

What is Immanent Critique?*

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Introduction

Even though the many variations of “critical social theory” that were developed during the late 19th and the 20th century — from orthodox Marxism to the various approaches within the Frankfurt School — disagree more often than not on methodological, normative as well as descriptive issues, they still share one core commitment: their critique of modern, capitalist society is supposed to be more than a form of *moral condemnation*.¹ Or, put more generally, they accept that it is not sufficient to approach social issues with a preconceived, normative standard that is justified independently of any examination of the social practices in question.

In a letter to Arnold Ruge, Marx famously rejected such a merely moralistic stance:

This does not mean that we shall confront the world with new doctrinaire principles and proclaim: Here is the truth, on your knees before it! It means that we shall develop for the world new principles from the existing principles of the world. We shall not say: Abandon your struggles, they are mere folly; let us provide you with true campaign-slogans. Instead, we shall simply show the world why it is struggling, and consciousness of this is a thing it must acquire whether it wishes or not.²

Subsequently, most Marxist and post-Marxist critical theorists have adopted the view that it is their task to show that the standards they employ are in some way *internal* to those practices they criticize.³ Only then, it is argued, do these standards lead to more than to a condemnation that merely shows that these practices do not live up to *our* conception

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¹This paper contains an introduction to an argument which I have laid out in more detail in my book Titus Stahl. *Immanente Kritik. Elemente einer Theorie sozialer Praktiken*. Frankfurt a. M.: Campus, 2013. The argument as presented here is not to thought to be a complete discussion of the strategy of immanent critique but rather an exposition of the relevant questions.

²Karl Marx. *Early Writings*. Trans. by Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton. London: Penguin, 1992, 208f.

³In relation to the Frankfurt School, see Raymond Geuss. *The Idea of a Critical Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981, p. 65.

of the good and the right, but to an argument that establishes that our society fails also on its *own terms*.

Axel Honneth similarly has argued that the reconstructive method which is characteristic for critical theory is committed to the presupposition

that only those principles or ideals which have already taken some form in the present social order can serve as a valid basis for social critique.⁴

Traditionally, the form of social critique that proceeds in this way has been called *immanent critique*. In a nutshell, an *immanent critique of society is a critique which derives the standards it employs from the object criticized, that is, the society in question, rather than approaching that society with independently justified standards*.

Of course, this could be only an idiosyncratic commitment peculiar to one particular tradition of thought. If it were, and if there were not many reasons to accept this commitment today, it would not warrant further attention.

As it turns out, however, the basic idea of immanent critique — without necessarily being called by this name — frequently resurfaces in contemporary political philosophy. For example, within the debate about the justification of a theory of justice, many theorists are uncomfortable with the model of critique implicit in John Rawls' *Theory of Justice*.⁵ Because Rawls seems to assume that we should formulate basic principles of justice in a way that enables them to be used for evaluating all possible kinds of basic social structures without presupposing any such structure to be normatively privileged, his theory seems to entail that we must justify these normative principles (and thus, any critical claims building on them) without referring to the self-understanding or the norms of any particular social practice.

As some of Rawls' critics have argued, this idea — that we should justify the principles we use for evaluating societies without any reference to the actual self-understanding or to the concrete practices of those societies — and the resulting model of social critique turn out to be unsuitable for deriving anything but the most minimal normative standards.⁶

Others have objected that the context-independent rules of rational choice that Rawls proposes should guide us in choosing the right standards of justice are only suitable for individuals disconnected from any specific community. If this is true, the question arises as to why principles chosen in accordance with such rules should have any significance for real persons who are members of particular communities. This is, because their membership in communities already enables them to evaluate principles of justice based on much more

⁴Axel Honneth. "Reconstructive Social Critique with a Genealogical Reservation: On the Idea of Critique in the Frankfurt School". In: *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 22.2 (2001), pp. 3–11, p. 6

⁵John Rawls. *A theory of justice*. English. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971

⁶Michael Walzer. *Interpretation and Social Criticism*. Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press, 1987, 14ff.

substantive normative commitments. The construction of a theory disconnected from these commitments is therefore seen not only as misleading but as unnecessary.⁷

Even though some of the critics of such context-free normative theorizing have taken this to be an occasion for endorsing a more relativistic, internal form of critique, others — such as Michael Walzer,⁸ Charles Taylor⁹ and Axel Honneth¹⁰ — have again turned to what in effect is the method of immanent critique. These theorists are committed to the idea that all forms of convincing normative critique must draw on unrealized normative potentials that are in some sense to be reconstructed from existing social practices. However, on their view, the realization of these potentials nevertheless can transcend the current shape of these practices.

As these debates show, an examination of the idea of immanent critique can amount to more than just to an exercise in cultivating Marxist traditions. Such an examination not only seems to be called for given the current debate in critical theory, it also appears promising in terms of broader philosophical developments.

But, even though immanent critique remains an important option for the justification of normative principles for political theory and social critique, there is no explicit discussion in recent literature of the relation between contemporary approaches and the commitments of classical Marxism and critical theory, nor has there been any attempt to describe the methodological issues at stake independently from the concerns of more particular normative arguments.¹¹

Even though this paper cannot undertake this project in its entirety, it aims nonetheless to at least provide an outline of some questions that need to be answered. I will describe the central idea of immanent critique more precisely and distinguish three central questions

⁷Michael J Sandel. *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1998

⁸Michael Walzer. *Thick and Thin. Moral Criticism at Home and Abroad*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994; Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism*; Michael Walzer. *The Company of Critics. Social Criticism and Political Commitment in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Basic Books, 1988

⁹Charles Taylor. “Neutrality in Political Science”. In: *Philosophy and the Human Sciences. Philosophical Papers 2*. Cambridge / New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985, pp. 58–90; Charles Taylor. “Explanation and Practical Reason”. In: *The Quality of Life*. Ed. by Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, pp. 208–231; Charles Taylor. “Interpretation and the sciences of man”. In: *Philosophy and the Human Sciences. Philosophical Papers 2*. Cambridge / New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985, pp. 15–57

¹⁰Axel Honneth. “The Possibility of a Disclosing Critique of Society: The Dialectic of Enlightenment in Light of Current Debates in Social Criticism”. In: *Constellations* 7.1 (2000), pp. 116–127. doi: 10.1111/1467-8675.00173; Axel Honneth. “Integrity and Disrespect: Principles of a Conception of Morality Based on the Theory of Recognition”. In: *Political Theory* 20.2 (May 1992), pp. 187–201. doi: 10.1177/0090591792020002001; Honneth, “Reconstructive Social Critique with a Genealogical Reservation: On the Idea of Critique in the Frankfurt School”

¹¹Exceptions from these rule are: Rahel Jaeggi. “Was ist Ideologiekritik?” In: *Was ist Kritik?* Ed. by Rahel Jaeggi and Tilo Wesche. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2009, pp. 268–295; Rahel Jaeggi. “Re-Thinking Ideology”. 2008; Antti Kauppinen. “Reason, Recognition, and Internal Critique”. In: *Inquiry* 45.4 (2002), pp. 479–498; Karin de Boer. “Hegel’s Conception of Immanent Critique: Its Sources, Extent and Limit”. English. In: *Conceptions of critique in modern and contemporary philosophy*. Ed. by Ruth Sonderegger and Karin de Boer. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, pp. 81–100

that have to be answered by theories of immanent critique (section 2). After a short discussion of the original notion of immanent critique in Hegel and Marx (section 3), I will describe two general strategies to deal with these questions which I call “hermeneutic” and “practice-theoretic” approaches (section 4). Finally, I will sketch the beginnings of an argument for a practice-theoretic account of immanent critique that relies on a theory of norm constitution by mutual recognition (section 5).

Immanent Critique: The Central Idea

While the term “immanent critique” is often used to designate forms of literary or philosophical criticism that start from the underlying assumptions of some work and then criticize it using these assumptions, immanent critique — in the sense I am interested in — is a form of *social critique*. What then is social critique?

Social critique is first and foremost a form of activity. People engage in social critique when they evaluate and condemn certain features of a society. The appropriate objects of social critique are therefore social practices, not merely the actions of individuals: For instance, if I criticize my friend John for being late, this is not social critique as long as John’s lateness is only the result of his own decisions or dispositions. Only if I assume that his lateness is either *part* of a social practice (i.e., a custom of not arriving at the time promised) or that it is *caused by* social practices, I can take his lateness as an appropriate occasion for social critique.

In contrast to moral critique in a wider sense — which can be directed at both individual actions and social processes — social critique is therefore limited to a certain domain of potential objects — namely, social practices, institutions, customs and beliefs and collective actions.

People who engage in social critique evaluate these social entities using some kind of *standard*. Engaging in a social critique of an institution or practice critique means pointing out that it fails to live up to such a standard.

Of course, it is not always necessary that the standard in question is *shared* by those whose behavior is criticized.¹² For example, pointing out that contemporary social practices fail to live up to the moral standards set out in the Bible, certainly counts as a form of social critique, even though many people would not accept the standard employed as particularly relevant to their lives. This entails that it is not necessary for social critique to be aimed at motivating those whose practices are criticized to change them.

However, social critique very often does have this aim. While people can engage in social critique for its own sake or to reach agreement with other observers of a social practice as to whether this practice should be condemned or not, social critics will most often not only

¹²Brian Barry. “Social Criticism and Political Philosophy”. In: *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 19 (1990), pp. 360–373, p. 368

refer to but also *address* those who either are engaged in the relevant practice or who have the capacity to change it. If this is the case, it does not suffice to describe the practice and to evaluate it according to the standard employed, the critique must also be directed at *changing* the practice in question so as to better conform to that standard. While such changes can be brought about by many different means, including manipulating the persons in question into changing their practices, social critique aims at effecting such changes by way of *convincing* its addressees to agree on the relevance of its guiding standard and, therefore, to take the failure of their practices to live up to this standard as a *reason* to change it.

This can be summarized as follows:

Social critique in the transformative sense is an activity that consists in the evaluation of social practices using some kind of normative standard with the intent to convince relevant social agents that the deficiencies of these practices (according to the standard in question) constitute a reason for them to change their practices so that they become better according to this standard.

While there are many types of social critique which do not directly aim at first justifying some standard and then using this standard as a reason — for example, we might think of Nietzsche's and Foucault's forms of genealogical critique¹³ or of Rorty's idea of disclosing critique¹⁴ —, at some point the question becomes inevitable as to how we can distinguish between standards that are not only justified but in regard to which we can have a legitimate expectation that others should accept them and standards for which this is not the case. This is especially true if the addressees of the critique have beliefs about norms and justificatory reasons which do not coincide with those of the critic.

On first glance, there are two obvious strategies to deal with this question:¹⁵ First, one could assume that the question of which standard is appropriate to measure social practices can be answered using arguments the validity of which is completely independent from any description of these practices and maybe even independently of all particular points of view. For example, one could assume that the relevant standard for the social is that of *justice* and that the meaning of justice can be known as a result of philosophical analysis — independently of its envisaged application — that always yields the same results when

¹³Martin Saar. *Genealogie als Kritik. Geschichte und Theorie des Subjekts nach Nietzsche und Foucault*. Frankfurt a. M.: Campus, 2007

¹⁴Richard Rorty. *Contingency, irony and solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 9, for other conceptions of disclosing critique, see Honneth, "The Possibility of a Disclosing Critique of Society: The Dialectic of Enlightenment in Light of Current Debates in Social Criticism"; Nikolas Kompridis. *Critique and disclosure: critical theory between past and future*. English. Cambridge, Mass.; London: MIT Press, 2011

¹⁵For this argument, see Honneth, "Reconstructive Social Critique with a Genealogical Reservation: On the Idea of Critique in the Frankfurt School"; Mattias Iser. "Gesellschaftskritik". In: *Politische Theorie. 22 umkämpfte Begriffe zur Einführung*. Ed. by Gerhard Göhler and Mattias Iser. Wiesbaden: VS, 2004, pp. 155–172; Onora O'Neill. "Starke und schwache Gesellschaftskritik in einer globalisierten Welt". In: *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 48 (2000), pp. 719–728

done correctly. The resulting form of critique could be called an *external critique*, for the standard that is used is established independently of all particular social practices. In this case, the standard is not in any sense bound to the particular features of any such practice but rather introduced by critics, as it were, “from the outside”.¹⁶

Second, one could deny that there are any such “external” standards that can be appropriately employed to evaluate social practices and that therefore one must attempt to derive the standard for each social practice from that practice itself. One obvious way to do so is to take up the *self-understanding* of the members of the practice in question and to evaluate whether their *actual behavior* within the practice is compatible with that self-understanding. For example, one might discover that most people engaged in shaping the foreign policy of some nation understand themselves as supremely concerned with the protection of human rights world-wide, but that the resulting actions of that nation do not actually display a regard for human rights. As a consequence, one could employ a strategy of *internal critique*, measuring the practice on norms that are “internal” to it.

While these two strategies are widely employed and easy enough to understand, it is an open question whether they exhaust all the options that we have. There are several reasons why it seems desirable that there should be other strategies. For instance, external critique seems to entail that the critic has access to some kind of objective normative truth that enables her to criticize social practices without examining the reasoning of the members (save for strategic reasons of how to phrase her criticism most effectively). And even if one does not consider the potential dogmatism of this strategy as philosophically problematic, there is always the question of why moral concerns that are removed from social reality should be seen as relevant from the point of view of a participant in that practice, that is, there is a question why such externally established standards should concern members of these practices more than other “internal” standards.

While external critique seems to claim too much in terms of the force of objective moral truths, internal critique seems to run danger of claiming too little. While it is certainly true that it often is better to act in accordance with one’s normative self-understanding, a mere demand for consistency seems to only enable a very weak form of critique. Not only are some empirical social practices better than the self-understanding of their participants. There are also many practices where persons engage in evil or unjust behavior without any internal inconsistency. And finally, even if a critic can point out that some actions do not conform to the self-understanding of the agents, this does not answer the question as to whether they should resolve the mismatch by changing their actions or their normative beliefs. In other words, while external critique seems to have a problem of *justificatory power*, internal critique seems to have a problem of *transformative potential*.

Is there another option for social critique? Immanent critique in the sense understood by

¹⁶One can also distinguish such universal-rationalist forms of external critique further from dogmatic, “ethnocentric” external critique that just assumes parochial standards as valid for everyone, see Kauppinen, “Reason, Recognition, and Internal Critique”

Hegel, Marx and the Frankfurt School is supposed to be a strategy that proceeds from the actual social practices of a society, but that does not remain content with only *reproducing* the normative commitments of its members on the level of theory. It rather attempts to uncover normative commitments which, although they are in some unspecified sense *part* of that practice, go beyond both the regularities of empirical behavior and the individual or collective beliefs of those engaged in it. Or, to put it more explicitly:

Immanent critique is a form of social critique that evaluates both the empirical behavior constituting social practices and the explicit self-understanding of their members according to standards that are, in some sense, internal to those practices themselves. By doing so, immanent critique aims at a transformation of such practices that encompasses both actions and self-understandings.

Immanent critique so defined seems to avoid the justificatory problems of external critique as it is not committed to some form of questionably objective insight into normative truth. It also avoids the transformative weakness of internal critique because its standards go beyond both actual practice and normative beliefs.

But it avoids these problems only at a price. There are at least three questions which must be answered by a theory of immanent critique in order for it to become even remotely plausible:

1. A theory of immanent critique must clarify the claim that “standards” or “normative potentials” do exist within social practices that are irreducible both to the actual regularities of actions within these practices and to the conscious self-understanding of its participants. Thus, it must explain what it means for a normative standard to “exist” in social practices in another way. This is a question about the existence of a social entity (a practice-based standard), a question of *social ontology*.
2. Even if the theory can present a convincing case for how such standards can be said to exist, a theory of immanent critique also needs to address the question as to how a critic can find out what these standards are. It is possible that there could be no reliable methods to decide which one of multiple standards is immanent within a practice in the relevant sense. Thus, a second question concerns the *normative epistemology* of immanent critique.
3. Finally, even if such standards exist and we can know about them, why should anyone care? Or, to put it differently, why should the existence of such a standard constitute a *reason* for persons engaged in a social practice to change their behavior? A theory of immanent critique must therefore also spell out how such critique is capable of *justifying* its demands.

Any theory of immanent critique must provide an answer to these three questions in order to constitute a genuine alternative to external and internal critique.

The Origins of Immanent Critique

In the genealogy of the idea of an immanent critique, Hegel occupies a central role. It was Hegel who introduced this idea into a discourse about society, a discourse that has since become fundamental for critical social theories.¹⁷

In the *Phenomenology of Spirit* Hegel clearly distinguishes his own method of a critique of institutionalized forms of knowledge from a merely dogmatic critique. The latter is a critique that takes some standard of a historical practice given and that merely *assures* us that its own concepts (that is, the normative standards of justification internal to a form of knowledge) are *real*.¹⁸ Relying on such a mere assurance, Hegel argues, is not sufficient. But it is equally insufficient to claim that some standard applies to a form of knowledge because this standard belongs to its “essence” (i.e. to apply a dogmatic, external form of critique).¹⁹

What we asserted to be its essence would be not so much its truth but rather just our knowledge of it. The essence or criterion would lie within ourselves, and that which was to be compared with it and about which a decision would be reached through this comparison would not necessarily have to recognize the validity of such a standard.²⁰

In other words, applying a standard which we merely *take* as the essence of a form of knowledge without showing that it is that form’s *own standard of self-evaluation* leads to a critique that cannot justify why it should be relevant from the point of view of the form of knowledge that is criticized.

In contrast, Hegel’s alternative model of critique is one of immanence: he argues that we should investigate forms of knowledge using their own presuppositions, being conscious that — taken objectively (as an “object”²¹) — each such form already contains standards for self-evaluation (it is at the same time a “concept”²² — that is, a normative standard):

Consequently, we do not need to import criteria, or to make use of our own bright ideas and thoughts during the course of the inquiry; it is precisely when we leave these aside that we succeed in contemplating the matter in hand as it is in and for itself.²³

¹⁷See also Andrew Buchwalter. “Hegel, Marx, and the Concept of Immanent Critique”. In: *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 29.2 (1991), pp. 253–279; Robert J. Antonio. “Immanent Critique as the Core of Critical Theory: Its Origins and Developments in Hegel, Marx and Contemporary Thought”. In: *The British Journal of Sociology* 32.3 (Sept. 1981), pp. 330–345. DOI: 10.2307/589281. This section can be skipped by readers only interested in the systematic question.

¹⁸Georg Hegel. *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Trans. by A. V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 49

¹⁹Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 52

²⁰Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 53

²¹Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 53

²²Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 53

²³Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 54

That this self-evaluation of knowledge-forms does not amount to a mere internal critique can be shown by pointing out that the application of the internal conceptual standard of justification of some form of knowledge *to itself* as an object can have the result that this object (i.e. the social rules of justification of some form of institutionalized knowledge) is found lacking and in need of change. If a historical form of justification *actually* changes in response to a critique drawing on its own standards, these standards will change with it, beginning a potentially endless process of development driven by the internal dynamic of forms of knowledge which Hegel calls “experience”.²⁴

This account of immanent critique is also at the core of Hegel’s idea of social critique and it describes the self-application of norms that are constitutive of different forms of knowledge (and effectively of forms of life) to these forms themselves, an application which uncovers conceptual mismatches and paradoxes that drive “Spirit” to always go beyond itself.²⁵

Hegel’s model of critique is *idealist* in the sense that it assumes that the social practices to which such critique is applied are always conceptually structured in the way typical for practices of justification. It not only presupposes that all relevant social practices are so closely entangled with standards of justification that they do not require a contribution by the critic in order to be evaluated, but it also presupposes that they display a kind of internal unity which makes it possible to reconstruct their historical self-development as one of a progress of justification.

Both of these presuppositions are rejected by Marx. In Marx’s theory, social practices should not be so much understood as the result of *conceptual self-determination*, but as the result or the “reflection” of *processes of social domination*. In addition, Marx does not describe practices as displaying the unity of “the concept”, but as being thoroughly divided by opposing interests, norms and self-conceptions of different groups of social agents, the self-understanding of one of which usually succeeds in falsely pretending to be an impartial description of that practice.

Therefore, on Marx’s account, social practices should not be judged according to their self-conception, but rather according to the criterion of whether or not they are characterized by *unresolved internal contradictions*.²⁶ Such contradictions eventually must lead to the negation or the downfall of the practice in question, a development which is anticipated and furthered by the activity of the critic.

As social critique must aim at uncovering such contradictions as far as they are essential for the practice in question, it cannot merely accept the self-description of a practice on its own terms because such a self-description will usually not contain an account of the

²⁴Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 55

²⁵For an extended discussion of Hegel’s approach, see Terry P Pinkard. *Hegel’s Phenomenology. The Sociality of Reason*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

²⁶For example, in relation to the state: “The contradiction between the vocation and the good intentions of the administration on the one hand and the means and powers at its disposal on the other cannot be eliminated by the state, except by abolishing itself; for the state is based on this contradiction.” (Marx, *Early Writings*, 411f.)

systematic character of its own instability. Thus, social critique cannot rest content with just *describing* contradictions, but must always also aim at *explaining* them:

Vulgar criticism falls into an opposite dogmatic error. Thus, for example, it criticises the constitution, drawing attention to the opposition of the powers etc. It finds contradictions everywhere. But criticism that struggles with its opposite remains dogmatic criticism, as for example in earlier times, when the dogma of the Blessed Trinity was set aside by appealing to the contradiction between 1 and 3. True criticism, however, shows the internal genesis of the Blessed Trinity in the human mind, it describes the act of its birth. Thus, true philosophical criticism of the present state constitution not only shows the contradictions as existing, but clarifies them, grasps their essence and necessity.²⁷

Marx's model of immanent critique thus does not contrast norms (of consistency) and reality as two separate poles, but rather attempts to *grasp* the failure of certain social practices to live up to their own norms as a result of their determination by relations of social domination, relations that in turn explain these contradictions.

However, by discarding the Hegelian idea that practices have a conceptual content, Marx's theory loses the capacity to explain how, starting from the presuppositions of "contradictory" social practices, immanent critique is capable of uncovering a normative demand that these practices should be changed in some *specific* way (rather, Marx's theory can only establish that they are inconsistent and thus to be overcome *somehow*).²⁸

The method of immanent critique has also been further developed by the first generation of the Frankfurt School, most prominently by Adorno. Adorno's use of the concept, however, shows the unresolved tension between the remainders of a Hegelian picture and Marx's materialist model. As Brian O'Connor suggests in his brilliant reconstruction,²⁹ Adorno both endorses Marx's thesis that society is structured by contradictions³⁰ and Hegel's idea that we can criticize society drawing on standards of rationality immanent within social practices entailing that these practices can be understood as having a conceptual unity.³¹ In addition, Adorno assumes that the most important immanent standard in today's society is the promise of autonomous subjectivity. At the same time, however, he also holds that, due to structural constraints, this promise can never be realized within the current form of social reproduction.³² Thus, society systematically produces normative demands internally

²⁷ Marx, *Early Writings*, p. 158

²⁸ Of course, Marx thought that capitalist practices would produce an agent, the proletariat, for which the question as to what would be better would be easy to solve even without help from philosophy. As we know today, not only has such a unified agent never existed, this model also cannot serve as a general model for immanent critique.

²⁹ Brian O'Connor. *Adorno*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2013, p. 44

³⁰ Theodor Adorno. "On the Logic of the Social Sciences". In: *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*. London: Heinemann, 1976, pp. 105–122, p. 106

³¹ O'Connor, *Adorno*, 48f.

³² O'Connor, *Adorno*, p. 47

connected to certain forms of subjectivity, on the one hand, and social structures that necessarily frustrate these demands, on the other hand. This state of affairs allows the social critic to uncover normative demands (that are only accessible through subjective experience) that are not actually recognized by those social practices that presuppose the forms of subjectivity in which these demands reside. Thus, the normative standards that Adorno has in mind could be better characterized not as immanent in social practices but rather as immanent in those forms of subjectivity on which social reproduction depends.

It is, however, not only unclear if the resulting form of social criticism really still amounts to “immanent critique” in the relevant sense. Adorno also seems to disregard the question of how the presuppositions of certain forms of subjectivity could appear as justified demands within the social practices concerned. Instead, he retreats to a pessimist stance and paints a bleak picture of social practices as necessarily devoid of potentials and presents a corresponding picture of subjective experience as the last resort of hope.

Hermeneutic and Practice-Theoretic Immanent Critique

The premise of Hegel’s theory of immanent critique — that we can understand the internal dynamics of social practices as their development according to their immanent conceptual norms — does not constitute an uncontroversial starting point for immanent critique. But the models that Marx and Adorno employ also cannot unambiguously answer the questions that we began with.

It therefore seems advisable to investigate the possibility of an immanent social critique not by pursuing an interpretation of these authors, but by approaching the question systematically of how an immanent critique of society could be possible.

In regard to the most fundamental issue — what it means to say that there are normative potentials in social practices that extend beyond the normative beliefs of their members — there are, in principle, two general ways of elaborating the presuppositions of an immanent critique, what I will call a *hermeneutic* and a *practice-theoretic* approach.

The hermeneutic approach

According to the hermeneutic approach, one can attempt to spell out the meaning of claims regarding the existence of immanent norms as follows: it can be shown that we are not restricted to a merely internal critique if we start from the self-understanding of a community. Rather, if we examine the *self-understanding of the members of a practice*, we are often able to uncover implications or interpretations of that self-understanding that have remained unacknowledged thus far. These new implications of a self-understanding can then be employed to criticize both the normative beliefs *and* the actual practice, without resorting to using any external standards. The resulting strategy of *hermeneutic immanent critique* is therefore not to be confused with a merely internal form of critique,

because it does not only *reproduce* and *apply* the acknowledged norms of a community, but it examines them for possible interpretations that go beyond their acknowledged meaning. The hermeneutic immanent critique strategy thus answers the social ontological question by reference to the normative self-interpretation of a community in which normative potentials are thought to inhere; it commits itself to an epistemology for which the process of interpretation is central. In terms of its justification, it relies on the assumed commitment of persons to their own ideals, a commitment that is thought to persist even when the same persons are shown that these ideals have a different meaning than the one they had previously acknowledged.

Michael Walzer is one proponent of this model of immanent critique.³³ Walzer argues that rather than as “disconnected criticism”,³⁴ social critique should be understood as a continuation and extension of ordinary, everyday complaints by persons who share a common understanding of morality. He distinguishes this practice from a merely internal critique insofar that he claims that interpretive criticism need not only apply, but may transform the normative framework “by exposing its internal tensions and contradictions”.³⁵ In addition, since normative standards in practices always serve to legitimize power relations, they must always describe these practices as normatively more attractive than they actually are. This internal tension allows critics to use these norms against their ideological purpose and to employ them to transform society.³⁶

While this model of critique is politically attractive, it makes several assumptions which are ultimately implausible. First, Walzer assumes that critics can transform the norms that they employ and thus avoids the charge of describing a critique that allows for nothing more demanding than evaluating consistency. However, in his insistence that critics must remain “connected” to a normative framework, he actually disallows any motivation for social critique that *aims* at radical social transformation. For this reason, the possible transformative effects of Walzerian critique can only be brought about *unintentionally*. Second, in assuming that criticism consists in interpreting an agreed-upon framework, Walzer restricts social critique to those contexts in which there is a single normative foundation that everyone accepts, a description that applies only to few modern social practices.³⁷ Third, the very question of what should count as the accepted normative self-description of a practice will always be contentious itself. Because Walzer identifies this self-description with the dominant interpretation of a practice, his form of critique often seems to result in what is in effect a form of conventionalism.³⁸

³³Walzer, *Thick and Thin*; Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism*; Walzer, *The Company of Critics*

³⁴Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism*, p. 64

³⁵Walzer, *Thick and Thin*, p. 47

³⁶Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism*, 41ff

³⁷Ronald Dworkin. “To Each His Own”. In: *The New York Review of Books* 30.6 (1983), pp. 4–6; Beate Rössler. “Kommunitaristische Sehnsucht und liberale Rechte. Zu Michael Walzers politischer Theorie der Gesellschaft”. In: *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 41.6 (1993), pp. 1035–1048

³⁸Joshua Cohen. “Kommunitarismus und universeller Standpunkt”. In: *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 41.6 (1993), pp. 1009–1019

Of course, some of these problems are bound to Walzer's particular account of hermeneutic immanent critique. For example, if we compare his theory to the much more sophisticated model of interpretation developed by Charles Taylor, it turns out that we can understand the process of interpretation as being guided by standards that allow the critic to reject the dominant values: if it is assumed, as Taylor proposes, that a re-interpretation of a self-understanding constitutes an advancement beyond a previous interpretation if it allows a richer articulation of the norms in question,³⁹ or if it is better able to deal with objections to the practice,⁴⁰ or if it contributes better to the practice's continuing functioning,⁴¹ we may very well find out that an interpretation of a practice can be justified that does not yet command agreement among the members of that practice.

However, even for such a refined account of hermeneutic immanent critique one problem still remains puzzling, namely, how one could justify one of the possible interpretations of the self-understanding governing a practice as the one which must be accepted as *normatively binding* by its members. While Walzer simply assumes that a critic is only justified if she can actually convince her audience of her new interpretation — and thus effectively rules out the possibility of a community which irrationally refuses accepting valid criticism — Taylor's suggestions for how one can justify selecting one particular re-interpretation as an improvement over the current self-understanding seems to already be normatively charged and thus in need of justification. For example, it is unclear why a community should accept that it should always adopt the most expressive account of its self-understanding (and not, for example, the account most faithful to the intentions of their ancestors), or why it should adopt the account that best deals with the internal contradictions of their norms (rather than an account which pushes for an overcoming of their practices because they are contradictory). One could continue this list, but the point will remain the same: adopting one criterion for selecting an interpretation over another seems to always already assume a community's *commitment* to a normative standard on which the critic can draw.

The practice-theoretic approach

As the hermeneutic approach seems to presuppose the idea of immanent normativity without explaining it, it seems worthwhile to examine the practice-theoretic model of immanent critique in order to find out whether this approach is capable of providing such an explanation. In contrast to hermeneutic immanent critique, practice-theoretic immanent critique does not (or at least does not only) draw on interpretations of the explicit self-understanding of some community. It rather relies on a description of *social reality* as it is discovered by the social scientist. In particular, practice-theoretic immanent critique aims to find normative potentials within the structure of empirical interactions that con-

³⁹Charles Taylor. *Sources of the Self. The Making of the Modern Identity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989, Sections 4.1 and 4.2

⁴⁰Taylor, "Explanation and Practical Reason"

⁴¹Charles Taylor. "Social Theory as Practice". In: *Philosophy and the Human Sciences. Philosophical Papers 2*. Cambridge / New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985, pp. 91–115, pp. 105,111

stitute social practices. Such normative potentials are then examined as to whether they might serve as a standard to evaluate both the empirical shape of these practices and the normative beliefs of their members.

A practice-theoretic approach is thus committed to a social ontology that assumes norms to be immanent in social interactions (in some way or another) and to a normative epistemology that includes at least some social scientific elements (as opposed to a purely interpretive methodology).

Because this description leaves the social ontological and methodological commitments of such a model more or less open, the variety of approaches that could be categorized as practice-theoretic is much wider than in the hermeneutic case. In order to get an impression of what the specific advantages and disadvantages of such an approach are, it may be helpful to examine one concrete example.

One theory that can easily be subsumed under the label “practice-theoretic” is Jürgen Habermas’ approach to the question of social normativity, in particular as outlined in his *magnum opus*, the *Theory of Communicative Action*.⁴²

Already in his early work, Habermas explicitly rejects a purely hermeneutic model of social critique for its potential conservatism.⁴³ Because a merely *interpretive* recovery of social norms might end up merely reproducing the distortions of the intersubjective relations of a society (in particular in the case of a severely pathological society), Habermas argues that social critique must aim instead at uncovering normative potentials that lay *beneath* the (potentially problematic) self-understanding of participants. In the *Theory of Communicative Action*, he therefore turns to the formal features of social practices — or rather, of one specific type of social practice: communicative action.

Habermas identifies communicative action as a type of practice where the participants are motivated by the desire to achieve an intersubjective agreement concerning the truth, normative validity and/or expressive authenticity of speech acts.⁴⁴ Habermas claims that because the *possibility* of such an orientation towards agreement has to exist within a practice in order for other types of interaction (such as manipulation or purely strategic interaction) to become even possible, the norms that constitute this type of practice are, in some sense, fundamental for an “original mode of language use”.⁴⁵ What are these norms? Habermas claims that participants in communicative practices must always be taken as to have accepted some constitutive norms as binding—for example, norms which disallow excluding potential arguments without appropriate consideration.⁴⁶ Thus, participants in communicative practices are committed, *qua* being participants, to certain norms that can

⁴²Jürgen Habermas. *The theory of communicative action*. English. Boston: Beacon Press, 1984

⁴³Cf. for example Jürgen Habermas. “Historical materialism and the development of normative structures”. In: *Communication and the Evolution of Society*. Trans. by Thomas McCarthy. Cambridge: Polity, 1979, pp. 95–129, 96f.

⁴⁴Habermas, *The theory of communicative action*, Vol. 1, p. 10ff, p. 288

⁴⁵Habermas, *The theory of communicative action*, Vol. 1, p. 288

⁴⁶Jürgen Habermas. “Discourse ethics: Notes on a program of philosophical justification”. In: *Moral consciousness and communicative action*. Cambridge (MA): MIT Press, 1990, pp. 43–115, 86ff.

be recovered using a merely formal method of examining the relevant practice type (in Habermas' terms, using a "formal pragmatics of communication"⁴⁷).

On this account, commitment to norms that are constitutive for the possibility of communicative action and the relevance of these norms is not derived from any interpretation of the participants' normative beliefs, but rather from an analysis of the normative presuppositions they must rationally accept (independently of whether they actually do) if they take themselves to be engaged in this type of practice.

While Habermas' arguments and the subsequent development of his theory cannot be examined here⁴⁸ — such an examination would especially need to focus on the question of how these purely formal norms can become the foundation for more specific types of social criticism, a question that largely remains unanswered by Habermas —, his account can serve as an example of a practice-based theory. In particular, he provides an (implicit) account of the ontology of immanent norms.⁴⁹ Such norms are constituted by their role as preconditions of certain forms of empirically existing action types. He supplements this ontology with a normative epistemology that privileges a method of formal pragmatics over hermeneutics.

But — like most of the other critical theorists that could be categorized as defendants of a practice-based approach — Habermas does not develop a detailed account of social ontology. In addition, both his theory and Axel Honneth's competing recognition approach concentrate only on very specific types of practices and social relations and therefore might be suspected of being too limited to count as theories of immanent critique in general, because they concentrate only on very specific types of practices and social relations.

Thus, in the remainder of this paper, I will attempt to describe a new approach to the question of practice-based immanent critique.

A Recognition-Theoretic Account of Immanent Critique

On the one hand, practice-based theories of immanent critique have distinct advantages over hermeneutic theories: first, they do not need to assume that one privileged self-understanding of members of a practice exists which can serve as the starting point for an interpretation. Second, they are not at risk of succumbing to a form of conservatism that merely reproduces a self-understanding (even if modified using some standard of progressive interpretations); third, they do not need to discard social-theoretic insights into the structures of domination or exploitation in social practices — insights that are ideologically ignored by some self-interpretation — but can attempt to uncover those normative

⁴⁷Habermas, *The theory of communicative action*, Vol. 1, p. 139

⁴⁸But cf. Titus Stahl. "Habermas and the Project of Immanent Critique". In: *Constellations* 20.4 (2013). DOI: 10.1111/1467-8675.12057

⁴⁹For a detailed argument for this claim see Stahl, "Habermas and the Project of Immanent Critique"

demands which are kept from entering the self-understanding of its members by such structures.

On the other hand, it seems rather unclear whether practice-based theories can actually support their claim that there are normative potentials within practices that go beyond the self-understanding of their members that nonetheless are waiting to be taken up by social critique. The social-ontological question therefore seems to be their main weak point. Even those theories that seem to offer an answer to this question — like Habermas' approach — do so only by describing particular practices for which the claim that there are immanent norms is particularly plausible without raising the issue of what could count as justification for such a claim in general.

A first step in answering this question can be taken by asking how a community can be said to *follow a norm or rule* in such a way that the truth-conditions for this claim are not already identified with either a description of its actual behavior (which is to be criticized, after all, in reference to such a norm) or the normative beliefs or intentions of the members of that community. Framed in this way, one can immediately recognize this question as one of the most puzzling problems of 20th century philosophy: the so-called problem of rule-following.⁵⁰

In its original form, as developed by Ludwig Wittgenstein,⁵¹ the rule-following problem runs as follows: If a person uses a linguistic expression, we can say that the *meaning* of this expression is determined by the rules governing its applications (that “sweet” can both designate the taste of some edible item and the endearing qualities of an action or person is true because when we use that term we follow a rule that makes it correct to use the term in these ways, but incorrect, for example, to use it to describe the height of a building). Thus, using a linguistic expression with a certain meaning presupposes the capacity to follow a rule.⁵²

But one might ask, how can we know *which* rule someone follows when they use a term (and how can we know whether they follow any rule at all)? The regularities of the past and present behavior of some group of speakers are clearly not sufficient to establish which rule they follow because each sequence of behavior can be described by any one of an infinite number of potential rules. And, in any case, in asking about the rules they follow we do not want a *description* of how they behave, but we want to know about the *prescriptive standard* they use to govern their behavior (perhaps imperfectly).⁵³

However, if we are tempted to say that what makes them follow a particular rule is their *belief* or their *knowledge* about the rule they follow — understood in the sense that they *represent* that rule to themselves while following it and intentionally try to conform to that represented rule — this also proves to be a dead-end: no one can mentally represent

⁵⁰The most famous exposition of this problem is Saul A. Kripke. *Wittgenstein on rules and private language: An elementary exposition*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1982.

⁵¹Ludwig Wittgenstein. *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1958, pp. 75-88.

⁵²Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 47.

⁵³Robert B. Brandom. *Making it explicit*. Cambridge / London: Harvard University Press, 1994, p. 28.

every possible application of a linguistic term.⁵⁴ But if they represent the rule only as a general rule, that is, as being defined via general terms (e.g.: “use ‘sweet’ only to describe a person if that person’s behavior will be generally recognized as friendly”), the meaning of the general terms (e.g. “friendly”) must be defined by further rules, only postponing the problem.⁵⁵

Moreover, if we think of the rule as being given by some immediate experience (i.e., “I know when to use the term ‘sweet’, for it just feels right to use it on certain occasions!”), we cannot grasp the difference between something *appearing to be right* and something *being right*. But if something is right whenever it appears to be right, we cannot speak of a rule that *excludes* certain applications of the term in question.⁵⁶

Thus the argument concludes that if there is linguistic meaning at all, there must be a way of someone following a rule that is neither to be identified with actual behavior nor with beliefs about which rules one follows nor with some immediate grasp of meaning. In other words, if there is linguistic meaning (and there certainly seems to be), there must be a way of following a rule that is in some way *immanent* to the practice of language use while still transcending the actual patterns or action. But this is precisely the form of normativity which immanent critique presupposes. Therefore, if we can formulate a positive response to the doubts about whether there can be rule-following, we at the same time describe the preconditions of immanent critique.

Of course, nothing has been said so far that establishes that the existence of norms that could be sufficient to determine the meaning of language terms needs to have anything to do with *social* practices. But as language is clearly a social institution, the idea that the relevant norms could be found in social practices is not far-fetched.

Without recapitulating the philosophical history of this idea, I would like to introduce one particular solution which is well equipped to deal with the problems of immanent critique: This is a *recognition theoretic* model. To describe this model I will draw on the work of Robert Brandom.⁵⁷

The basic idea of this model is the following: one can say that there is a norm N within a community when the members of the community stand in the following relation towards each other: Each member A recognizes all other members (each individually) to be *entitled* to criticize (or sanction) A, whenever A’s behavior does not conform to N.⁵⁸

It must be noted that this does not entail that A (or anyone else) has any specific *beliefs* about what N says. Rather, it only presupposes that there is not only a disposition of each

⁵⁴Kripke, *Wittgenstein on rules and private language*, p. 22

⁵⁵This is the so-called regress problem of Wittgenstein, see Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 81, Brandom, *Making it explicit*, 20ff, Kripke, *Wittgenstein on rules and private language*, p. 16

⁵⁶Kripke, *Wittgenstein on rules and private language*, p. 41

⁵⁷Brandom, *Making it explicit*; Robert B Brandom. *Reason in Philosophy. Animating Ideas*. Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press, 2009

⁵⁸For a defense of this analysis, see Titus Stahl. “Institutional Power, Collective Acceptance, and Recognition”. In: *Recognition and Social Ontology*. Ed. by Heikki Ikäheimo and Arto Laitinen. Leiden: Brill, 2011, pp. 349–372.

member to evaluate all other members' behavior according to N, but also a disposition of all members to evaluate the other members' *evaluations* according to whether they reflect a concern with N. That is, the existence of that rule within a community is not exhausted by *first-level evaluations of behavior*, but also includes *second-level dispositions to evaluate evaluations* (and similarly on all higher level).

Brandom's model of linguistic practice needs to be supplemented in order to account for the justificatory model of immanent critique. In particular, I have argued that we need to introduce another layer of collective commitments into this model to explain how persons can acquire authority in specific instances of normative disagreement to establish their "interpretation" (in behavioral terms) of a norm as binding for others.⁵⁹ But taking such a social pragmatist, recognition theoretic account of social normativity as a starting point, one can hope not only to save a normative theory of linguistic meaning, but also to explain the possibility of immanent critique.

Brandom argues that the meaning of a term is constituted by the inferential relations in which it stands with other terms⁶⁰ and that the norms governing these relations are instituted via the mutual attribution of authority within a linguistic community. The norms thus instituted allow for the existence of aspects of meaning of terms that potentially go beyond any individual's beliefs about meaning and therefore can serve as a standard for the evaluation of the behavior of individuals (and even of the community as a whole).

In virtue of these features, we can adopt a similar model as a foundation for a theory of immanent critique: whenever there are some relationships of authority in a community which regulate the interpretation of the norms governing the appropriate normative reactions to behavior within a specific practice, such a practice can be said to have *immanent norms*. In contrast to the assumptions of a hermeneutic theory, it need not be the case that the self-understanding of a community properly reflects such norms. For example, as sociologists often discover,⁶¹ subordinate groups' conscious interpretations of their own practices often reflect the evaluation of dominant groups (e.g., dominant evaluations of the value of working class culture or of the traditions of racially disparaged groups) whereas their intersubjective, practical evaluation of the attitudes of others towards the very same practices (e.g., their expressions of working class solidarity) reflects a very different set of principles.

Thus, using insights derived from *observation* rather than from *interpretation*, critics can sometimes diagnose that the attitudes that are practically approved within these practices do not reflect the openly affirmed norms and — starting from these observations — propose explanations for these inconsistencies.

Unlike the hermeneutic model, this approach is not committed to the presupposition that each social practice is characterized by only one set of immanent norms or by one consistent

⁵⁹Stahl, *Immanente Kritik. Elemente einer Theorie sozialer Praktiken*, 325ff.

⁶⁰Brandom, *Making it explicit*, Chap 2.

⁶¹See Frank Parkin. *Class Inequality and Political Order*. New York: Praeger, 1971, p. 93

self-understanding. Rather, the investigation into the relationships constitutive for the norms of a practice might uncover a variety of contradictory normative commitments, thus making sense of the Marxist claim concerning “contradictions in practice”. However, if these commitments are taken as normative commitments, there seems to be more hope for this account to uncover, through a rational reconstruction, criteria for a distinction between better and worse way to resolve their incompatibilities than on the Marxist model.

The recognition theoretic model of norm constitution by mutual attribution of authority thus provides a general answer to the *social ontological* question of what it means to say that immanent norms exist within some practice. Moreover, it also suggests an *epistemic account* of practice theoretic immanent critique: such an account must include both the observer perspective of the sociologist who focusses on behavior, as well as an interpretive perspective on what the most rational reconstruction of intersubjective attitudes and sanctions is in terms of potential immanent normative commitments. However, this interpretive perspective goes beyond the epistemic approach of a hermeneutic immanent critique since it does not ask for the *best interpretation* of beliefs that have already been made explicit, but for the *most plausible reconstruction* of certain social relationships of authority. This means that the result of an investigation into what immanent norms rule behavior within some community might contradict even the best interpretation of their self-understanding.

Finally, in regard to the issue of *justification* — which is the last remaining question for this account of critique — one must distinguish a very general answer from more specific issues. If one interprets a community as being committed to certain norms through mutual recognition, the discovery that this community does neither *conform to* nor explicitly *endorse* these norms, provides a *prima facie* reason for that community to change both its collective beliefs and its actual practice. This is for the following reason: if one is committed to some standard, then one has (at least a *prima facie*) reason to conform to it if no other considerations are in play.

In real cases, however, other considerations are almost always in play. To anticipate a common objection against this account (one which aims to show that it eventually collapses into a conservative form of internal critique), the following example might be helpful: We can imagine a community that is committed to gender equality on the level of explicit beliefs. In terms of actual intersubjective reactions, however, women are not only treated badly in that community, bad behavior towards women is not negatively sanctioned. Such behavior might even be approved in terms of positive attitudes. Such a community would have an *immanent norm* of discrimination despite having explicit norms of non-discrimination. Certainly, when dealing with such a community, one would not argue that a critic is obligated to convince them to also explicitly endorse discrimination.

This is a valid argument. However, the model of immanent critique was never meant to deal with severely distorted practices, but rather to uncover better *potentials* within practices. It is also a mistake to assume that a theory of potential justifications of critique must give us an account of what is the right thing to do for a community *all things considered* (and

thus, in some sense, allow us to derive what is to be done for all possible situations). Rather, a model of immanent critique shows us that there is a *potential* within such practices, even though in this specific case it is a rather undesirable one. The participants within that practice indeed have a reason to explicitly endorse their immanent commitments — it is just a very weak reason, given that there are many better reasons (for example, moral reasons) against it.

If we give up the idea that a theory of critique must fashion the critic with a method that unfailingly guarantees access to moral truth, we may see that something is already won if such a theory makes a source of norms accessible that was not properly understood before. It thus equips us with another way to look for the potentials of our societies to become better without telling us what this entails. Although such an approach does not guarantee progress, it does give us hope that there is more to our social practices than their (often frustratingly bad) empirical reality and their (oftentimes even worse) explicit justification in the minds of their participants.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have distinguished immanent critique from both external and internal critique and have described two varieties of immanent critique: hermeneutic and practice-based.

I have argued that practice-based forms of immanent critique are better equipped to deal with the problem of competing norms and, by turning to recent theories of social normativity in particular to a recognition theory of social norms, that there is hope to answer the vexing question of what it means to say that norms are immanent within a practice.

A recognition theory of norms allows us to understand practice-based immanent critique as a critique that starts from a *rational reconstruction of observed relations of ascription of authority within practical interactions* and justifies its claims about the existence of immanent norms by using such a reconstruction. Its ontology is thus one of *social norms as constituted by authority attributions*, its epistemology one of *interpretive reconstruction of empirical behavior*. Its claim to enable the *justification* of critical demands towards a community finally is derived from the assumption that *socially instituted commitments are prima facie reasons*. Even though this assumption does not answer the question of what a critic is justified in demanding *all things considered*, it can still serve as an argument for the claim that immanent critique can uncover new normative resources that can be employed by critics that want to change the practices and beliefs of their fellow citizens or community members for the better. The main contribution of a theory of immanent critique is thus not a *methodology to derive what society should be like* but rather establishing that, beyond the standards of external critique, there is often a potential for improvement contained within our practices and that there are (very often) *reasons to be hopeful about the possibility of social progress*.