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Critical Theory and the Concept of Social Pathology

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Characterising social pathologies: an analytic grid

by Fabian Freyenhagen

In this paper, I would like to take up one proposal that I touch on as part of the longer paper delivered at the SPT conference on Critical Theory and the Concept of Social Pathology. The proposal is an analytic grid for characterising social pathologies, particularly in the light of the conceptualisations of this idea specified within the Frankfurt School Critical Theory tradition.

Let me first summarise briefly the longer paper. I present some general features of the idea of social pathology (see below), and suggest that this idea can set Frankfurt School Critical Theory apart from mainstream liberal approaches – notably, in virtue of the specifically ethical register it involves (rather than a justice-based one dominant in contemporary liberalism) and the interdisciplinary approach it calls for (which marks a contrast to the relatively stark division between normative theorising and the social sciences characteristic of much of political philosophy today). I criticise the way Habermas and Honneth transform the early Frankfurt School conceptualisations of this idea by tying it to their respective models of functional differentiation of society. Intended or not, this builds a tendency towards reformism into the social pathology framework and thereby restricts it (and Critical Theory) unduly. While reformism might sometimes be called for, it is a problem if we methodologically restrict our options to just this path. Moreover, in their respective later works, both Habermas and Honneth tend to erode the difference from mainstream liberal approaches by linking social pathology with justice. I highlight features of a more distinctive use of this idea by way of two case studies of particular social pathology claims (one by Adorno about ‘sick normality’ and one by the early Honneth about ‘organised self-realisation’). Among other things, the first case study brings out that the interdisciplinary approach – or at least ambition – of early Frankfurt School Critical Theory was not accidental, but intimately connected with the social pathology framework at work in it. The main reason for this is that vindication of social pathology claims is understood in terms of explanatory success – something that can be achieved only by combining different disciplines and methods. I also note various challenges in deploying the Frankfurt School conceptualisation of social pathology (including, in relation to the second case study, the challenge of dealing with a multi-causal nexus of social pathology). Overall, I urge its proponents to return to something more like its original, interdisciplinary program, adding a new emphasis on philosophy of (social) science and the second-order question of how to validate the causal claims and ontological commitments contained in the social pathology framework.

My more restricted purpose here is to present an analytic grid with which to characterise, sort, and investigate claims about social pathologies. This grid contains both general features and more specific elements of the Frankfurt School conceptualisations of the idea of social pathology. By proposing an analytic grid, I do not mean to suggest that all social pathologies have a common structure. The grid is compatible with, albeit not necessarily tied to, thinking of the idea of social pathology as a cluster concept, resistant to systematisation into one common structure. The purpose of the grid is rather to help identify different claims about social pathology and to uncover their respective elements and commitments (and thereby to help assess their respective strengths and weakness).

As a first step in developing the analytical grid, it helps to distinguish between the thesis that society makes individuals ill, and the thesis that society itself is ill. Often, the two are combined (say in the claim that a society is ill because it makes its members ill).

But they are analytically distinct, and at least sometimes only one is advanced, in isolation of the other. It is, thus, advisable to examine specific social pathology claims in relation to whether each thesis or both are in play; and if both are, what the exact relationship between them is meant to be (for example, by asking whether the link is meant to be constitutive or causal).

Next, following Zurn, we can say that there are four analytically distinct tasks for theorists who advance social pathology claims: (1) symptomology, (2) diagnosis, (3) aetiology, and (4) prognosis and therapy. Noting that we can analytically distinguish between these four tasks is not to say that all four tasks are always carried out when such claims are made. It is not even to say that all the tasks always need to be carried out – for example, depending on the kind of critique one is engaged in, different tasks might be essential (notably symptomology for disclosing critique), but not others. The reason why I bring up the four tasks is merely because it is useful to keep these tasks in view when analysing and comparing claims about social pathology. Moreover, by following Zurn in conceiving of these tasks as four analytically separable ones, I am not suggesting that there is always a hard and fast distinction between them in practice. Particularly when we are nearing the point when a full account of a pathology (social, physical or mental) has become available, the different aspects will merge into each other, so that, notably, the distinction between the diagnosis of a condition as pathology and the account of its causes (the aetiology) will have become hard to distinguish. Yet, particularly in the early stages of conceptualising and understanding a condition as pathological, we might have a (however preliminary) diagnosis of it, but not yet a full or even any causal account of how it (typically) arises. (One need only think about how mental disorders are conceptualised in diagnostic manuals, particularly from DSM-III onwards – as involving a cluster of symptoms, but often no clear aetiology.) As most social pathology claims are still in relatively early stages of their development, deployment and defence, it strikes me as helpful to analyse them by separating out the four tasks in mind and asking which are offered and required in relation to a particular claim or text.

Moreover, drawing on the longer paper, let me here list three general features of social pathology claims:

- (a) Such claims tend to concern social processes of increasing deterioration.
- (b) They tend to operate with ethical terms (such as self-realization and flourishing or the lack thereof), here contrasted to moral terms (notably justice).
- (c) They tend to involve a commitment to macro-social entities (like society, capitalism, or consumer culture) as explanatory categories (notably as causal factors).

Not every social pathology claim will exhibit these general features. Indeed, some such claims clearly deny or break with one or more of these features (such as Honneth's most recent keying of social pathology talk to the moral vocabulary of justice). What I am suggesting is that it is helpful for understanding and analysing claims about social pathology to ask whether or not they exhibit these features. Similarly, it is helpful to ask of such claims whether the proposed conception presupposes or contains one or more of the following specifications of the idea of social pathology in the (early) Frankfurt School tradition (suggested by Honneth):

- (d) Are social pathologies understood as rationality deficits of society, using a

broadly Hegelian notion of reason?

- (e) Is the conception that their ultimate cause is capitalism?
- (f) Does it presuppose that these pathologies include or give rise to human suffering, which fuels an emancipatory interest to overcome them?

And it is also helpful to ask, whether claims about social pathology invoke Habermas' and Honneth's specification that

- (g) society is functionally differentiated into spheres, whereby social pathology becomes understood as a malfunctioning of these spheres (malfunctioning either internally or in their interactions, notably by one colonising the other).

It is then also possible to interrogate social pathology claims further in relation to these above features. For example, one might investigate whether the ethical approach contains or presupposes a conception of social health (not just of social pathology). Or one can question what other social-ontological presuppositions than a commitment to macro-social entities are made in claiming that society is ill or makes individuals ill. This in turn will raise further questions, such as about the envisaged role of the social sciences in making and validating social pathology claims, and more generally about what it would take to vindicate social pathology claims and what validation strategies are available for doing so. (The literature on social pathology is largely silent on these matters – other than critical voices doubting that social pathology claims can be made to stick).

Finally, it is important to recognise that the idea of social pathology is not an innocent one. Some object that it rests on an illicit analogy between society and an organism. Others point to an ugly history of (ab)use of the idea. Notoriously, Nazi propaganda portrayed the Jews as a pathogen in European society and used the rhetoric of social pathology to pursue a policy of extermination. This in turn points towards a further objection, which alleges that invoking this idea is more a reflection of antecedent ideological commitment than of good evidence and reasoning. Indeed, one might argue that the notion is so vague that it lends itself to pushing through policies that do not work. Or one might object that the use of metaphorical language betrays a lack of understanding of the social problems at issue and can misframe them. Moreover, one might also object to the status claimed for theorists of social pathologies and the status assigned to those (purportedly) affected by them: What can legitimate the claim to be a physician of society? And is social pathology talk not rendering those affected into passive victims, into 'patients'?

Taking these various considerations into account yields the following grid for analysing, characterising, and comparing social pathology claims:

<i>Basic Grid:</i>	
Symptomology:	<i>Key question:</i> What are the symptoms?
Diagnosis:	<i>Key question:</i> To what social pathology (or set of social pathologies) do the symptoms point?
Aetiology:	<i>Key questions:</i> What are the causes? Is capitalism one causal factor? If so, how so? Is it the ultimate cause?
Prognosis/Therapy:	<i>Key question:</i> Is there an appeal to emancipatory interests, and what explains their existence?
<i>Further issues for analysis and comparison:</i>	
The notion of social pathology:	<p><i>Key questions:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What is the notion of 'pathology' (or 'illness', etc.) at stake? Is it taken over from medicine or broader/different (and if so, how and why)? - Is the invocation of pathology language merely metaphorical or literal? If metaphorical/analogical, what are its legitimate uses and boundaries? If literal, what is meant by 'pathology', such that it covers physical and social 'bodies'? - Do the claims amount to the thesis that society makes us ill or the thesis that society is ill itself or both theses? If both, how are the theses related? - Do the social problems in question involve a downward spiral (or can they be understood fruitfully in this way)? - Are the normative criteria ethical? Is there a notion of (social) health at play, and if so, what is it (and is it defensible)? If not, is one required? - Is there an invocation of the language of (social) rationality deficit? If so, what exactly is the notion of rationality, how can it be deficient, and what remedy can there be?

<p>Social Ontology</p>	<p><i>Key questions:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What conception of society (or other macro-social entities) is used or presupposed? What are the other social-ontological presuppositions? - Is a functional differentiation of society used or presupposed? If so, does the analysis assume the in-principle health of the social body? What implications does this have (such as for the possibility of radical critique)?
<p>Evidence, validation, and defence</p>	<p><i>Key questions:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What relation to the social sciences is envisaged in advancing and validating the social pathology claims? - What forms of evidence are offered? What would a successful validation look like? What methods are there for validation? - What conceptual, normative, or political difficulties does the proposed model of social pathology involve? How can they be addressed? - If any particular kinds of illness/disease are invoked in the social pathology claim (such as Plato's thesis that democracies are feverish), what problems does this introduce, and how can they be addressed? - What is the role of the theorist? Is it a defensible one? How are those afflicted by the illnesses/disease conceived? Is this a defensible view?

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Endnotes

¹ The longer paper will appear as 'Critical Theory and Social Pathology' in *Routledge Companion to the Frankfurt School*, ed. by E. Hammer, A. Honneth, and P. Gordon. London (etc.): Routledge, forthcoming 2018.

² Indeed, elsewhere I have criticised Zurn's influential proposal of a common structure of (what Honneth describes as) social pathologies. See my 'Honneth on Social Pathologies: a critique', *Critical Horizons* 16.2 (May, 2015): 131–52, section III. Available open access at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1179/1440991715Z.00000000044>

³ C. F. Zurn, 'Social Pathologies as Second-Order Disorders'. In: *Axel Honneth: Critical Essays*, edited by Danielle Petherbridge, Ch. 12, section 2. Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2011.

⁴ A. Honneth, *Das Recht der Freiheit: Grundriß einer demokratischen Sittlichkeit*. Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2011. English translation by J. Ganahl as *Freedom's Right: The Social Foundations of Democratic Life*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014.

⁵ A. Honneth, 'Eine soziale Pathologie der Vernunft: Zur intellektuellen Erbschaft der Kritischen Theorie'. In: *Axel Honneth: Sozialphilosophie zwischen Kritik und Anerkennung*, edited by C. Halbig and M. Quante, 9 – 28. Münster: Lit Verlag, 2004. English translation in *Cambridge Companion to Critical Theory*, edited by F. Rush, Ch. 13. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

⁶ See, for example, Dornes' recent critique of claims that capitalism makes us depressed (M. Dornes, *Macht der Kapitalismus depressiv? Über seelische Gesundheit und Krankheit in modernen Gesellschaften*. Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 2016).