so central? In *On Justification* we have tended to overlook those expectations and demands made by human actors which do not already correspond to social

reality and to established orders of justification. This is something I have learned during the field studies that I conducted for my book *The Foetal Condition: A Sociology of Engendering and Abortion*.[16] I do not believe in ideologies to which people are subjected; only rulers need ideologies, because it is very difficult to rule. Yet, people have many experiences for which there is no language and about which, consequently, they cannot talk. For instance, my grandmother – who had emigrated from Russia – lived in an extremely poor reality, but in an extraordinarily rich – and, in her case, imaginative – world, which she was not able to express; even in the context of her immediate family, she could share her world only with her kids. An ethnologist with whom I became friends once told me that the sociology of critique that we had developed would work only within the area surrounded by the Parisian ring road [Boulevard périphérique de Paris]! I think that, to some extent, she is right. The fact that we do not understand something does not mean that we can regard it as normatively irrelevant. *Critique has to strengthen the world – even if it is difficult to grasp – against reality.*

Robin Celikates: You have just mentioned Marx as an important reference point for this reorientation. What role does the *concept of class* play in your analysis of society?

Luc Boltanski: 'Class' is one of the most important concepts in the history of sociology. Yet, within only one decade, it has almost completely disappeared. In some respects, the criticisms levelled against this concept are certainly justified. For example, the assumption that there is a space – that is, society – which is divided into homogenous strata is utterly misguided. *Only a pragmatic approach can revive the analysis of class. Classes are always practical phenomena.* The key question is as follows: how is it possible that a small group can exploit the large majority? The only plausible answer to this question is that, whereas the small group is integrated, the large group is fragmented. If the majority seeks to overcome this fragmentation process with the aim of strengthening itself, it needs to create explicit connections, discipline itself, form a party, and so on and so forth. To be sure, the ruling classes do not conceive of themselves as 'the ruling classes', but as 'the elite'. I call them 'the responsible ones' – and the ambiguity is deliberate.

How, then, do 'the responsible ones' succeed in building connections with one another which enable them to secure their position of power? There is some kind of *tacit agreement* amongst them, which also manifests itself in relation to social rules. For instance, when one talks to a 'responsible' who is accused of fraud, he or she will say that they could not have achieved what they had achieved if they had strictly followed the rules; he or she does think, however, that they need rules. This implies an *asymmetry* between those who have to follow

the rule and those who dispose of some sort of secret knowledge, according to which the rule cannot be adhered to in all situations. Of course, the latter, unlike the former, have the power to act correspondingly. From a normative point of view, we are dealing with a very dubious way of using *institutional power*. In contrast to this account, which portrays social reality as marked by class-specific asymmetries, my own normative vision refers to a society in which everyone would take the initiative – that is, in which everyone would acknowledge that, although rules are obviously necessary, they cannot be unconditionally valid. This would be a society shaped primarily by liberty, rather than by difference.

Robin Celikates: What status do the aforementioned immanent contradictions have in this regard? The question which arises in this context, and which is far from easy to answer in relation to Marx, can be formulated as follows: can these contradictions be considered *objective* ones, belonging to the very structure of society, or are we dealing with an *interpretive* reconstruction of social reality, which is proposed by the theorist and which is not necessarily superior to other forms of social self-understanding?

Luc Boltanski: I have to admit that I am annoyed by my insufficient knowledge of anthropology. Unlike sociologists, anthropologists tend to be aware of the fact that *the world – including, evidently, the social world – is a big mess, rather than an ordered whole*. Under these circumstances, it is almost impossible to produce something like 'a collective'; even if we endorse an optimistic conception of humanity, we need to accept that we are dealing with a kind of miracle. This is due to the various and unresolvable *immanent contradictions*, which should also be addressed by sociology. Even Marx has failed to do so in a convincing manner; too often does he treat social relations as a given, rather than as something that is very difficult to establish. Social relations are always an extraordinarily *fragile* construction. Yet, Marx underestimates the enormous *symbolic* accomplishments that are necessary for the consolidation of productive relations.

Robin Celikates: From the perspective of critical theory, it would be possible to formulate something similar as follows: *it is theory's metacritical task to uncover the immanent contradictions concealed by institutions, which act as if these contradictions did not exist in the first place*. A sort of reification conceals the actual fragility of social reality. Or should we elucidate the normative basis of the aforementioned form of critique in a different way?

Luc Boltanski: To begin with, the normative basis consists in the moral conviction that there should be a society without exclusion – that is, without an excluded rest that finds no place in the social order. Modern liberal societies

have always excluded a great number of people. Perhaps the following moral postulation is enough: *there should be no rest, no second-rank people, no rubbish*. The reference to 'immanent contradictions', by contrast, is not exactly 'normative' in the narrow sense of the term. 'Immanent contradictions', as I understand them, constitute a source of constraint to which people respond by mobilizing their reflexive resources. Thus, the existence of 'immanent contradictions' can be conceived of as a *normative prerequisite* for the construction of social reality.

Robin Celikates: Does this mean that we can criticize any form of exclusion by referring to a more inclusive order? How is this linked to the assumption that the 'world' is always more than 'reality'? Would this not mean that there is no such thing as complete inclusion and that, in this sense, there will always be a 'rest'?

Luc Boltanski: The critics' attention should always be directed towards the world. This is due to the fact that, in the world, there are always people who knock at the door of social reality, but who are denied entry. Nowadays, even the political left argues that our societies cannot accept all immigrants. Yet, it is precisely because of this that these marginalized groups become a revolutionary, transformative force.

Axel Honneth: I would also say that the *normative intuition* of a society that does not exclude anybody – that is, of a community in which everyone is considered a fully fledged member – is fundamental. In essence, this is what is meant by what I describe as 'recognition' and, alternatively, by what Nancy Fraser calls 'participation'. At the same time, there is another intuition behind the idea of a *transcending critique*, at which Luc Boltanski has just hinted: namely, an intuition concerning the existence of societies in relation to the rest of the world. The critique drawing upon this intuition is concerned not with the members of society but with the question of how *the world* can be brought to bear within *reality*.

Robin Celikates: And these are two competing intuitions, one of which is 'normative' or 'moral' and one of which is 'socio-ontological', perhaps in the sense referred to by Cornelius Castoriadis or by Bruno Latour.

Luc Boltanski: This question takes us back to the connection between sociology and metacritique. The first intuition makes metacritique both necessary and possible, whereas the second intuition accomplishes the same thing with sociology. We have to try to integrate the two intuitions. Surely, the world is composed not only of the social, but also of many entities – such as deities, catastrophes, and so on and so forth – which are not social, but which are nonetheless of fundamental significance for our social reality. In order

to be able to describe society accurately, it is necessary to relate to the world, which is not wrapped up in social reality.

Axel Honneth: I would like to relate what has just been said to the concept of critique and propose a division of labour between two forms of critique: between a *critique of social injustices* (which is always motivated by a moral intuition), on the one hand, and a *critique of social pathologies* (which are related to intuitions about the good life), on the other. Intuitions regarding institutional modes of functioning are, above all, concerned with facilitating the possibility of a good life, rather than with justice in the relationship between persons. Ultimately, ontological intuitions – according to which institutions should not be too rigid and enclosed – relate to ethical intuitions about the good life. These are, however, two very different perspectives on society and also two very different forms of social critique.

Robin Celikates: Yet, Luc Boltanski must have another form of critique in mind, because even the critique of social pathologies, which inhibit the possibility of the good life and which lead to the loss of identity and meaning, is formulated always in the name of those who suffer from them. Ontological critique shall speak on behalf of the world – of a world which does not consist of humans, animals, and other entities, but which, for the time being, needs to remain totally *indeterminate*. Anything that goes further is already a classification and, thus, part of social reality, institutional effects, and precisely not the world anymore. This third form of critique ties in with Latour and sounds almost Heideggerian: the world shall disclose itself [*sich entbergen*] and show itself [*sich zeigen*], and it is the task of critique to make this possible.

Axel Honneth: One could suggest, however, that we – as *subjects*, who, by definition, are affected by the world and by its way of impacting upon social reality – have an interest in this kind of *ontological critique of over-institutionalization*. Human actors suffer indirectly from institutions that are too rigid, because they have no access to the world and lack the capacity to articulate those dimensions of their own self that are a product of this world. It is in this sense that we are dealing with social pathologies in this context. It is certainly true, though, that the point of reference for such a critique would have to be something that corresponds to what Castoriadis describes as '*magma*': the indeterminate world out there, beyond the cultural constructions of which society is comprised.

To reiterate this point: such a criticism (which is levelled against the rigidity of institutions – that is, against the fact that they constantly fulfil the function of the normative regulation of reality, but without providing the world, or the

non-identical in the Adornian sense, with a soundboard) is not expressed in the name of a social group or class, which would be discriminated against or excluded. If one can say so, *we all suffer from the enclosure of institutions* in relation to desires, impulses, or imaginative thinking, for which – due to semantic fixations – we have not yet been able to find an accurate language. In this respect, perhaps it is possible to talk of a 'disclosing critique', whose task is to draw our attention to life forms, ways of relating to one another, and ways of relating to ourselves which – because of the normative regulation of reality – are still being excluded. From this endeavour, however, we have to distinguish a form of social critique that, on behalf of particular groups, criticizes social states of affairs regarded as unjustified, and therewith unjust, because they breach institutionally established principles. What is criticized here are institutional practices or governmental measures, by which we are not all equally affected, but which adversely affect some groups more than others. To the extent that such a critique is not based on abstract and simply obligatory norms, it must be able to invoke institutionalized, and thus widely accepted, principles. Such a critique, then, must proceed in a *reconstructive* manner, in the sense that it *unveils* the norms underlying socio-historical processes, which – owing to their institutionalization – appear to have a certain degree of social acceptability. On the basis of these principles, it is possible to pursue social critique in two directions: *either* we rely upon the already well-practised interpretations of these principles, in order to suggest that they are not adequately applied to particular groups, *or* we draw attention to a certain normative excess – that is, a 'validity surplus' – of these principles, in order to demonstrate that more social justice would be required than that which is already established within the given practices and institutions.

Luc Boltanski: The relation to the world does not have to be emancipatory. The so-called ruling classes change reality and justify this by referring to changes in the world. For instance, given that labour processes have been so radically transformed, workers shall no longer be called 'workers'. This illustrates that, unfortunately, the world is a resource not only for the political left, but also for the political right. By all means, it does matter which aspects of the world *critique* seeks to address and how it brings them to bear in reality. The descriptive-ontological side and the normative side of critique cannot be separated from one another without any implications. In any case, *the main task of critique remains to uncover the immanent contradictions concealed by the dominant order*.

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Notes

1 Original Publication: Luc Boltanski and Axel Honneth (2009) 'Soziologie der Kritik oder Kritische Theorie? Ein Gespräch mit Robin Celikates', in Rahel Jaeggi and Tilo Wesche (eds.) *Was ist Kritik?*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, pp. 81–114. The interview took place in Frankfurt am Main on 3 July 2008.

2 See, for instance, Latour (2004).

3 Boltanski (1987 [1967/1982]).

4 Cf. Boltanski (2012 [1990]).

5 On this point, see Boltanski (2012).

6 See Boltanski and Thévenot (2006[1991]).

7 Marcuse (2002 [1964]).

8 Honneth (1991 [1986]).

9 See Moore (1978) and Sennett and Cobb (1993 [1972]).

10 See Honneth (1995 [1992]).

11 See Habermas (1987a [1981]) and Habermas (1987b [1981]).

12 See Boltanski and Chiapello (2005 [1999]).

13 See Fraser and Honneth (2003).

14 See Boltanski (2012 [1990]).

15 On this point, see the various contributions to *WestEnd: Neue Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 2, 2008.

16 Boltanski (2013 [2004]).

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