Practicing Social Critique

I. Introduction

Oppression and injustice comes in many forms. One distinction worth noting is between oppression that is repressive, i.e., forced upon individuals through coercive measures, and oppression that is ideological, i.e., enacted unthinkingly or even willingly by the subordinated or privileged. *Repressive:* Chattel slavery; *Ideological:* Gender oppression; *Hybrid:* Racism. Stuart Hall's suggestion:

> [Ideology] has especially to do with the concepts and the languages of practical thought which stabilize a particular form of power and domination; or which reconcile and accommodate the mass of the people to their subordinate place in the social formation. (Hall 1996/2006, pp. 24-25)

What exactly is ideology and how does it work to maintain oppression? Very broadly, ideology is best understood functionally: ideology functions to stabilize or perpetuate unjust power and domination, and does so through some form of masking or illusion (Geuss 1981; Shelby 2003; Celikates 2006; Haslanger 2012). As a result, ideology critique takes two forms. The epistemic critique of ideology reveals the distortion, occlusion, and misrepresentation of the facts. The moral critique concerns the unjust conditions that such illusions and distortions enable.

Differences under the surface (arising from different traditions):
- *Cognitivist approaches:* an ideology is a relatively explicit set of (distorted) beliefs that purport to justify a (morally problematic) social order. On these accounts, the epistemic and justificatory failings can be identified through ordinary epistemic critique.
  - This approach fails to take into account how, in the social domain, ideology can make itself true, and be a basis for knowledge (Haslanger 2017, Ch. 1).
  - Moreover, in order to promote meaningful change, we need a better understanding of why unjust systems are so *durable*, e.g., enacted even by those committed to social justice (Haslanger 2017).
  - Focusing on shared attitudes pushes the question back: why do we persist in holding such attitudes in the face of sustained efforts to challenge and change them?
- *Practice approach:* an ideology is a set of social meanings in a context (a *cultural technē*) that guide our participation – by being internalized as a practical orientation - in unjust practices/structures. Ideological social meanings are a component in a homeostatic social system.

My primary aim in this talk is to argue that efforts to achieve social justice must address culture; so our political efforts (and the normative inquiry that guides them) should not be focused on state action (or directly on individual hearts and minds – though indirectly, of course, this is required).

II. Motivating Example: Brown v. Board of Education

Even with the implementation of the 1954/55 desegregation orders, the aims of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision have not been realized. For example, in 1977, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights reported that 'segregation had actually increased since 1954' and 'true desegregation could be achieved in urban areas only if students were bused between cities and suburbs.' Some argue that now sixty years after *Brown*, not only is education separate and unequal, but re-segregation is occurring, especially since the late 1990s when judges began releasing hundreds of districts from court-enforced integration (Civil Rights Project, 2012). For example,

> Freed from court oversight, Tuscaloosa's schools have seemed to move backwards in time….Serving the city's poorest part of town, [Central High] is 99 percent black…Predominantly white neighborhoods adjacent to Central have been gerrymandered into the attendance zones of other, whiter schools. (Hannah-Jones 2014)

In districts released from desegregation orders, 53% percent of Black students now attend 'apartheid schools,' with less than 1% White students. (Hannah-Jones 2014). Many of these schools are failing. For example, Michael Brown graduated Normandy High School in Ferguson, MO just before his death. Notably,

> The state's 2014 assessment report on Normandy's schools was spectacularly bleak: Zero points awarded for academic achievement in English. Zero for math, for social studies, for science. Zero for students headed to college. Zero for attendance. Zero for the percent of students who graduate. Its total score: 10 out of 140. (Hannah-Jones 2014)

There are, no doubt, multiple factors – legal, economic, historical, cultural, psychological – relevant to explaining the phenomenon of racial segregation and the educational achievement gap in the United States. *Brown* was clearly an important step in the civil rights movement, but at this point in time, the idea that racism is going to be dismantled by state action is no longer credible.

No doubt, some of the individuals, including school board officials and police officers, are sexist, racist, and classist. There are also serious problems with the laws that govern the American education and other institutions (e.g., Paltrow and Flavin 2013). However, at the heart of these patterns is a structure of social relations that is ideologically sustained in spite of legislative, judicial, and individual efforts to change it. Policy decisions can make a difference by motivating people to become aware of and care about ways they interact with others (Lessig 1995, Appiah 2010), but entrenched social meanings can override such efforts. If state action and well-meaning individual efforts to correct our (and others') beliefs are insufficient, then what are our other options? Hint: A broad social movement.

III. Culture

Within mainstream moral philosophy, normative analysis seems to focus on either individuals or the state. Culture is almost entirely left out of the picture. In my previous lecture, I embraced Sewell's view that culture is a dimension of human practices:

> …human practice, in all social contexts or institutional spheres, is structured simultaneously both by meanings and by other aspects of the environment in which they occur – by, for example, power relations or spatiality or resource distributions. Culture is…the semiotic dimension of human social practice in general. I further assume that these dimensions of practice mutually shape and constrain each other but also that they are relatively autonomous from each other. (48)

Following this line of thought, culture is a network of public social meanings, (scripts, schemas, heuristics) that gives shape to our practices. Three features of culture are especially relevant to the possibility of ideology critique.

- *Culture frames and motivates agency.* Agency requires us to navigate (both interpret and employ) the social meanings that partly constitute the dominant practices. So, Sewell argues, 'even if an action were almost entirely determined by, say, overwhelming disparities in economic resources, those disparities would still have to be rendered meaningful in action according to a semiotic logic' (Sewell 2005, p. 46). We might add, that even if the state were to intervene in an attempt to improve the economic or political position of the subordinated, the interventions would have some social meaning or other that would affect how agents would respond to them and integrate them into current practices (or not). The *Brown* example demonstrates this point.

- *Culture makes itself true* (through looping). In my previous lecture, I argued that a cultural technē is one part of a system that functions (not always successfully!) to regulate our interactions in a domain. Other parts of the system include *resources* – things such as material objects, time, knowledge, and the like – taken to have (+/-) value, and the *psychological capacities* of humans and other non-human animals to be responsive to and learn from each other (Sewell 1992; Zawidzki 2013; McGeer 2007). Due to the looping effects in a (roughly) culture-psychology-resources-culture system, the world comes to conform to our beliefs and expectations. This can justify individual action that reinforces the loop, and can create an illusion of inevitability, e.g. the Interstate highway system in the United States (Rehm 2016). The point is not that the cultural technē is 'the cause'

of the injustice, but that it is a component in a (noisy, dynamic) social system that tends to reproduce itself (Pettit 1996).
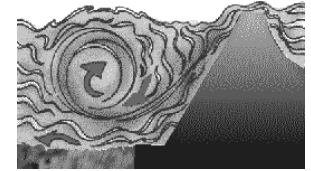
- *Culture constitutes identities.* Identities are framed in cultural terms and commit us to practices. We can object to the practices and resist a particular framing of our (and others') action, but effective social change must not only provide incentives for acting differently, e.g., through law or policy, but must replace the problematic practices – and the meanings that partly constitute them – with alternative meanings that have some continuity with the prior meanings so we can project ourselves into the new practices and new form of life (cf. Lessig 1995).[1] Without attention to culture, state action can appear (and be!) not only unwarranted, but deeply destructive of who 'we' are, as George Wallace clearly expressed in 1963, in his first inaugural speech as Governor of Alabama:

> Let us rise to the call for freedom-loving blood that is in us and send our answer to the tyranny that clanks its chains upon the South. In the name of the greatest people that have ever trod this earth, I draw the line in the dust and toss the gauntlet before the feet of tyranny, and I say segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever.

IV. Ideology Critique

Ideology, on my view, is a cultural technē gone wrong, i.e., that (a) organizes us in ways that are unjust, and/or (b) skews our understanding of what is valuable (Anderson 1993; Satz 2010). How does this approach connect the epistemic and the political dimensions of ideological oppression?

In contexts of ideological oppression, the cultural resources are inadequate to recognize the injustice for what it is. Individuals who participate in the injustice, i.e., who either suffer from, perform, or are complicit in it, are not stupid or ignorant; even epistemic responsibility (in the traditional sense) within the available cultural technē is often insufficient to appreciate the wrongs in question. And because the cultural technē also informs agency and sense of self, participation in injustice appears called for, so moral critique misfires.

So the task of ideology critique is to challenge, disrupt, and replace those aspects of the cultural technē that mask or occlude what's valuable and prevent us from organizing ourselves in ways that are more just. Robin Celikates (2016) points to two challenges an account of ideology critique must address:

> i) *Normative or criterial challenge:* what makes an ideology problematic? (3) Do

[1] A similar point is relevant to scientific revolution. 'In the science, the testing situation never consists…simply in the comparison of a single paradigm with nature. Instead, testing occurs

as part of the competition between two rival paradigms for the allegiance of the scientific community.' (Kuhn 1970, 145)

we need ideal theory to answer this question? And, if so, which ideal theory?

ii) *Methodological or epistemological challenge:* from what standpoint does the critic speak? Traditionally critical theory is embedded in a social movement and aims to articulate the interests and demands of the oppressed (Fraser 1989, Haslanger 2012). But then the question is 'which insights of which agents – given that they usually do not constitute a homogeneous category – the critical theorist articulates and whether, and if so, how, can she gain some critical distance with regards to the agents in question.' (4)

V. Value
In responding to the normative challenge, critical theorists are, to say the least, extremely wary of relying on ideal theory. Why this hesitation?

The problem isn't just a knee-jerk cultural relativism. Rather, it emerges from an appreciation of the very notion of culture we have been discussing. Culture shapes what we value and our reasons for action. The point is not just that culture shapes what we *take to be value*, i.e., our beliefs about value, but *what is valuable*. In other words, at least some value is path-dependent.

> Values are not so much what people have as what they do and feel. Human beings possess an inexhaustible drive to evaluate, to pronounce what is good and bad, beautiful and ugly, advantageous and disadvantageous. Without culture, human values are inchoate and indeterminate; through culture they become differentiated, articulated, refined. (Balkin 1998, pp. 27-8)

Cuisine, music, religion, are perfect examples. We create new resources, and in doing so enhance and extend our appreciation, our valuing, our values, what is valuable.

> Cultural software allows human beings to articulate and concretize their values, to put flesh on the bones of their...inchoate urge to value and evaluate. Through cultural software our brute sense of the beautiful is transformed into the many varieties of aesthetic judgment, some of which come into being and fade away at different points in history. Through culture software the inchoate sense of good and bad is transformed into the many varieties of moral and practical judgment, and the many virtues and vices are articulated and differentiated. (Balkin 1998, pp. 17)

For example, White Supremacy teaches us to be selective in what we notice, what we respond to, what we value. Just as the promisor, worshipper, or chef ignores certain desires or considerations and takes this to be required by their practice,

the police academy trains the officer to ignore (or interpretively skew) certain behaviors – all too often the cries of the Black person. They are not what matters; the local cultural technē produces 'blinders' that filter and shape experience. As Paul Taylor argues, 'Race-thinking is an integral part of modernity's screen of signs, and discovering what this screen screens out is the key to understanding black invisibility' (Taylor 2016, p. 48). If racism is embedded broadly in our cultural technē then it is partly constitutive of social practices that give people (what they take to be) reasons to act in racist or racially segregating ways. The practices in question create a topology of social space, channel resources, and may become entrenched through commitment to roles and identities.

Valuing is a human practice; so is reasoning. Reasoning is learned through socialization, along with the selectivity of experience and other cognitive mechanisms (Laden 2012). It too involves tutored, guided, responses to things and people around us. Academic disciplines teach different ways of thinking and reasoning. Learning practical and moral reasoning are important human tasks and happen through culture (and philosophy classes).

So the question of cultural critique is pressing. Plausibly, at least some norms of logic and rationality are universal, so sometimes arguments can be shown to be defective by these norms; and sometimes norms thought to be universally binding on all rational agents are not, and we can challenge them. But universal norms of rationality will only in rare cases be sufficient to adjudicate between different forms of life. If we turn to culturally specific standards of reasoned debate, however, we will face many of the same problems that arise when we invoke values that are culturally specific.

VI. Naturalized Non-Ideal Moral Epistemology
On the view I've sketched, whether a cultural technē is ideological is to be determined in terms of the injustice of its effects and the values it promotes (or not). This assumes that there is a fact of the matter about what is just and unjust, good, and valuable. I endorse the presupposition that there are moral truths (/facts), e.g., that slavery and genocide are morally wrong, that rape is morally wrong, that men *and women* have a right to bodily integrity.[2] Not every cultural technē is ideological.

If we have moral knowledge, then the proper target of ideology critique simply follows: we should disrupt the cultural technē that prevents us from valuing things aptly and disrupt those social structures that produce injustice. But can we have moral knowledge? More specifically, can we have knowledge of the sort to make

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[2] I am not committing myself here to a meta-ethical view about the nature of moral truths or facts. What I say here is compatible with a robust moral realism, a quietist or deflationary moral realism, moral constructivism, and some forms of moral anti-realism. However, I intend it to be incompatible with moral nihilism and some forms of moral relativism.

moral judgements about culture? And if so, how? If ideal theory is not adequate, how should we proceed?

We should keep in mind that it is not necessary to *know what justice is,* or have a complete moral theory, to engage in critique. It may be sufficient to know that this *particular* practice, or structure, is unjust. Sometimes I can know that a moral wrong or injustice is being done *to me* or *to us.* This is not a commitment to moral particularism, but to situated knowledge. Like other knowledge, moral knowledge is situated. A central commitment of critical theory is to listen to first person (especially first person plural) knowledge claims. I take this commitment to be grounded, at least in part, in epistemic *humility*: we should listen to those directly affected by the practices in question because they are likely to have better access to morally relevant facts. But sometimes it is a claim of epistemic *entitlement* on the part of theorists *who are also members* of such oppositional groups. Critical theorists are part of the struggle, not standing outside of it, looking in.

I am a member of the society that I critique. I have first-person knowledge of some of the harms and wrongs that the culture produces, and I object to these wrongs. I also have indirect knowledge, through testimony and witnessing, of wrongs to members of other subordinated groups (Jones 1999). The harms to them are linked to harms to me, and as a critical social theorist I am committed to a unified social movement – or at least to work in coalition – to change the culture. This is not a movement to change someone else's culture. It is a movement, first and foremost, to change *my* culture and *our* culture.[3]

This approach assumes that human beings are capable of recognizing at least very basic (and serious?) forms of good and bad, justice and injustice. As James Scott (1990) has argued, "Every subordinate group creates, out of its ordeal, a "hidden transcript" that represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant" (xii). Under good enough conditions, the method they have for doing so is fairly reliable. It is not just an accident that our justified moral beliefs are true and constitute knowledge (Setiya 2013, Ch. 4).

I propose, then, that there are two sources of moral knowledge.

- *Being a Social Animal:* On one hand, we can draw on knowledge we have by virtue of being human (or better: by being a social animal) under good-enough conditions. Humans and other non-human animals are capable of recognizing suffering and have it matter (Gruen 2014). In such cases, we are exercising our epistemic capacities adequately and gaining moral knowledge. These epistemic capacities come with the sort of being we are, even if we are almost always in conditions that prevent us from exercising them well. This is compatible with

whole societies being grossly mistaken about what's right and wrong and leaves room for disagreement about the conditions under which we are adept at exercising our capacities to judge the moral facts. We learn what conditions enable and prevent moral knowledge, just as we learn what enables and prevents other forms of knowledge, by doing naturalized epistemology.

- *Being a Participant in a Practice:* Participation in social practices provides us with first-person moral knowledge and also knowledge through testimony from trustworthy others. However, our claims of moral harm are fallible; I can learn that my justified belief is false. Moreover, moral knowledge is not 'immediate.' In many cases, I don't just experience the harm. It may take work to know or even to believe that I've been harmed; it may take consciousness raising, participation in counter-publics, critical reflection, even theory (MacKinnon 1989, Ch. 5). One way critical theory contributes to oppositional social movements is to provide language to articulate the nature and scope of the injustice at issue.

So how do we gain normative standing to critique culture? Recall that under conditions of ideological oppression there is, by hypothesis, a range of unjust social practices that oppress a group; however, the oppression is not experienced as such, either by those who are subordinated or by those who are privileged by the practices (or both). So in social movements that seek to undermine ideological oppression, there is a risk that those engaged in the critique are illegitimately imposing their values on others or treating them as "cultural dupes".

I've argued, however, that an important form of social critique begins amongst the practitioners as a resistance to the practice that they are being asked to perform. Resistance arises from their knowledge that even if the practice constitutes some sort of value, it is harming *them* in ways that are morally problematic. It may be that the values the resistant rely on when making claims of being harmed are at odds with what others engaged in the practice value. But that does not delegitimize their claims. Practices are cooperative enterprises, and if parties to the cooperation have reason to think that they are being treated unjustly, or that values they care about are being undermined, there is reason – at the very least – for all parties involved to reconsider the practice. It may be too much to ask for the consent of all those engaged in the practice, but insisting on terms of cooperation in the face of non-consent is coercive, and is a *pro tanto* wrong. (Shapiro 2003). This is the normative basis for contentious politics (Tilly and Tarrow 2007). The paradigm case of contentious politics is the social movement.

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[3] Sometimes oppositional social movements cross cultures, e.g., transnational feminism. In such cases the critical social theorist should be allied with those who have situated knowledge of the

cultural harms, and resists claiming moral knowledge from a neutral standpoint, i.e., knowledge ungrounded in situated social, moral, cultural knowledge (Khader 2011).

VII. Conclusion: Social Movements

Culture frames the possibilities for thought and action so that certain morally relevant facts are eclipsed and others distorted. However, a cultural technē is not a rigid frame, but a set of tools made ready for use in certain ways, and not everyone uses the tools in the same way or finds them fitting for the jobs they need done. So in cases of ideological oppression there will be some who are able to gain knowledge of morally relevant facts that are for others inaccessible or unavailable; this may be knowledge that the practices are morally problematic. They are entitled (even required!), then, to resist the practices and demand change. The resistance is just the beginning, however, for justice requires a resolution of the conflict on terms that all can (in principle) endorse. Under good circumstances (with critical inquiry, support, and such) we can recognize that a different cultural technē will be more just and, ideally, will be better for all.

Resistance may be made by individuals, but there are many reasons that it is best undertaken as a collective enterprise. There is greater credibility when many judge a practice to be harmful or unjust. The resistance of a few is easily ignored, silenced, or eliminated. The viability of an alternative form of collective action is more plausible if it has been tried. This is why resistance takes the form of social movements. Achieving social justice is not just a matter of changing our own behavior, but changing social meanings so that collectively we have a more just choice architecture for coordination, a better appreciation of the value of resources, and fairer ways to produce and distribute them.

There is no doubt that it is important to gain the support of (and train) elites so that you can convince lawyers to take your case to the Supreme Court, and lobbying legislators to pass new laws. And laws and other state action are often effective in incentivizing more just and less harmful behavior (Lessig 1995; Thaler and Sunstein 2009). However, social movements seek cultural change through reconfiguring social meanings and disrupting material conditions (e.g., monkey-wrenching, curb cuts). In addition to new laws and policies, we need new tools in our cultural technē. Critical theory, including philosophy, can and should make important contributions to these efforts.

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