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Can Systems Theory be used for Immanent Critique?

Introduction:

We're all familiar, I expect, with the "great debate" between Habermas and Luhmann concerning the viability or usefulness of systems theory for critical social theory in the early 1970s. The debate ended with Habermas insisting that systems theory is a merely technical apparatus and that Luhmann's position is essentially a conservative. By Habermas' lights, systems theory could make no real contribution to critical theory. Luhmann countered by claiming that critical social theory as an enterprise is impossible insofar as critical theorists cling to an Enlightenment narrative concerning how to understand and steer social organization and development. I don't plan on returning to this debate. Instead, I want to pick out an implicit question in it, one that I think is still driving a number of discussions in contemporary Critical Social Theory. To formulate the question explicitly, **what theoretical resources can theorists draw on in order to articulate a critical social theory?**

Judging by recent publication trends, the question is particularly pressing. For not only can Honneth's efforts to reintroduce recognition (and Psychoanalysis) back into Critical theory be understood as an effort to reengage the explicitly *critical* character of critical theory, but a great deal of recent work – from Robin Celikates to Rahel Jaeggi, from Titus Stahl to Hartmut Rosa – is also trying to reformulate

critical theory or introduce novel resources for situated social critique back into the research paradigm.

With the exception of Rosa's work, which draws on Luhmannian systems theory rather selectively as part of what we might call 'the temporal turn' in critical theorizing, recent efforts to formulate new resources for social critique have largely aimed to refunctionalize an older notion, namely immanent critique. Some have even ventured to reinterpret Habermas' theory of communicative action as a 'practice-based form of immanent critique' – despite Habermas' well-known rejection of and antipathy towards the notion. What is particularly surprising about interpreting Habermas' theory of communicative action as a form of immanent critique is that it promises to integrate systems theory and critical theory. After all, Habermas' theory of communicative action and the rationality problematic driving it are worked out in action-theoretic terms – that is to say, in terms of a social systems theory of broadly Parsonian proportions.

To address these issues, and take a first stab at answering the leading question I posed a moment ago, I plan to focus on the notion of immanent critique. I'll try to dispel some of the conceptual and methodological confusion surrounding the notion by articulating a set of success conditions for immanent criticism. And I'll try to draw out these conditions by focusing on the relationship between immanent critique and critical social theory. On my view, the desiderata of critical social theory commit its proponents to something like immanent critique. These desiderata in turn allow us to delineate the kinds of requirements an

immanent social critique would have to satisfy. By way of conclusion, I'll try to answer the question in the title of the paper: can social systems theory be used for immanent critique.

1. The intuitive sense of 'immanent Critique'

To begin, then, consider a dictionary definition of 'immanent critique' in the *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*:

Immanent critique can be understood, first, as a principle of interpretation and understanding whereby historical epochs, cultures, literary texts, etc., are assessed according to their 'own criteria.' It can also mean the examination of a theory's internal logical stringency and consistency but without challenging the theory's basic assumptions.¹

According to this characterization, the thrust of immanent critique is to leverage the criteria 'internal' to a historically situated object, practice, or theory out into the open so that the critic may examine, test, or experiment on them.

Echoing the dictionary definition, Seyla Benhabib (1986) characterizes immanent criticism as "refus[ing] to stand outside its object and instead juxtapos[ing] the immanent, normative self-understanding of its object to the material actuality of this object" (33). To further clarify, Benhabib contrasts her sense of 'critique' with what she calls 'mere criticism,' which, she says, "privileges an Archimedean standpoint, be it freedom or reason, and proceeds to show the unfreedom or unreasonableness of the world when measured against this ideal

¹ *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* Bd. 4, p. 1292.

paradigm” (*ibid.*). “By privileging this Archimedean standpoint,” she continues, “criticism becomes dogmatism: it leaves its own standpoint unexplained, or assumes the validity of its standpoint prior to engaging in the task of criticism. This means that criticism is not ready to apply its own criteria to itself, for it stops short of asking whether its own normative standards cannot be juxtaposed to facts by yet another critical critique” (*ibid.*).

More recently, Titus Stahl defined ‘immanent critique’ as

A form of social critique that evaluates both the empirical behaviour 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.²

At first blush, the various characterizations seem clear enough. They even foreground the virtues proponents usually ascribe to ‘immanent critique’ as a method: impartiality, objectivity, and immunity to sceptical responses. Because immanent critique does not import extrinsic concerns into the context of evaluation, it remains impartial; because the normative conditions are in fact the ones agents ascribe to themselves as part of their own self-conceptions or self-understandings, the evaluation is objective; and because agents tacitly accept these norms, this kind of criticism circumvents sceptical responses while motivating agents to act on any failure of fit. Whatever problem or inconsistency is uncovered in the process is taken to be internal to the social situation the agents inhabit and hence already tacitly accept.

² Stahl, Titus. “What is immanent Critique.” *SSRN Working Papers*, url: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2357957>

Here's the rub, though: it's one thing to say *that* immanent critique does this, but quite another to explain *how*. What, precisely, does it mean to say that we extrapolate criteria inhering in or internal to an epoch, historical object, self-conception, or practice? What else must be the case – metaphysically, epistemologically – for this process of extrapolation and reflection to be successful? And what are the relevant formal features we are supposed to examine and experiment upon?

2. The Desiderata of Critical Theory

To answer these questions, we need to understand *why* critical theorists (of the Frankfurt variety, at least) are committed to immanent critique in the first place. Hence, in the first part of the talk, I'll offer a quick account of the connection and triangulate the content of 'immanent critique' by contrasting the intuitive characterizations I just gave with better-known argumentative strategies, namely arguments from consequence (slippery slope arguments, genealogical, and 'positivist' arguments), *reductio ad absurdum* arguments, and indispensability arguments. The comparative analysis will allow me to identify three requirements or conditions that, once interpreted, yield specific philosophical sensitivities and argumentative tendencies that can be described as 'immanent critique'. The various ways of satisfying these requirements, however, has an interesting consequence: the notion of immanent critique does not denote a philosophical method *per se*. So that

there's no mystery, I'll contend that there are at least three requirements,³ as follows:

- i. The *inherence* requirement specifies the manner in which normative content is said to be internal to or implicit in a given practice; to wit, how base practice and normative content are connected in a manner that is *necessary and revisable*.
- ii. The *contradiction* requirement specifies the manner of fit between normative content and base practice such that *failure of fit* has motivational import. This condition yields a *non-analytic* evaluative criterion or procedure for assessing the success or failure of an instantiated practice.
- iii. The *access* requirement specifies how social critics can successfully identify the relevant normative content *without* imputation or confabulation. Satisfying this requirement involves articulating an observational perspective that does not shift or alter the relationship between base practice and implicit commitments. It accounts for a critic's *epistemic access* to her object and the *objectivity* of her critical intervention while precluding the possibility that the 'contradictory' relation between base practice and normative content are artefacts of critical analysis.

How we interpret and satisfy these conditions determines our philosophical sensitivities, procedures, and comportments. And, as long as we satisfy each one in some way, we'll have a procedure worthy of the name 'immanent critique,' even if individual critics proceed in markedly different ways.

³ My access requirement is a way of reformulating one of Titus Stahl's desiderata of immanent criticism. He identifies three: (i) a *social ontology* able to explain how immanent standards exist, (ii) an account of *epistemic access*, and (iii) an account of the kind of *authority* an immanent critic can draw upon (see Stahl 2013b & 2013c for his discussion). My other two conditions, however, do not fit neatly into his other categories. My hope is to supplement Stahl's account with a finer grained set of distinctions in order to fill in the spectrum of possible immanent critical practices between the two ideal-types of immanent critique (hermeneutical and practice-based immanent critique) he identifies, while resisting his overly narrow insistence that immanent critics must articulate or presuppose a *social ontology*. Although some kind of ontology is indeed necessary, it need not be a *social ontology*.

The requirements I've just articulated follow from what we might call the desiderata of critical theory. From its inception, the Frankfurt School insisted that critical theory has at least 3 things aims:

1. **Offer an account of theoretically possible social transformation.** This involves
 - a. Identifying a form of social failure (e.g. a structural deformation in the communicative coordination of action or consensus formation; misrecognition, false [class] consciousness related to misidentification of interests.)
 - b. Proposing a manner of addressing the social failure that is possible and sustainable by current levels of technology

2. **Show that the proposed transformation is 'practically necessary.'** This involves
 - a. Showing that social failure is *intrinsically* connected to some kind of suffering
 - b. Showing that agents accept this suffering because they subscribe to a specific system of interests/conceptual scheme that justifies the suffering as necessary.
 - c. Showing that the system of interests/conceptual scheme was acquired under 'reflectively unacceptable' conditions.

3. **Address social agents who will be motivated to undertake the proposed transformation** such that
 - a. Agents recognize themselves in the theory
 - b. Agents recognize their suffering
 - c. Agents recognize the source of their suffering (the 'coercive conditions' identified in 2)

Although it's not clear that any critical theorist has satisfied all three of these aims, they nevertheless give us a good grip on the ways in which critical theory differs from more familiar approaches to social and political theory. The first condition

spells out a utopian orientation that is consonant with Rawls' characterization of political philosophy as the 'art of the possible,' while anchoring theorizing in a specific historical situation so that the basic structure of a given social organization cannot be taken for granted. The second identifies critical theory's motivational and normative core: the impetus for social transformation is the rational unacceptability of unnecessary suffering. Finally, the third modulates a Marxist commitment concerning the historical subject of change.

The desiderata thus distinguish critical theory from 'ideal' political theory, on the one hand, and more orthodox Marxist approaches to 'engaged' social and political theorizing, on the other. They also commit critical theorists to the concept of immanent critique. Consider again the three characterizations of immanent critique I introduced earlier in light of critical theory's aims. These characterizations share several features. They all insist on the situated character of critique; they contrast a historically or socially situated object or practice with its implicit normative or formal features; and they all seek to identify a potential inherent to the practice or normative self-conception of agents that has not been actualized because of some kind of social failure. Furthermore, the situated or embedded character of immanent critique keeps criticism anchored in a social context, thus ensuring that evaluation stays in touch with what is theoretically possible and practically necessary in terms of social transformation, while the extrapolation of criteria that are internal to, and constitutive of agents' practices

and self-understanding ensures that critics address specific groups and motivate them to undertake the relevant changes freely.

Now, the conceptual connection between the aims of critical theory and the general idea of immanent critique suggests an isomorphism: immanent critique just is the method for achieving critical theory's goals. Yet I would argue that immanent critique is not, strictly speaking, a method. On my view, it is more of an umbrella term that covers the various ways we can satisfy the three requirements I introduced earlier. Rather than a one-to-one and onto mapping of critical theory and immanent critique, we seem to have a one-to-many relationship.

3. The Conditions of Immanent Critique

The Inherence Requirement

Let's return to the requirements for immanent critique I mentioned earlier, beginning with the inherence requirement. In broad terms, this condition involves securing the right kind of relationship between the evaluative or normative criteria for our critical enterprise and the base practices or objects of our interest. We can get a sense of what's involved here by contrasting criteria that 'inhere' in a given situation or performance with those that are extrinsic to it, or that remain otherwise external to the case at hand.

Let me begin with two intuitive, contrasting examples, to illustrate the point: every Olympic level diver will perform so as to instantiate the judgeable properties of diving (i.e. starting position, approach, take-off, flight, and entry) without necessarily fulfilling the standards of excellence (i.e. receiving a 10). The criteria of

assessment—and the degree of fit between an individual instance and the ideal specified by the criteria—are said to structure the performance and hence are internal to it.⁴ Without them, the performance itself would be unintelligible. Now, consider a bit of partisan political punditry (e.g. Bill O’Reilly): the partisan political pundit comes armed with a set of criteria that she or he *applies* to specific cases. In the first case, the diver is judged on the merits of her concrete performance by comparison with the criteria structuring this performance as a specific kind of activity. In the case of partisan political punditry, on the other hand, the topic being discussed loses none of its specificity when we substitute evaluative criteria.

The intuitive examples are meant to show that the inherence condition differentiates ‘internal’ forms of criticism from external ones via two notions: *consequence* and *indispensability*. Since Olympic level diver’s per se instantiates the judgeable properties of a good dive, the degree of fit between individual instance and the ideal provides us with the ability to criticize a given practice. Furthermore, the evaluative framework is indispensable to the performance. One could not engage in Olympic diving without it. The opposite is true of political punditry. By

⁴ One might object that the example threatens to oversimplify matters, since the kind of criticism involved in this instance is *internal critique* rather than *immanent critique* (see Geuss 1981, 64f and Stahl 2013a, 5-7). The difference between these models of criticism concerns the target and scope of critical transformation involved in each critical intervention: internal criticism aims to evaluate an individual performance via its fit with normative standards that structure the practice. But the standards themselves are never called into question – the internal critic simply does not occupy a perspective from which she can challenge the criteria themselves. Immanent critique, on the other hand, problematizes both the structuring normative standards and their base practices by identifying a potential intrinsic to both the practice and its normative underpinnings but that has somehow been missed (this explains Habermas’ notion of ‘transcendence from within’). My example aims to show only that these critical strategies are plausible. Both internal and immanent critics agree that practices are normatively structured and that the normative standards governing a specific performance need to be extrapolated for non-dogmatic transformative social criticism to take place. Furthermore, for reasons I introduce in note 11, I tend to think that internal critics do in fact have the resources to criticize theoretical frameworks in the way that, e.g., Stahl denies. The substantive difference between immanent critique and internal critique, then, is fleshed out by how critics interpret the contradiction condition. Internal critics simply have a thinner notion of contradiction than do immanent critics (and, given the latter’s German idealist lineage, this should not surprise us).

its very design, punditry introduces criteria that are extrinsic to the issue being analysed via a distinctive practice and uses them as a kind of Archimedean point to leverage support for a particular course of action.

The inherence requirement therefore excludes using external standards. This has an interesting consequence: excluding external standards precludes argumentative or interpretative strategies that proceed along causal or consequentialist lines. The idea is that consequences are *external to the practices and remain contingent*. They are neither indispensable nor reliably connected to the object of our critical interest. This point becomes clearer if we examine arguments from consequence or slippery slopes. We see this kind of argument used in a variety of political contexts. In the United States, for instance, critics of universal health care often made the following argument:

1. Obama's health care plan requires universal participation,
2. Mandatory participation has as its consequence a reduction of individual freedoms,
3. Any reduction of individual freedoms is undesirable,
4. Therefore we should reject Obama's healthcare plan.

The crucial feature of this kind of argument is that the criteria determining the value or desirability of the consequences are extrinsic or external to the object being criticized.⁵ Whether 'freedom' is the relevant category for evaluating universal health care is an open question. And whether universal healthcare places

⁵ This is not to say that this form of argument is illicit in some general sense. It may work well in some situations. My point is merely that arguments from consequence employ criteria that are in fact *transcendent* – extrinsic to the situation being analysed – rather than *immanent* or internal to the practice, performance, or object of interest. We thus have a more nuanced way of characterizing external/transcendent criticism – and hence of delimiting internal and immanent critique from it.

constraints on individual freedom, etc., is a further one that's probably determinable empirically (say by looking at countries where universal health care is already in place). The point here is thus threefold: the evaluative criteria appealed to remain (1) contingent, (2) external to the situation at hand, and (3) the crux of the criticism depends upon consequences that may or may not actually follow from the base practice or proposal being criticized. Put differently, the criteria being used do not structure the proposal being presented, are not necessary to its successful implementation, and are not *internal to or immanent* in the base practice.

There are, of course, more sophisticated versions of arguments from consequence. Genealogy would be one such sophisticated form of consequential criticism; 'positivist social criticism' would be another.⁶ Both forms of criticism argue that the rational content we attribute to our basic, motivating convictions is in fact distinct from, and external to the role these convictions actually play in our practices. By treating specific forms of rational action or forms of knowledge as consequences of historically contingent practices, they work to show that the rational status of our convictions or evaluative criteria is in fact independent of their functional roles; in other words, these criteria are contingent and do not follow necessarily from a practice's historical development – they're *dispensable*. The historical origin of the practice, the motivational import for participating in it, the causal efficacy of the practice, and the rational justification or success conditions for it come apart under causal-historical analysis.

⁶ Geuss 1981, pp. 26-31.

The inherence condition thus places a decisive limitation on the kind of consequences we can consider if we want to lay claim to the titles ‘internal’ or ‘immanent critique.’ In the first instance, we require a *necessary relation* between the base practice being considered and the rational standards we apply to it. A necessary relation between practical base and criteria of assessment introduces a further constraint into our critical endeavours, since it *excludes* strictly empirical or causal relationships. If we’re going to do critical theory, we cannot evaluate or criticize something on the basis of its effects alone. Notice, however, that despite the requirement that the relationship between base practice and relevant evaluative criteria be necessary, practices and criteria *themselves* must be contingent. Without this further constraint, social transformation via critique would be impossible.

The Contradiction Requirement

I want to press on to consider what kinds of consequences the inherence requirement still permits us to entertain. This brings us to the second requirement, the contradiction requirement.

In specifying a necessary relation between contingent practices and normative criteria, we’ve excluded empirical or causal consequences. A natural response might now be to say that the relevant kind of consequence is formal. Indeed, the dictionary definition made reference to such formal features. There may just be something about the very structure or meaning of a kind of

performance that yields conceptual incoherence or contradiction. Two candidates thus suggest themselves: logical contradiction and implication of contraries.

Although we're all familiar *reductio ad absurdum* arguments,⁷ two quick examples will be helpful. Consider first a simple *reductio ad absurdum* argument that relies on logical contradiction: namely that the root of 2 is an irrational number. The first thing to note is the experimental character of the proof. We entertain an assumption (namely that $\sqrt{2}$ is rational) to see where it leads us. Notice further that deriving a logical contradiction from the assumption doesn't tell us which claim ought to be rejected. The guilty hypothesis has yet to be determined. Given the contradiction we've derived, we could choose either to accept the initial assumption and reject the definition of rational numbers or reject the assumption and keep the definition. We choose to reject the hypothesis and stick by our definition because the definition *analytically grounds* arithmetic. It's foundational. The definition is conceptually necessary, while the hypothesis yields a contradiction.

Although the kind of contradiction employed in this type of reasoning is immensely compelling, it's not the same kind of failure we find in either internal or immanent critique. In the case of internal critique, the relevant sense of failure is captured by saying that a given performance or practice fails to meet some normative threshold, fails to satisfy a normative principle, or violates a norm altogether. However, there's no doubt about where the failure resides: for the internal critic, the underlying normative commitments are never in question; a

⁷ Researchers in argumentation theory often distinguish between two kinds of *reductio ad absurdum*: weak (arguments from consequence, slippery slopes) and strong (arguments from contradiction or semantic incoherence).

given performance or practice is always the guilty party. In a sense, the internal critic tends to think of social failure as a performative misfire. The immanent critic, however, insists on a more robust sense of failure: a practice may contradict its inherent norms, a performance may misfire, or a performance may demonstrate that some of the inhering concepts or norms are themselves incoherent. In this sense, immanent critique resembles a proof by contradiction in that there's something experimental about the approach and what may need to be revised. It differs, however, in that mathematical reasoning involves *too strong* a sense of necessity, which limits what kinds of revision are possible. Although there is a necessary relationship between the definitions structuring our reasoning and our derivation of a contradiction, the definitions themselves *are not contingent*. And the only response to a derived contradiction is to reject an offending assumption. Furthermore a failure at the level of mathematical practice is simply an error. There's no room to revise the argumentative practice in light of the contradiction obtained, while any revision of mathematical practice is external to the formal model itself.

In sum, then, analytic or conceptual necessity is simply too strong a notion for our purposes. It runs afoul of the inherence requirement because it does not allow us to alter our practices in order to alleviate the contradiction.

This might lead us to believe that a weaker sense of absurdity will fit the bill. A paradigmatic case of a weaker *reductio* argument is Galileo's refutation⁸ of Aristotle's theory of falling bodies:

Suppose that heavier bodies fall faster than lighter ones. Suppose that we have two bodies: a heavy one, M , and a light one, m . By hypothesis, M will fall faster than m . Now suppose that M and m are joined together as m/M : m/M is heavier than M , so the joined body m/M should fall *faster* than M alone. But in the joined body m/M , m and M will each tend to fall just as fast as before they were joined, so m will act as a 'brake' on M and m/M will fall slower than M alone. Hence it follows from our initial assumption that m/M will fall both faster and slower than M alone. Since this is absurd, our initial assumption must be *False*.

On its face, this argument looks as if it followed the same pattern of reasoning we used in the proof by logical contradiction, with a significant difference at the level of definition. As with the previous *reductio*, we entertain a given hypothesis within a specific body of claims and show that it leads to an absurdity. Unlike the mathematical example, however, the definitions involved aren't stipulative or analytic. They purport to capture or describe natural phenomena. The difference is a genuine step forward. In representing something about the world, the definitions and the theoretical framework maintain their sense of contingency while expressing a necessary connection to the phenomena they aim to accurately represent. The Galilean critique then shows how the definitions and framework generate an internal resistance in the sense of a cognitive dissonance: the theory yields two equally plausible but contrary implications.

⁸ I present here a simplified version.

Galileo's *reductio* is weaker than the proof by logical contradiction because it only shows that the theory yields two *contrary consequences*. All we know is, we can derive two claims from a conceptual framework that can't both be true, but can both be false. Although it may seem tedious to insist on this definitional point, two important points emerge from it: first, immanent critics don't need strict contradictions – some kind of cognitive dissonance will do (say between the rational unacceptability of unnecessary suffering and one's commitments to a normative principle that engenders it). Showing that our deeply held beliefs and practices pull us in contrary directions is sufficient for immanent criticism.⁹ Furthermore, the idea of cognitive dissonance preserves the necessary relationship between base practice and normative criteria, while the possibility of both being false leaves room for social transformation (the practice can be made to fit the criteria, the criteria can be tweaked to fit the practice, or indeed both can be jettisoned in favour of something altogether new).

The second point is equally powerful, albeit less obvious: cognitive dissonance needs to be pragmatically anchored in specific performances and experienced by concretely situated agents. Although easily missed, this point becomes obvious once we inspect the Galilean critique. We simply need to focus on the fact that Galileo presents an argument from which we can infer contrary conclusions. From a logical perspective, this simply means that the argument is *invalid or unsound*. If our notion of immanent critique is coextensive with a notion of

⁹ We are dealing with a cognitive dissonance, for instance, when we uphold something like a formal principle of equality of opportunity, while decrying the kinds of inequality of outcome that any competitive, scarcity-based system must ultimately generate.

invalidity, however, it's not a helpful category. Every analytic philosopher, every scientist and lawyer would be an immanent critic, every approach to argumentation and accepted form of reasoning would turn out to be a piece of immanent critique. Such an outcome would license the undergraduate objection that, what belongs to all, belongs to none.

The Access Requirement

The inability of either strain of *reductio ad absurdum* to withstand the pressure we were trying to put on it has been informative. For it's yielded some new constraints for the kind of contradiction involved in the *contradiction* requirement. We now see that the requirement involves three things: first, the kind of contradiction involved in immanent criticism needs to be cashed out in terms of a notion of cognitive dissonance, where the dissonance is generated by a failure of fit between empirical practices and their structuring norms. In effect, the practices one is deeply invested in and the normative criteria one takes to be constitutive of them turn out to interfere with one another. Second, the kind of interference involved in cognitive dissonance cannot be folded into purely analytical or logical considerations. Finally, because it is not purely analytical or logical (formal), this cognitive dissonance needs to be anchored in a pragmatic description of a given social space.

The need to pragmatically anchor social criticism rather than simply rely on analytical or formal considerations prompts a further set of worries about how one *accesses* the relevant phenomena. These worries inform what we might call the *access* requirement. Anyone with a passing familiarity with the social sciences has a sense

of the problem. Ian Hacking, for instance, gives us a nice illustration of it in *The Social Construction of What?*:

We are not surprised to hear that the results of primatology bear strong traces of their discoverers [...]: accounts of the behaviour of primates reflect the societies of the scientists who study them. We all know the bad jokes about British apes with stiff upper lips, ruthlessly enterprising American apes, hierarchical and communitarian Japanese apes, promiscuous French apes. (64)

Hacking's example is instructive because it illustrates the extent to which the way we describe phenomena – especially social phenomena – is *response relative*. However, unlike the response relativity involved in something like colour perception, it's difficult to determine how to *objectively* anchor our responses to social phenomena.

Response relativity thus makes the very idea of accurately describing social phenomena dubious. So much so, in fact, that some theorists simply give up entirely on the idea that we can track social phenomena accurately. Max Weber would be a case in point here. His theory of ideal-typicality hinges on the idea that the norms structuring our social scientific theories are not identical to the ones observed agents operate with. Accuracy in the social science is a matter of explanatory and predictive power – an issue of modelling behaviour – rather than accurately describing what situated agents are actually doing or how they understand these goings on. As Weber's work also illustrates, however, the moment one acknowledges the gap between theoretical model and the way the world really is, one loses the ability to critically intervene in it too. Sociology may

allow us to understand the iron cage we find ourselves in but the very practices through which we describe it disconnect us from the effective values and motivations to change it. We suffer a failure of sociological imagination.

Now, the Weberian dictum that sociology never yields social policy is anathema to Critical Theory. Acknowledging that an account does not have access to the effective norms structuring social practices and informing agents' self-understandings, but merely models a social situation or interaction is tantamount to admitting that one has failed to *address social agents* such that they can recognize themselves and their suffering as described by the model. Furthermore, it also means that any alleged failure of fit between base practice and structuring norms will have no motivational import *because* the cognitive dissonance identified is not pragmatically anchored within the social activities and self-understanding of the agents involved. The contradiction remains bound up in the model, rather than pragmatically anchored within the social phenomenon being described. It may simply be an artefact of modelling techniques.

Once we admit to even the smallest possible gap between model and social reality, we generate a cascading set of problems for critical social theory. We've encountered two so far, namely that the accuracy of the model can be called into question and an accurate modelling doesn't yield *prescriptions* for action or motivational import. These worries yield a further concern that agents may not recognize themselves in the model, and hence will not be motivated by the diagnoses the model produces. Finally, applying unanchored models for social

criticism is by definition ‘external critique’. Failure to satisfy the access requirement is therefore a sufficient condition for (a species of) external critique. It’s also a pretty good indicator of whether a social and political program is an instance of Ideal theorizing.

Conclusion

A virtue of this account is the increasing stringency of, and mutual support among the requirements: the inherence requirement distinguishes between external critique and various forms of internal criticism in a straightforward way by requiring critics to specify a non-analytic, non-empirical, necessary connection between a base practice and its normative criteria, while nevertheless preserving the contingency – and hence revisability – of either the practice or the criteria, or both. The Contradiction requirement requires critics to identify some form of social dissonance that is capable of motivating social transformation. Finally, the access requirement requires critics to determine how the social theory pragmatically anchors itself within the social situation it models or observes and the sense of dissonance it uncovers.

We’re now in a position to answer my initial questions concerning the theoretical resources available for critical theory and whether social systems theory is among them. The broad answer seems to be this: if the three requirements of immanent critique spell out the success conditions for satisfying critical theory’s desiderata, then these criteria place a decisive limit on the tools we can use. More specifically, it would seem that social systems theory won’t make the cut. For

although systems theory can satisfy the inherence requirement and the contradiction requirement (the necessity of contingency and the problem of complexity being systems theoretical reformulations of them), I don't systems theory can satisfy the access requirement.

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