Throw the bathwater out but save the baby: new perspectives in Critical Theory

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Abstract: *In this paper, I discuss the status of critical theory and thinking, claiming that we should not throw the baby out with the bathwater: if a certain way of conceiving and practicing it has nowadays become partial and unfit, then it's not true that it is qua tale useless, old-fashioned, or dead. I start stressing that, in general, Critical Theory highlights that there is a problematic relation between individuals and social structure, which has to be pointed out, to indicate actual and possible transformations. Then, I propose a heuristic distinction between two main paradigms of Critical Theory and thinking (the modern Critical Theory and the postmodern Critical Theory), discussing three main aspects, separated but intertwined. The first is more strictly philosophical, involving the problem of the transcendent or immanent position of the critique: on the one hand, we have the external condemnation of the society, in the name of some kind of superior truth; on the other hand, we have the inner problematization of a given social field, according to criteria that have been posited by itself or that are implicit in it (§ 1). The second is more strictly anthropological, dealing with the problem of human nature and alienation: on the one hand, we have the hope for the restoration of a lost state of originary plenitude; on the other hand, we have the effort of learning the better way to deal with human openness and relationality (§ 2). The third is more strictly sociological, posing the question of ways and forms of life: on the one hand, we have an ironical attitude, aiming to elaborate a true counter-society that should take the place of the false present one; on the other hand, we have a humoristic attitude, that attempts to make the problem that a society both poses and tries to answer a problem that reemerges, so that it can be again for the first time seen as a problem (§ 3).*

Keywords: *: Postmodernism, Philosophical Anthropology, Immanent Critique, Alienation, Paradox, Ways of Life.*

> *What I want to teach is: to pass from unobvious nonsense to obvious nonsense.*
> *(L. Wittgenstein).*

Critical Theory is Said in Many Ways

Talking about critical theory and thinking (CTT), we refer to the general idea that philosophy is linked with a critical attitude towards society: it can, should, or either must develop a critique of society, in order to make it better, or – at least – make people perceive the necessity of its transformation and improvement. CTT provides a sort of *normative description*: it says that something doesn't work in the society, and that full human emancipation is to be reached.

In a stricter sense, the specific difference of a CTT may depend on its conception of the core of society – i.e. institutional, linguistic, economic, repressive, globalized, communicational, ideological, affective, imaginary –, or on its key-disciplines – i.e. Frankfurt School, with philosophy, psychoanalysis, Marxism; Structuralism, with anthropology, semiology, linguistics; Poststructuralism, with cultural, gender and media studies; Globalization Theories, with geopolitics, economics, bio-sciences.[1]

But, Plato and Hegel would say, we should not miss the forest for the trees: CTT highlights anyway that there is a problematic relation between individuals and social structure, which has to be pointed out, to indicate actual and possible transformations.

I propose here a general heuristic distinction between two main paradigms of CTT: the modern one (*m*CTT) and the postmodern one (*pm*CTT).[2] Such a contraposition may seem too "Manichaean" or even "strawy", but it can both show some important limits of *m*CTT and explain how *pm*CTT represents a development of its instances.

The Modernism-Postmodernism debate is still lively, but here I intend to stress two basic aspects. *Firstly*, the modern conviction that the (only one) truth does or could exist is substituted by the postmodern (dis)belief that such a "one and only" truth does not and could not exist (the problem of "the end of the grand narratives"). *Secondly*, this shift has important consequences on how CTT is, *and not* just in the sense that – as for instance Jameson notoriously suggests – Postmodernism is the cultural logic of late capitalism, something that closes the possibility of any kind of criticism (the problem of the "unfinished project of emancipation").

Here, I take as both a state of case (*quid facti*) and something to enquire into (*quid juri*) the fact that the tasks of intellectuals change from being *legislators* to being interpreters along with the transition from modernity to post-modernity:[3] intellectuals can no more "educate" and "cure" but can still "comprehend" and "throw into crisis". As Spinoza *docet*, «not to deride, bewail, or execrate human actions, but to understand them»:[4] that's the Northern Star of the critical attitude. Interpreting, or understanding, does

not mean – as I will explain – to be simply "indifferent" or "descriptive"; rather, it means being careful to the specific difference you are facing, by *problematizing* it.

Hence, my key claim can be resumed with the saying *we should not throw the baby out with the bathwater*. If a *certain way* of conceiving and practicing CTT has *nowadays* become partial and unfit and we have to "update" CTT's key-authors (going beyond the "classical" Adorno, Arendt, Benjamin, Habermas, Horkheimer, Marcuse, etc.), then it's not true that CTT *qua tale* is useless, old-fashioned, or dead.

I will discuss three main aspects, separated but intertwined: one that is more strictly *philosophical*, involving the problem of the transcendent or immanent position of the critique (§ 1); one more strictly *anthropological*, dealing with the problem of human nature and alienation (§ 2); one more strictly *sociological*, posing the question of ways and forms of life (§ 3).

I will not do so much use of direct quotations, hoping to help in circumscribing better the conceptual issue at stake; nevertheless, I start by declaring two main kinds of general references as the background of my exposition. Concerning the postmodern thought's side, I will refer mostly to the conceptual framework offered by French authors like Deleuze, Derrida, and Lyotard.[5] Concerning the critical reflection's side, I will take into account, above all, some important recent developments of the CTT's perspective,[6] but also some moments of the Marxian tradition.[7]

Where to Stand? Transcendent and Immanent Position

Escape-strategy

In *m*CTT, criticizing, transcending, and opposing are all in one: you need to separate from the social reality in order to negate its cogency. Transcendence means not simply disengagement (staying nowhere), but *opposition* (staying somewhere else and thus against "this where"): society has to be faced frontally and attacked, criticizing is striking the present and the existent, refusing to coincide with it and making efforts to transform it.

But when you say that something doesn't work, you also need to explain what (and why) could or should actually work instead. Any transcendence presupposes an *external position* to make the judgement possible, a place which is not merely different from the one you are blaming or disputing, but more radically *better* than it. There is, somewhere, something that makes the (suppression of the) contradiction between this *poor and inadequate* reality and *another better and adequate* possible reality.

This place could be metaphysical or physical (or both of them, or one could ground the other and vice

versa), but there must be, in order to distance from the reality and negate it. Exteriority entails superiority: the other place is a higher one, it's the "normative prop" for the critique. In addition, there is someone who is able to gain knowledge on how to live properly, on the best world and behaviors: one who can know what people want or should want better than themselves.

But, this is where *m*CTT came to,[8] such a real "above place" cannot exist. Conceptually, you cannot refer to a universal Truth, an encompassing Concept, an incontrovertible Norm, or an exclusive Ought-Being (*no more Capitals are given*). *Historically*, after the unmasking of Real Socialism and the fall of the USSR, you cannot rely anymore on the concrete existence of another better world (*no more "Priests of the Truth" are given*). Finally, we shouldn't renounce to the passion for another better world, but it becomes the afflatus towards a utopia, the nostalgia for a completely other, or the disillusion with any kind of positivity.

If you start with the idea that a false condition must be substituted with the true condition, but finally you realize that this true condition does not or cannot exist anymore, then you can – at the best – claim that the fight against the false condition never ends, no matter if we don't know where it will lead.

You aspire to be a partisan, but you find yourself without no more "part(y)"; you aspire to criticize any

kind of onesideness, but you find asking yourself if there could be any right side; you argue that one could criticize the system only standing outside it, but you find yourself with no more outside: critique becomes the generic refusal of the constitutively imperfect reality, or – even worse – critique is erased. Interested in blaming contradictions, you risk to get stuck in the contradictions produced by your own blaming.

Fold-strategy

So, *pm*CTT is an attempt to take charge of such a criticality, in order to save both the *m*CTT's inspiration and try to resolve its ambiguities.[9] In a general sense, while *m*CTT is more focused in "criticizing", *pm*CTT pays more attention to "critiquing": the first encompasses a negative and destructive gesture, that aims at finding fault with something, to discover and condemn lacks and defects; the second exhibits a positive and reconstructive gesture, that aims at looking at the structure of something in order to ask for clarification, and to find what and how is working and not working. Criticizing wants to judge. Critiquing wants to discuss.

Thus, in *pm*CTT critiquing is standing inside and raise problems: going deep into the social reality in order to individuate its own "critical points", its inner fractures and zones of tension. Here, immanence means not indifference or concurrence, but *problematization*: society is queried,

critiquing is questioning the intimate structure of the present and the existent, asking for its conditions and presuppositions, reconstructing its dynamics and possibilities of mutation.

In doing so, you cannot be outside and over the society: you are *in it* and you have actually no other society; you cannot judge in the name of another (real or imaged) better place. Nevertheless, you *can evaluate*: you should dive and see how the waters go, where the currents lead, and what kind of inherent crack you can testify. You cannot judge in the name of The Good and The Evil, but you can continue to evaluate what is good and bad each time: having no "transcendent prop" opens the space for the immanent comprehension and interrogation.

Questioning, as emblem of the problematization, is what *pm*CTT's does: interrogating, not affirming, neither negating. To pose a question (to problematize) is to see the elements of a situation as challenges, as something that invite who is involved into the situation to transform it. When you raise a problem, you don't know the answer, you are not supposed to know it at any cost: it's firstly a matter of defamiliarization and demythicisation, leading to a draw back from what is taken for granted and to reevaluate it.

Before choosing the right answer, to pose a question provides the visibility of different possible answers; before the enlightening of the truth,

to present a problem marks the entrance in that zone of indiscernability that soften the edges of what is taken for true. A question operates as an inner factor of folding inside a system or a situation: it opens the initial phase of a work of re-enquiring and of a possible process of transformation, but it cannot predict its final destination or point at its inner goal.

A question is not a mere curiosity: it's rather a *demand*, the expression of an impelling force, that allows a difference to emerge (from renewed consciousness to new actions). Thus, an evaluation is here at stake: asking for something in a problematic way means bringing out something like an inner "mismatching" of a given field, something whose value is now put under investigation.

Therefore, for *pm*CTT, if we want to claim the need for some standard in the critical work, we should keep in mind that the standards employed cannot but derive from the critiqued itself, namely, the society in question, and not from somewhere else. Critiquing doesn't mean saying and giving an account of what is the (individual or social) right thing to do; neither allowing to derive what is to be done for all possible situations: instead, it means showing the inner potential of modification within a given situation.

Close Encounters of the Third Kind: We Are (Between) Aliens

For *pm*CTT, alienation, far from representing – as it's in *m*CTT – a perversion of human essence and nature, should rather be conceived as a *revelation* of it: the human being is constitutively alien to himself (*zoon allotriomenon*).[10] But all alienations aren't the same, they don't go in the same way: the human being's in-itself is actually a for-itself, but not all the ways of "being out" are equal (I will discuss this further on).

Following the German Idealism's tradition, *alienation* could be distinguished in such terms as *objectification*, *extrinsecation*, *reification*, *estrangement*, *externalization*; nevertheless, here it's sufficient to highlight two big main senses of alienation, one proper of *m*CTT and the other of *pm*CTT: the *romantic* perspective [*RP*] and the *cynic* perspective [*CP*].

I know, such a distinction appears to encapsulate what postmodern thought claims to have laid to rest, that is, the characterization of the term "alienation" suggested in *RP* is provided by *CP* itself. Truly, it's through the second that the first notion of alienation appears to depend on concepts like "presence", "proper", along with the semantic of "essence" and "origin", which is purported to underpin them: it's only in the impetus of the unmasking and debunking of any notion of an unalienated condition that such a logic of the origins can be revealed.[11]

But here I don't consider so important if *RP* is really the one and only anthropological heart of *m*CTT, or if it completely exhausts how alienation is (explicitly or implicitly) meant in *m*CTT: I intend to distinguish sharply *RP* and CP as possible paradigms, as to show the intimate relation between CP and pmCTT.

Lost Paradise

For *RP*, alienation is the name of a teleological and eschatological grand narrative of fall and redemption, of the loss and hope for the restoration of a state of originary plenitude, a state of fullness. Here, we have the loss of something original and essential that could or should be regained in the future, entailing the belief in a lost and retrievable human essence – the authentic human nature: we refer to the simple unity of an originary human essence; a lost unity, that can be regained exactly because previously lost.

Alienation has to be overcome or suppressed: human history is the effort to restore origins, return to authentic life, repair corruption. *Reestablish*, *reintegrate*, *reconciliate*: if you exit and move away from an essential and predefined core, you have to go back to it and come back in it.

Then, for RP the truth, or the real content, lies in the origin: the true

human essence is "saved" or "enshrined" in the origin, which has to be *revealed* if not yet shown (as in any *teleological* view), or *recovered* if lost (as in the *original sin affair*). "Exteriority" is nothing but a manifestation of the "interiority" that keeps the real core: the first risks – at the best – to distort the second, and fail in fully restoring it; but – in the end – exteriority is always totally inadequate regarding the pristine origin or essential nucleus.

Thus, for *RP* a society is judged wrong or unjust by comparing it to an essential human nature and its own features (rationality, morality, goodness, equality, harmony, and so on, or *their opposite*): a society must correspond to this essence and reflect its characteristics, or – at least – it must realize its fundamental traits in the most possible adequate way – and this is always a lack if compared to the perfection of the original core.

It's just like the projective movement of birth would have broken the comfort of womb's life, conceived as the *real life* that should be desperately reconquered.

Purgatorial Life

For *CP*, in its turn, alienation *reveals* and *expresses* human nature; it *doesn't* deform, pervert, corrupt, restore, recover, etc. it in its own essential features: human nature is at all effects entailed in a process of mediation, that is, in a work of "passing through" otherness and alterity (from things to other animals, from social organizations to symbols, and so forth).

Thus, human being has not a unique specific determination, a pre-established set of qualities: there isn't a substantial identity to be recovered or reflected, neither a bare abstract infinite determinability, independent from any determination. In fact, a process of mediation entails actually the immersion in a web of determinations, which are not the ultimate and definitive ones, which can be good and bad, and which offer some opportunities and keep some others closed – or unperceived. That's where the critical attitude makes its own specificity works (I will return on this).

For *CP*, different modes and means of production, ways of social life, political structures, technologies, etc. represent the way human beings shape their life and express their needs: *every different mode* works in such a shaping and expression, and it's exactly this difference that makes them not equivalent. They all satisfy *but not* in the same way, they are all expressive but not in the same way. How a mode should work is not predetermined in advance and cannot be judged in the name of "the true human essence".

So, for *CP*, to reflect *critically* on the society and its conditions, you have to avoid at least two mood-traps: *nostalgia*/*phobia*, and *hubris*/-*mania*.[12]

The first is the trap of some primordial authenticity, pristine nature, or – in general – virgin phenomena: the beginning is the promised land, lost because of corruption, and hence it's progressively reclaimable only through the embankment or the containment (*katechon*) of the present situation. But this is just like saying that the plane could fly faster if there was no air.

The second is the trap of ultimate power, extreme self-confidence, or – in general – blind euphoria: we can in no way improve the present, or – even worse – improve it only going ahead in the same direction walked until now. But this is just like believing that the plane itself creates the air thanks to it and in which it flies.

Actually, both moods testifies a lack of sober reflective discernment, undermining the *in-between* of them: the locus of mediation, as of – literally – critique.

This sobriety is more accepted concerning the human being/technology relationship (technique *does not* pervert but do show and build humanity), but less in the relationship of human being with society, history, institutions, and modes of social production. In these cases, mediation appears to operate as a repressive or distorting factor, rather than an expressive or possibilitating one.

But if – for instance – we take seriously the fact that we are humans because we want to live in a happy society and not because we should correspond to some image of the ideal human being, we have to admit to all effects the plurality of ways of being and living. So, we have also to acknowledge that (free) market is not the devil, but a set of social practices through which it can be managed in various ways activities as property, production, labor, exchange, etc., and even a possible relational vector of emancipation – namely, that it's still possible to distinguish between "market economy" or "market societies" and "capitalism".[13]

More in general, in *CP's* perspective, we thematise not just what prevents us from living according to the Good, but better what prevents us from asking ourselves how we want to live and how we are living at the moment. What is in question is not so much the what we are trying to reach in and through the process, but mostly the how of its course: if our attempt to appropriate (to comprehend, reconstruct, be all in one, make consistent, give account for, feel happiness and satisfaction for, etc.) our life is damaged or prevented, we are living a bad life. A society is good as long as it opens such a possibility to its members, namely, as it offers effective possibilities and not just abstract or hypothetical ones. It's not a matter of being part of a teleological process or of being protagonist of a recover of an essence already and, since the beginning, proper and determined: it's a question of being in the middle of a process, whose

proceeding and experiencing should not be arrested or paralyzed. Appropriate doesn't mean *reappropriate*.

Provokingly, a society is good as long as it allows alienation, for the alienation process doesn't ground itself in advance but only in its during: one cannot refer to something that one already is or was, but nevertheless endeavors to come and relate to oneself.

For *CP*, finally, something like a "not alienated life" could be nothing but the ability to pose problems, develop them, and react to them when they engender obstacles – whether this reaction culminate in a violent conflict, or in a peaceful discussion, cannot be determined in advance. Without exteriorization there cannot be nothing to "hack": alienation cannot be extinguished, it's a matter of learning the better way to deal with it, and of building a society that makes this possible.

Attitudes Have Consequences

Taking into account all this, we can come closer to the relationship between CTT and society, asking:

1. What kind of attitudes towards social life could be considered typical of *m*CTT and *pm*CTT?

2. Then, what kind of social function can be carried out by the critical work?

Sense the Non-Sense

I suggest to distinguish two main attitudes, typical of *m*CTT and *pm*CTT respectively: *irony* and *humor*. The biggest differences can be summed as follows:

Irony	Humor
Judges.	Reverses.
Marks the distance of who has another place.	Indicates the involvement of who is questioning his own place.
Is the art of ascent at the height.	Is the art of descent towards the circumstances.
Has a well-established plan.	Has not an established project or system of reference.
Pretends to be its own contrary to lead to the truth and aimed goal in a safer way.	Has no sovereignty or original meaning to reestablish.
Is an edifying, pedantic, and pedagogical cunning.	Is a deviating, confusing, and deviant movement.
Derides, ridicules, and confutes ignorance and madness.	Plays from the within stupidity and folly.
Goes in search for the truth, the unmasking of what really lies underneath, the announcement of the right principle.	Asks where something can lead, which its prolongations could be, how it could be.

Irony	Humor
Defends a thesis from the beginning.	Engenders puzzlement first of all.
Wants to substitute a sense (the wrong one) with another sense (the right one).	Works on and with non-sense in order to open a crack within the sense.
Wants to discover, recognize and behold ideals.	Raises, poses and develops problems.

Whereas the ironist mocks in a sarcastic way the contradictions of a system in the name of what is "extra" or "outside" it, the humorist plays *with-in* a system provoking the manifestation of its own internal tensions. To problematize means actually producing literal confusion, suspension, virtualization, and so on – *folding*: a problem engenders a doubt, conceived as that *inner doubling*, the marks a split, an opening, an *intimate ouverture* within a system.

As it has been stressed, «whereas the ethics» – as *attitude* or *posture* – «of irony posits ideas and concepts towards which we ought to strive, or what we *must mean* when we use words like "justice", humor allows all the repressed and meaningless drives of the body to disrupt sense».[14] Disrupting is to all effects interrupting a process, by causing a disturbance and making it emerge: it's making a system produces an internal resonance. Humor triggers a *wrong-foot effect* – quite close, so to say, to the Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*.

The history of the relationship between irony and philosophy is as old as philosophy itself, and quite a lot of things have been written about it. Clearly, I cannot fully discuss it

here, but I want nevertheless to prevent a possible objection: *there's nothing new in saying that philosophy has a critical attitude in a humoristic way; actually, traditional "irony" seems to coincides with what is here called "humor"*.

This objection entails very important issues: the essence of philosophy, the tension between the Socrates' and Plato's view of philosophy, etc. For instance, one could answer by saying that whereas Plato was ironical, Socrates was humoristic, or even that the foundation of philosophy in a strict sense consists in the transformation of the Socratic humor in a more consistent and grounded irony – before Aristotle came to say that such attitudes should be substituted with a sharper scientific detachment, and all its implications (i.e. *thauma* is no more just "perplexity", neither "indignation", but becomes "amazement").

Besides, to explain how humor is different from traditional philosophical irony, I prefer to evoke – *once again* – another important philosophical figure: cynics. In the common sense, a cynic is a contemptuous person coveting for success and richness, or at least not caring about others: the emblem of a ruthless, pitiless, and cold person.

So, cynicism is the perfect example of an apolitical and non-empathic attitude towards society and others, to the point that «cynicism will never become an active measure; it will simply accept the order of things».[15] But if we pay more attention, we can see the other side of the coin.[16]

A cynic attitude is in fact a humoristic attitude full of political meaning, and – more precisely – exactly owing to its capacity of folding.

Let's take one of the most famous cynic: Diogenes of Sinope. As the story tells, he slept in a large ceramic jar in the marketplace, carried a lamp in the daytime claiming to be looking for an honest man, publicly kidded Alexander the Great, distracted attendees by bringing food and eating during the discussions in philosophical lectures, etc. In such cases, he was to all effects playing a socio-critical role, by striving to make perceivable the zone of distinction and transition between *physis* and *nomos*. Moreover, he was doing this by assuming a clearly provoking, fun and weird (*humoristic*) attitude.

This is pretty well known, but it has to be understood more into depth. In fact, this kind of "embodied questioning" of the tension between nature-immediate and culture-mediate is the performing of an *act of problematization*, namely, of a practice of critique in the literal sense: an attempt to exhibit and engender together their inner ridge and crack. On the one hand, the supposed *physis* of the naturalness of the social conduct is suspended and shown to be actually in the field of the *nomos*; on the other hand, the supposed *physis* of the naturalness of the life outside any kind of social influence or determination is baffled, to the extent that it appears totally weird, and as a different form of (provoking, shocking, individual, etc.) *nomos*.

So, even more deeply, a cynic is properly an example of that process of folding, through which a re-fold, namely, something like an intimate reverberation, can happen within a field, a system, or a situation. Cynicism is here a *vector of problematization*: a vehicle of the immanent critique. A cynic doesn't simply show the "bare truth" (*this is life, can't help it!*); rather, a cynic *bares the truth*, which is not to say that erases any kind of truth. On the contrary, the cynic attitude exposes the condition of possibility, foundations and development of the truth, of any truth in general, and mostly of the specific truth one is facing or is involved in. Such an exposure, finally, is exactly the humoristic exhibition-creation of *a paradox*.

Humor works on and with nonsense (sense is both how things are "sensed" and where things goes): it engenders paradoxes. Our daily experience teaches this (just think of humoristic comedians). A paradox is not the simply contradiction of the *doxa* (a counter-dox, so to say); instead, it's the genesis of the shift

of the *doxa*. A paradox marks the increasing of doubt and the decreasing of confidence about something, not the mere affirmation of its contrary, neither of something different: it fends off security and increase perplexity within a structure.

Moreover, in doing so the paradox shows the source of the *doxa qua tale*: it forces a system both to show its own instability and to make its own virtual potential raise; and it's exactly this "tensor" that testifies of the fount of systematicity in itself. A paradox doesn't *ironically* provide a counter-sense, or presuppose an alter-sense; neither it's barely senseless: by exposing the inner non-sense within and of a given sense, it exhibits the non-sense as the spring of that specific sense and of sense itself – or, put in other words, it manifests the act of donation of sense qua tale (as the Derridian *hyperbole*, maybe).

The theater artist Carmelo Bene often told of Lèon Bloy's definition of paradox: "a telescope for the stars and a microscope for the minimum bodies". This affirmation, albeit rhetorical, spots very well the specificity of paradox: it makes visible something that we are somehow already seeing or experiencing, or – even better – something that constitutes the condition, the framework, or the structure of our seeing and experiencing.

Lastly, the form of paradox for excellence is the question, the problem as questioning, and – at the same time – the form of questioning and problematizing for excellence is the paradox. The connection between paradox, question and problem is often technically stressed and debated,[17] but here I just want to underline that as the question tells us about the "looping effect" engendered by the paradox, the paradox tells us about the "puzzlingness" proper of a question which is not merely the search for an information, a data, a state of case, a fact, etc. Briefly, a paradox-problem-question makes visible something undecidable, intractable and resistant: in this way, it determines a change of the intensity within a system, that is, the demand for its rediscussion or transformation.[18]

As it should be clear, this is not a pure logical fact or only an abstract issue: the social role played by the critique it's here at stake. Thus, two different socio-critical roles and behaviors may correspond to the two attitudes presented above.

Reconstruct How, not Prescribe What

Shortly, *m*CTT aims at transforming the present society in a correct society, it's motivated by a practical interest in emancipation, it's engaged in the struggle for the future: the society is a sick patient that needs an urgent cure. In its turn, *pm*CTT tries to enlighten the conditions of possibility, formation, and genesis of the society, or – more precisely –the relationship between

the individual and society, because the second affects and constitutes the first, while the first reproduces and nourishes the second.

Hence, *pm*CTT doesn't lose potential of effective transformation, because its critique comes to *put in crisis or in strain* actions whose effects are in no way neutral or weak. Shortly, *pm*CTT *problematizes* the society: it both gathers and builds its inner paradoxes.

Using medical terms, critical work provides a sort of *symptomatology* for pmCTT: it dissociates symptoms that were previously grouped together and juxtaposes them with others that were previously dissociated, creating one concept that becomes the name of a *syndrome*, which marks the meeting place, point of coincidence or convergence of the signs and components of the problem, namely the *symptoms*. This is not the same task of etiology, the search for causes, or of therapy, the development and application of a treatment; it's rather what underpins them, what makes the search for causes and solutions possible. Besides, this task cannot rely on a pre-given model of illness with which the situation should be compared: the pathology's symptoms and syndrome are to be sought and found within the situation itself. That is to say: it's not the pathological deformation of a(n ideal or real) state of sanity, but it's a pathology proper of the present state itself – *its own crisis*, exactly.

For instance, it's exactly in a society supposed to work for guaranteeing or producing freedom that can acquire meaning and visibility questions as: are we really free then? What is freedom for us? How can I deal with a society that seems to ask me to relate with myself and others as a free being? Can we appropriate of our freedom only in an economic way? Etc. The work of immanent critique is to make such problems fully raising.

Moreover, *this is not a matter of contradictions*, but of demands: when we ask ourselves if we are really free, we are not simply marking a contradiction between a promise and its realization; rather we are making a problem that asks for solutions to emerge. As mentioned, this is one of the deepest concept proper of *pm*CTT's conceptuality: a "mismatching" is not a contradiction, it's an internal difference, a potential for transformation.

Under this regard, *pm*CTT can provide not a functional or a moral analysis and society critique, but rather an ethical one, namely, it points not simply at the mechanisms, dynamics, and performances of its own functioning, neither at its correspondence with some standard of justice, goodness, humanity, etc. *Instead*, it looks at the way and form of life that the society entails, focusing on how relations with oneself, others, and the world are experienced or could be experienced inside of it, as well as on the conditions of possibility and formation

of such relations, and the grade of facility of the work of social self-reflection itself – that is, the measure in which the society is able to put itself in question.

Otherwise said, *pm*CTT starts from the idea that people are not always deliberately engaged in or explicitly reflecting upon what they are living: they might participate in *their own* forms of life without planning, intending, or even knowing exactly what they are doing and why they are doing it. What makes us act is not by itself actively acted, even when it's actually acted. A way of life sets limits to what we can do as well as enables us to do things in a certain way: it's given as well as created, but it might also develop a certain dynamic of its own. Nevertheless, it's something that human beings do, and therefore could do otherwise.

That's where critique plays its role: as soon as a form of life hits its limits, things no longer run smoothly and are interrupted, so that this *criticality* doesn't go unnoticed anymore. The moment of crisis forces reflection on and adjustments of practices that were previously taken for granted – their re-creation: the task of critique is actually to make this criticality notable and remarkable, by at the same time *shaping* and *marking* it.

Hence, to be critical requires *not* to be the partisan or defender of a specific position, neither the herald of a renewed political-cultural and socio-economical manifest, but the effort to render the field of visibility visible, to make what makes possible specific social concepts conceivable. So, the fundamental task of *pm*CTT is not to simply elaborate a true counter-society that should take the place of the false present one, in the name of some kind of superior truth, but to reconstruct how this society has come to its own configuration, how it works, and what it presupposes.

Besides, *pm*CTT attempts to make the problem of a society emerge, a problem that the society both poses and tries to answer; thus *pm*CTT attempts to make such a problem reemerge, so that it can be again for the first time seen as a problem – the goal, let me say, is not to correct, but to show what does "rect", namely, what holds and sustains a society. To make visible the invisible, perceivable the unperceivable, conceivable the unconceivable, thinkable the unthinkable, imaginable the unimaginable, and so forth, means not merely to render visible, perceivable, conceivable, etc. another thing, another possibility, and so on, in addition to the ones already done. More deeply, it means to bring to the surface what makes those specific regimes of visibility, perceptibility, etc. possible.

As seen, this is the specificity of the immanent critique: evaluating the forms of life in question according to criteria that have been posited by themselves or that are implicit in them, namely, insisting exactly on the problematic link

between explicit and implicit levels – on the inner fold of a form of life.

In this sense, we could say that *pm*CTT points at the social unconscious of a society, where "unconscious" should mean a *virtuality*: a potential that animated and still animates, a further demand for integration, rather than something that should be finally unmasked in order to be removed and suppressed. Reconstruct means here to not simply demystify a failure and invoke the (past or future) Golden Age, but to understand a process and a dynamic, so that the signs of a future to construct become graspable, and the question about if and how individuals are able to relate to themselves and the process becomes posable. To thematise a crisis is both to show something that was already there, and to force to take into account something that *now becomes* "already there", and thus is actively produced: then, you have to ask yourself how to deal with it, how to tackle it, etc.

It's the double meaning proper of every "invention": together *to find and to create*. Thus, critique is a laborious creative practice, and this does not implicate its «domestication»[19] in any way: on the contrary, it means to let it free to give its contribution.

In sum, *pm*CTT insists on the fact that a good life can be lived only within good institutions, in almost three ways.

i) It deals with the social unconscious of a given society, that is, with the *reciprocal relationship* between individuals and society, reconstructing its web and knots. If it could be true that there is no such thing as society, it's also true that the society as process does exist, act and be acted: in critiquing it, we cannot refer to an external ideal or alter social reference in order to give a metaphysical authorization or a moral imperative, but we can still examine it as a peculiar instance of problem posing-solving.

ii) On the individual side, this implies that critique doesn't prescribe behaviors or recommend manners to individuals. Rather, it raises questions as: are we able to appropriate of ourselves and our own life? Can we really put our individual mark on, and insert our own ends and qualities into what we live? Do we have ourselves at our command? To what extent can we affect our society? Can we also impose our meaningful mark on it? Do we have the possibility to put it in question? Are we first of all able to perceive such a need? Etc.

iii) On the social side, this implies that critique doesn't provide to society and its institutions its own telos, the opportunity for a reconciliation between norm and fact. Rather, it poses problems as: can they enable individuals to appropriate themselves and their own life? To what extent are they going by themselves, that is, is their functioning becoming autonomous, no matter if and how individuals accept it, feel good in it, participate in it,

etc.? Are they once for all solidified and ossified, unquestionable, and thus unexpressive (even before that repressive)? Etc.

Conclusion. Unity Makes Strength

The distinction around which I developed my ideas is not to say that all we need is *pm*CTT. Actually, this would contradict one of the ideas which shape such an approach, namely, taking seriously *human being's plurality* – in the widest meaning.

In society, under this regard, it happens the same as in individuals' life: depending on the phase of the process that one is living, different resources need to be activated and mobilized. In other words, sometimes an energetic "no!" may be the best strategy, some others a laboring work of immersive problematization may be more opportune: what counts is to avoid in the critical undertaking that kind of unilaterality which appears so reductive and choking in individual and social life. You cannot be critical if you are not at the same time self- and *meta-critical*

Note

1 See more in detail A. Elliott, *Contemporary Social Theory: An Introduction*, Routledge, London and New York, 2014.

2 This may be also brought back to the paradigms of *German Philosophy* and *French Theory*, about which see R. Esposito, *Da fuori. Una filosofia per l'Europa*, Einaudi, Torino, 2016, pp. 64-145.

3 As formulated by Z. Bauman, *Legislators and Interpreters: On Modernity, Post-Modernity and Intellectuals*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1987.

4 B. Spinoza, *Political Treatise* (1677), in Id., *Complete Works*, M. L. Morgan (ed.), trans. S. Shirley, Hackett, Indianapolis, 2002, pp. 676-754: 681.

5 Particularly: G. Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense* (1969), trans. M. Lester, Athlone Press, London, 1990; Id.,

Difference and Repetition (1968), trans. P. Patton, Columbia University Press, New York, 1994; Id., *The Fold – Leibniz and the Baroque* (1989), trans. T. Conley, Continuum, London, 2006; J. Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (1967), trans. G.C. Spivak, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1976; Id., *Margins of Philosophy* (1972), trans. A. Bass, Harvester Wheatsheaf, Hemel Hempstead, 1982; J.-F. Lyotard, *Rudiments païens. Genre dissertatif*, Christian Bourgois, Paris, 1977; Id., *Postmodern Fables* (1993), trans. G. Van Den Abbeele, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1997.

6 Namely: R. Jaeggi, *Der Standpunkt der KritischenTheorie. Überlegungen zum Objektivitätsanspruch Kritischer Theorie*, in «Sonderheft», n. 50,

2010, pp. 478-493; Id., *Alienation* (2005), trans. F. Neuhouser and A.E. Smith, Columbia University Press, New York, 2014; Id., *Kritik von Lebensformen*, Suhrkamp, Berlin, 2014; T. Stahl, *Immanente Kritik. Elemente einer Theorie sozialer Praktiken*, Campus, Frankfurt a.M., 2013.

[7] Mostly L.Althusser, *For Marx* (1965), tr. by B. Brewster, Verso, London 1996.

[8] Or – one could stress – it was already the *original and explicit destination* of the CTT's project: see, as emblematic example, M. Horkheimer, *The Social Function of Philosophy*, in «Studies in Philosophy and Social Science», n. 8, 1939.

[9] T. Stahl (*Immanente Kritik. Elemente einer Theorie sozialer Praktiken*, cit.), claims that immanent critique is already at the core of what here I call *m*CTT, which originally intended to avoid the traps of both external and internal critique.

[10] For further discussion and references, see: G. Pezzano, *Debitori (e creditori) a vita. Per una morfologia del debito (e del credito)*, in «Lessico di Etica pubblica», IV, n. 1, 2013, pp. 1-20; Id., *Marxismo e natura umana*, in A. Monchietto (ed.), *Invito allo straniamento. II. Costanzo Preve marxiano*, Petite Plaisance, Pistoia, 2016, pp. 115-129.

[11] About this, see the important S. Skempton, *Alienation After Derrida*, Continuum, London-New York, 2010.

[12] I take into account the distinction, more strictly concerning the *physis/techne* affair, made by L. Floridi, *Harmonising* Physis *and* Techne*: the Mediating Role of Philosophy*, in «Philosophy & Technology», XXIV, n. 1, 2011, pp. 1-3, but see also G. Pezzano,*Oltre la tecno-fobia/mania: prospettive di "tecno-realismo" a partire dall' antropologia filosofica*, in «Etica & Politica», XIV, n. 1, 2012, pp. 125-173.

[13] See the recent A. Honneth, *Die Idee des Sozialismus*, Suhrkamp, Berlin, 2015.

[14] C. Colebrook, *Irony*, Routledge, London and New York 2004, p. 148.

[15] M. Gutauskas, *Truth*, in G. Chiurazzi, D. Sisto and S. Tinning (eds.), *Philosophical Paths in the Public Sphere*, LIT, Zürich and Berlin, 2014, pp. 239-249: 243.

[16] See more broadly the relevant P. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason* (1983), trans. M. Eldred, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1988.

[17] See for instance R. Sorensen, *A Brief History of the Paradox: Philosophy and the Labyrinths of the Mind*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2003.

[18] On the connection between paradox, transformation, and humor see also the relevant P. Watzlawick, J. H. Weakland and R. Fisch, *Change: Principles of Problem Formation and Problem Solution*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 1974.

[19] See: M.J. Thompson, *T he Domestication of Critical Theory*, Rowman & Littlefield, London, 2016.

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