

## ON THE FORMS OF IMMANENT CRITIQUE.

by Marco Solinas

### 1) SPATIAL AND METHODOLOGICAL ELEMENTS

The social critic does not simply take a stand: whether he is more or less conscious of it, the dynamics of his positioning is always developed within the framework of mutual interrelationships among the multiple subjects, objects and instances, conflicting or not, that occupy the wide theoretical chessboard, on which the process of formation and development of social criticism can be represented.

It is a dynamic positioning, co-determined by the convergence of a number of factors, not easy to control: from the peculiar model of criticism adopted to the specific positions defended and attacked, from the relations of alliance and opposition deliberately established to those involuntarily generated by criticism on active, passive and mostly seemingly neutral forces; to recall just some of the perhaps most evident elements at stake.

Even in the case of the forms of the so-called ‘immanent critique’ - the spectrum I’d like to focus on - we will see that the range of the main possible positions of a critic are more varied and diverse than is usually believed, given that, even in this case, the chessboard presents a relatively high degree of complexity. Managing to shed light on these dynamics remains a priority of current social criticism: what is at stake is the critic’s ability to heal past rifts with large and peculiar social groups, without yet resetting the emancipatory goals of his work. Therefore, he needs to approach particular social actors, taking into account the overall framework of conflicts and cross alliances, while avoiding to be relegated to what may prove to be a more or less acute recording of the existing, often a harbinger of as much paradoxical outcomes as those generated by a desperate and blinding detachment.

Moreover, the issue of the positioning of the social critic in relation to the poles of internal or external criticism, and more generally the issue of his distance and proximity to the various components of society, is one of the most significant elements of the heated debate that continues to animate the current reflection on the forms of criticism. A discussion reintroduced with great decision by Michael Walzer in the late Eighties, and readily accepted

and then continuously discussed so far; let’s consider, for example, the last works about sociology of criticism by Luc Boltanski, or the model of reconstructive criticism adopted by Axel Honneth<sup>11</sup>.

In all those cases, a radical problematization of those traditional approaches - both “right” and, especially, “left” - was developed, which sometimes led to place the critic in a more or less radical and paradoxical distance from particular social actors. Therefore, though traditionally such distancing was sometimes believed legitimate and necessary, for example, to unmask the so-called ‘false consciousness’ generated by particular ideological mechanisms, the prospect has now been somewhat reversed: if it is still permissible to discuss about any form of ‘false consciousness’, it is the social critic, and not the masses, that must be referred to.

The following pages are devoted to a brief analysis of certain premises and certain consequences of this process of reversal of perspective. I’ll proceed from a very short rundown of some of the main forms and functions of immanent critique, from its Hegelian origin to the current philosophical and social discussion. I’ll try, at the same time, to give this reconstructive process a spatial slant. In doing so, I hope to provide the primary elements necessary to produce a differentiation of some basic forms of immanent critique.

I’m especially thinking of the differentiation between the proper *method* of immanent critique and the *positions* a critic who adopts the immanent method may take or may happen to take in the overall framework. Though correlated, these two issues - method and positions - concern two different aspects of immanent critique, although that distinction is very often disregarded in the current debate: the two planes tend to slide and to overlap. A lack of clarity that inhibits the possibility to outline the method a critic should adopt to avoid running in the shallows of detachment, or even of the apparent opposition against those social groups, of which he would like to reflectively interpret, and possibly normatively revitalize, the emancipatory potential.

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<sup>11</sup> By Michael Walzer cf. *Interpretation and social criticism*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.), 1987; *The Company of Critics*, Basic Books, New York 1988. By Luc Boltanski cf. *De la justification* (with Laurent Thevenot), Gallimard, Paris 1991; *De la critique*, Gallimard, Paris 2009. By Axel Honneth cf. *Rekonstruktive Gesellschaftskritik unter genealogischen Vorbehalt*, in: *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie*, 48, 5 (2000), pp. 729-737; *Das Recht der Freiheit*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/Main 2011.

## 2) IMMANENT CRITIQUE: THE THEORETICAL ADHERENCE AND THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE CRITIC

In its traditional sense, of genuine Hegelian origin, immanent critique is a particular form of criticism essentially characterized by the fact that it proceeds by perfectly adhering to the object, or rather to the criticized theory: it is literally immanent to it. In other words, the criticism uses only those elements provided by the theory in question, in order to show how those same elements actually generate inconsistencies, dissonances, contradictions, such as to require the overcoming of the theory taken into account.

This is the very heart of the method introduced by Hegel: to make the criticized theory implode from within, by making it turn its own weapons on itself. It is precisely in this strictly Hegelian sense that immanent critique has been resumed, revived and reworked many times over time, going well beyond the peculiar use of the “determinate negation” adopted in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

Emblematic is the tight defense of it, prepared by an author so distant from Hegel as Karl Popper. In the *Postscript to the Logic of Scientific Discovery* (1956)<sup>12</sup>, Popper firmly insists on the importance of a critical approach able to question a given theory by exclusively proceeding from within it.

Here, Popper points out that the peculiar element of immanent critique is to adopt and use all the assumptions or presuppositions of the criticized theory, without ever resorting to assumptions external to it. Hence, the appreciation for a precious methodological instrument that makes it possible to show the incoherence and inconsistency of a given theory, or its opposite.

If it is relatively simple, intuitive and even unambiguous to interpret the process of immanent critique in its traditional Hegelian sense, in spatial terms, the issue of the positioning of a social critic, who adopts such a method, is rather open. It is so because, first of all, the traditional sense is not a specific variation of social criticism, but rather a methodology that can focus on any theory and that, in this particular case, is directed against theories quite far from the social and political dimension.

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<sup>12</sup> Karl Popper, *Postscript to the Logic of Scientific Discovery. Realism and the Aim of Science*, London, Hutchinson & Co., 1982

It might even be said that, in the canonical theming of this approach, the figure of the critic almost disappears from the scene: a kind of ghost, of whom you perceive only the product of his spiritual activity: that particular form of criticism called immanent, which becomes the true and only protagonist of a representation, whose director is hard to recognize.

But also when you (legitimately) try to bring this methodology in the peculiar context of the social criticism, the issue of the critic’s positioning is not directly and unilaterally determined by the adopted method; it also and always depends on the specificity of the contents of the theories criticized from time to time. And, then, we should here recall the alliances and conflicts that such contents generate in the overall context of power relations among the subjects and objects involved. With this, however, we already passed to the issue of the differentiation between the immanent method and the positioning of the social critic.

## 3) CRITICISM OF IDEOLOGY: IMMANENT METHOD

Immanent critique has played a leading role in the field of social criticism, at least starting from Marx’s reinterpretation of the Hegelian method in terms of criticism of ideology. A tradition that, from the twentieth century on, gave a role to the criticism of ideology which determined the fate of a very substantial part of the “leftist” social criticism.

To have an immediate idea of the unique and important role played by the method of immanent critique in the criticism of traditional ideology, enough consider the paradigmatic model by which the latter tries to unmask the ideology as an instrument to legitimate and justify the exploitation of wage labor<sup>13</sup>.

The model is quite simple: criticism must unmask the fact that equality and freedom, presupposed by the law in two contracting parties entering into a contract of wage labor, are purely formal: this assumption masks a social condition of radical disparity, in which the worker is really forced, on pain of death by starvation or harsh poverty, to accept working conditions that are proposed, or rather imposed to him, thus experiencing a brutal

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<sup>13</sup> On the topic cf. Rahel Jaeggi, *Rethinking ideology in New Waves in Political Philosophy*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009

exploitation. A model that, in this *hard* version, does not represent, however, only the prototype of the criticism of the nineteenth century ideology: in recent decades, the acceleration and radicalization of the dynamics of neo-liberalism has revived and, in some ways, even exasperated it (by insisting, for example, on such elements as individual empowerment and flexibility).

However, as for the method of criticism, it is quite clearly an immanent approach: the criticism shows how the same assumptions, i.e. the normative principles underlying the ideology in question, are indeed inconsistent and contradictory, if compared with the reality they aim to justify. Again, therefore, immanent critique reveals the inner contradictions, tensions, paradoxes that afflict the ideology in question *from within*: the principles of justice called into question are aimed at justifying those particular social and economic conditions that actually reject those same principles.

If compared with the original Hegelian definition, the immanent critique of ideology, therefore, exploits the same method. In this case, however, it has a clear social value: it is applied to “theoretical objects”, ideologies, which have an inherent social and cultural connotation. Moreover, and above all, this form of criticism is characterized in that the critic who adopts it is forced to take a specific position in the context of the relations of social and political power, at least in minimal terms. As soon as he practices the criticism of ideology, he immediately lines up *against* the advocates and defenders of this ideology, and, at the same time, in favor of those who are subject to the mechanisms of ideology. In the opposite case, alliances are overturned. And yet, there is a further problem.

#### 4) CRITICISM OF IDEOLOGY: DISTANCE AND DETACHMENT OF THE CRITIC

As soon as we consider the critic of ideology from the point of view of the stand he takes compared to the effects that ideology seems to be able to produce on society, a short circuit can be generated. The critic, indeed, is now led to criticize not only the supporters of ideology, but also those who are subject to it. Think of the symbolic cases of such intellectuals as Adorno or Marcuse, of their fierce criticism of the ideological mechanisms of late capitalism. Mechanisms that included an attack against a whole series of varied and multifaceted popular cultural elements, unilaterally interpreted as pernicious products of “cultural industry”. Or think of the raising of the standard of living, unilaterally reinterpreted as a form of dulling derived

from a deliberate “repressive tolerance”. An approach that - combined with a well-defined philosophy of history - thus led them to take a stand against that same proletariat, by whom they felt as “betrayed”, and of whose “real” emancipatory interests, meanwhile, they somehow continued to consider themselves as the only, albeit desperate, custodians.

A paradoxical reversal of roles and positions: almost as if those social critics had been blinded by the overwhelming power they themselves had given to the ideological mechanisms of late capitalism and, thus, as if they had also lost the ability to see those cracks, conflicts, and especially that suffering that continued (and continues) to pervade the most developed Western societies.

The ironic fate shared by many twentieth-century critics of the excessive power of ideology has been, then, repeatedly interpreted, at least from Michael Walzer on, from the perspective of the excessive distance between the critic and society, of the critic’s substantial detachment and alienation. And, indeed, this peculiar kind of critic is in many respects radically separate, dangerously detached, and even paradoxically opposed not only to the social body as a whole, but, in this case, to that class or social group, whose emancipatory interests he aimed to defend. And yet, if this representation of what we can consider as the pernicious result of this form of social criticism is, in my opinion, legitimate, and indeed represents an essential path of contemporary reflection on these issues, you cannot simplistically confine yourself to condemn such critics for a lack of empathy or for snobbery or for a low sense of belonging to something communitarian. Nor you can reduce the question to a form of Manichaeism as easy as misleading.

Conversely, it is necessary to develop an analysis that is at least able not only to thoroughly redefine the mutual differences between immanent method and positioning process, but, by following this direction, also to take into account the main points of view of the actors involved. From the critic’s perspective, to cite a few simple examples, there is in fact no doubt that he continued to believe he was defending the “real” interests of the oppressed, while sharpening the weapons of analysis in the fight against the oppressors.

But even when you more closely consider the perspective of the users of those goods, regarded by critics as perverse and pernicious products, their positions are not unilaterally and unequivocally distant, if not simply hostile. Besides this detachment, that existed, the critic himself continued to be also perceived as a figure who stubbornly fought against the powerful and the

rulers. Hence, the doubly paradoxical effect generated by the prototype of the twentieth-century critic of the excessive power of ideology.

After all, these effects represent only one of the many dissonances generated by the heterogeneity of those involved in the overall process of social criticism. Heterogeneity of perspectives, different interpretations, multiple plans, asymmetries of mutual positions, changing and transversal temporal correlations: not only with respect to the two macro levels of method and positioning process, but also with respect to the relations of alliance and struggle among the different subjects and objects involved. The need to dispose of a sufficiently articulated theoretical chessboard resurfaces.

##### 5) INTERNAL DRIFTS AND THE SPATIALIZATION OF POSITIONING

A proper chessboard would first help to avoid the drift experienced by the critic of the excessive power of ideology: I mean the internal drift experienced, for example, by Walzer in his fervent defense of the so-called “internal criticism”, whose author should be the “connected critic”.

Encouraged by the fact of having shown certain drifts due to the excessive detachment of the traditional critic, Walzer was led to take up a position diametrically opposed to the traditional one, which yet, in my opinion, leads to a similar one-sidedness, though of opposite sign. Instead of distancing himself, we read that the critic must side with the supporters of the common morality of everyday life, thus sharing principles and standards “internal” to an undefined social body, to an equally generic “we” (of a communitarianist matrix).

However, since the “we” of the social body, as Walzer well knows, is not reducible to a sort of compact and amorphous mass to be cut with a conceptual hatchet into a sort of majority “we” (in the best case coinciding with the oppressed) as opposed to a minority “they” (the rulers), even in this case the critic, in my opinion, experiences an ironic fate: equipped with an internal compass only, he finally seems to be forced, in terms of method, to defend almost any element coming from popular culture, thus being forced to take stands that can lead him to the same paradoxical conflicts and attitudes of the critic of the excessive power of ideology. Instead of starting from the bottom, he rather seems to go downwards, thus risking to sink into the whirlpool of reactionary positions and regressive dynamics.

To correct this internal drift is at first necessary to establish a clearer differentiation between the proper method of immanent critique and the process of the critic’s positioning in the overall framework of the chessboard of social criticism. Despite Walzer develops a varied series of differentiations, he, in fact, causes the level of immanent approach to collapse on that of positioning; this is evident from the fact, among others, that he regards his “internal criticism” as coinciding with the traditional “immanent critique”<sup>14</sup>.

On the contrary, the adoption of the *method* of immanent critique in no way implies the need for the critic to adopt an internal *position* in the sense of recovering, defending and reviving the principles and beliefs of everyday morality. And this is ironically proven by the case of the critic of the excessive power of ideology: he does not proceed by “inventing” or “discovering” new moral standards and principles, but, on the contrary, by developing an immanent critique of ideology, yet combined with a positioning interpreted as external and even opposed to the social class considered as a prey of its effects<sup>15</sup>.

More generally, in order to systematically differentiate method and positioning, as well as to strictly articulate the dangers caused by both an excessive detachment and a specular flattening, I think a good solution is that of a theoretical spatialization of the forms of immanent critique. In addition to the elementary spatial forms hitherto outlined, we have to transfer the shaping, articulation and mutual arrangement, organization, differentiation and possible opposition at least of the main objects related to critical activity to our theoretical chessboard. Elements among which a series of figures might appear, whose roles and functions can themselves represent, embody and submit further critical instances, sometimes opposite.

It must also be included the dynamic and time factor inherent to the critic’s positioning: from the place where his activity starts to the targets pursued and the relations that those trajectories gradually establish with the elements of the social reality in question. A dynamic that, at the same time, refers to the multiple recursive effects generated, deliberately or not, by the paths embarked on.

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14 Cf. M. Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.), 1987, p.64: “it is for this reason that I have tried to distinguish his [of the critic] enterprise from collective reflection, criticism from within, or as it is sometimes called, ‘immanent critique’.”

15 Ibid. p.52

In short, the chessboard must include not only the different instances, agents and the real or potential tensions against which the social critic voluntarily or involuntarily takes a specific stand. In addition to this, the critic must take into account the dynamics that his own stance, to some extent, contributes to articulate, exasperate, dilute or quell. If you can create such a chessboard, I think that even the issues of distance and detachment, as well as those of flattening and weakening, linked to the different forms of immanent critique - and not only to these actually - can become increasingly intelligible, providing us with a map that enables us to take a perhaps more conscious stand.