
Systematic misrecognition and the practice of critique: Bourdieu, Boltanski and the role of critical theory

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IN recent years the sociology of critique, as elaborated by Luc Boltanski and his research group in explicit opposition to Pierre Bourdieu's objectivist conception of critical social science, has emerged as a new paradigm in social theory. Only now are the overlaps and differences with the Frankfurt School's tradition of critical theory coming into view. In what follows I explore this relation by defending three claims: (1) that Bourdieu's model of a critical social science rests on the assumption – empirically and methodologically problematic – of a systematic form of misrecognition which takes on the role traditionally played by ideology; (2) that the sociology of critique offers a convincing alternative to Bourdieu's model by taking seriously the actors' self-understanding, and thus the categories employed in their practices of justification and critique; and (3) that, drawing on Boltanski, a revised version of critical theory – elements of which can be found in the work of Axel Honneth – can play a crucial complementary role since these self-understandings and practices may suffer from what one might call 'second-order pathologies'. Such an understanding of critical theory offers a new perspective on the politics of recognition, on the level of both theory and social practice, by linking the 'micropolitics of recognition', negotiated within the field of everyday practices of justification and critique, to their 'macropolitical' conditions, that is, to institutionalised and structural forms of recognition and misrecognition.

In contrast to objectivist approaches which tend to understand social actors as 'judgemental dopes' (Garfinkel, 1984: 67–73) rather than as agents possessing reflexive capacities, the pragmatist sociology of critique rightly rejects the idea of a break between the supposedly objective viewpoint of the critical scientist and the unreflective perspective of so-called 'ordinary' agents. Instead, actors are understood as capable of those forms of critical reflexivity which scientific

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observers have often claimed as their monopoly. Indeed, being able to distance oneself from the immediate practical context, and critically reflect on it, is 'a capability whose existence must be presupposed if we are to account for the way the members of a complex society criticise, challenge institutions, argue with one another, or converge toward agreement' (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006: 15).

While it is typical for approaches within the paradigm of critical social science to identify social structures and mechanisms at the macro level which account for the reproduction of the status quo, the sociology of critique follows the example of ethnomethodology by situating itself at the micro level and describing situated practices of critique and justification. Justified though this may be in terms of enlarging the theoretical perspective, this reversal tends to neglect the possibility that certain social conditions block the exercise or even the formation of actors' reflective and critical capacities. In order to account for this possibility, social theory has to focus – at a 'meso' or 'intermediate' level – on those social conditions, largely ignored by the sociology of critique, which can stand in the way of real-world practices of critique and justification. In contrast to Bourdieu's approach, however, the hypothesis that certain conditions block actors' reflective capacities does not imply that these actors find themselves structurally incapable – that is, incapable in virtue of the structure of the practice they engage in – of understanding this situation. In other words, such actors are not, as Bourdieu tends to imply, completely trapped in a naïve, pre-reflective position.

The 'pragmatic turn' proposed by Boltanski and others should not lead us to abandon the project of critical theory, as if all necessary criticism were already articulated within everyday practices of critique. The reflective capacities of 'ordinary' actors and their practices of justification and critique, which are convincingly reconstructed by the sociology of critique, constitute the social and methodological basis of critical theory. However, this should not lead us to attribute an epistemic authority to the perspective of the participants which is immune to being put into question from a theoretically informed point of view (see also Celikates, 2009a and 2009b).

Critical social science and structural misrecognition

According to a theoretical model that could be called 'orthodox', critical social science begins by substituting one question for another. Instead of asking why, in a particular case, people rebel or go on strike, it asks why such persons for the most part not only tolerate the status quo, but even participate in its reproduction, regarding it as natural and/or legitimate (Rosen, 1996: Introduction). Since there seems to be an obvious contradiction between the behaviour of people and their basic interests, we can reasonably suspect that ordinary actors

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misrecognise their objective situation and their real interests in a systematic, i.e. not purely accidental, manner.

In order to explain this phenomenon of systematic misrecognition critical social science points to the 'fact' that the agents do not really know what they are doing and are really prisoners of an ideology that masks their situation and their interests.¹ To be prisoner of an ideology means to be confined to a false form of consciousness that is both objectively necessary and necessarily false. This 'orthodox' notion of ideology does not only imply that actors do not know what they are doing, but also that they do not, and indeed cannot, understand how what they are doing and thinking contributes to the reproduction of the social order. The systematic misrecognition on the actors' part is then contrasted with insight into the 'real' mechanisms of social reproduction available to those who are able to diagnose forms of false consciousness, as it were 'from sideways on'. On this understanding, ideology can only be identified from an objective and epistemically privileged viewpoint which is situated outside of the ideological context and must be provided by social science.

The 'orthodox' conception of critical social science thus implies an asymmetrical opposition between science and critique, on the one hand, and the naïve perspective of 'ordinary' agents subject to structural forms of misrecognition, on the other. Consequently, social actors are seen as objects of critical discourse rather than as interlocutors in their own right whose self-understandings would provide more than just additional data. It is this dogma of asymmetry, and the associated methodological imperative of an epistemological break with the participants' perspective, which has animated the project of a sociology that is at once scientific and critical. It lies at the heart of Bourdieu's critical sociology. For Bourdieu, the break with the actors' self-understanding is both epistemological and methodological. It presumes a radical discontinuity between the perspective of the social sciences, on the one hand, and the perspective of participants, ordinary consciousness and common sense, on the other. This break is achieved by a double operation: the metatheoretical separation of science from common sense (as well as the epistemological disqualification of the latter) and the methodological imperative to struggle for scientific knowledge against common sense, vulgar opinion and ideology. Bourdieu and his co-authors squarely situate themselves in this Durkheimian framework when they characterise the first methodological principle of their approach as follows: 'The social fact is won against the illusion of immediate knowledge', requiring permanent 'epistemological vigilance' on the part of the sociologist (Bourdieu, Chamboredon and Passeron, 1991: 13). On this understanding, sociology is engaged in a continuous struggle with the 'spontaneous sociology' of ordinary agents and their self-understanding, with the 'spontaneous movements of naïve practice' that threaten to 'contaminate' sociological analysis (1991: 24). There is an irresolvable structural conflict between scientific sociological analysis and the

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interpretations of actors, who are, in virtue of their immersion in social practice, incapable of distancing themselves from what they are doing, victims of a mere 'illusion of reflexivity' (1991: 24).

This conception of a form of misrecognition which is not contingent but structural, in that it is constitutive for the functioning of the practice in question and the reproduction of the social order, has played a decisive role in Bourdieu's work ever since his early analysis of gift exchange. The truth of this exchange – that it is, in reality, not a matter of disinterested gifts but a sublimated struggle for symbolic power and material advantage – cannot be recognised within the 'official' self-understanding that frames the perspective of the participants. What actors are (objectively) doing does not coincide with what they (subjectively) think they are doing. This misrecognition of the structure of their practice is necessary in the sense that it is one of the foundations of their practice: the practice in question, in this case the gift exchange, exists and functions 'because subjects do not, strictly speaking, know what they are doing', so that 'what they do has more meaning than they know' (Bourdieu, 1977: 79).

To account for this structure of misrecognition, Bourdieu speaks of a 'twofold truth'. In one sense, the gift really is and has to be what it seems to be – a generous act, without interest and calculation. However, this act is, in another sense, subject to the relentless logic and 'forceless force' of gift exchange (Bourdieu, 2000a: 188–202). This 'twofold truth' is only accessible from the standpoint of the observing sociologist because actors themselves are trapped with the half-truth which is all that is accessible to them from the perspective of a participant. According to Bourdieu, the contradiction between the 'subjective truth' of the participants and the objective analysis of the sociological observer is not limited to gift exchange alone; it accounts for the distinctive character of all symbolic practices. The self-mystification of such practices can only be unmasked by a 'general science of the economy of practices' (Bourdieu, 1977: 183).

This misrecognition, constitutive for the functioning of social practices, derives from a work of denial and repression that is interiorised by subjects in the course of their initiation into these practices by way of education or '*dressage*'. As 'second nature', the *habitus* which results from this formation allows actors to move in the social world 'like fish in water': we immediately and intuitively know which behaviour is appropriate and what we must do, and we usually do it without further reflection. Because the *habitus* conditions and structures our experiences, thoughts, evaluations and practices, it imposes strict limits on reflection and critique. Within these limits – which we could describe as 'the cave of practice' – we find the realm of *doxa*. The *doxa* of participants in a practice guarantees that they misrecognise the conditions of their thought and action, and do not ask any questions for which there is no immediate and 'official' answer. This immunity of practice – and of the entire social world more generally – to critical reflection and questioning is anchored, by way of *habitus*,

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in actors' self-understandings and secures the functioning and reproduction of the social order.

Within Bourdieu's framework, *habitus* and systematic misrecognition fulfil a function analogous to the 'orthodox' model of ideology in two respects. First, they are crucial elements in the reproduction of the status quo and must be analysed from a functionalist perspective. Second, for structural reasons, their functioning must remain opaque to the actors themselves, imprisoned in the *doxa*, and can only be unveiled by the sociologist who breaks with this incorporated and necessarily false consciousness (Bourdieu and Eagleton, 1994: 265–77; and Wacquant, 2002: 25–40). The quasi-ideological system of convictions and dispositions which make up the *habitus* is both necessary and sufficient from an objective viewpoint *and* false, because it rests on a fundamental misrecognition of its own conditions, causes and effects.

For Bourdieu, symbolic domination – a form of domination which successfully hides its dominating character – is solely based on the recognition accorded to it by the dominated, but this (mis)recognition is rooted in the 'disguised (and thus misrecognised) imposition of systems of classification and of mental structures that are objectively adjusted to social structures' (Bourdieu, 1993: 169) and that are effectively protected, in virtue of being part of the *habitus*, against being questioned. According to Bourdieu, actors are accomplices in the (re)production of their own domination, but it is impossible for them to come to an adequate understanding of this process and thus to transform it because it is viciously circular: '1. The system reproduces itself because it is misrecognised. 2. The system, by reproducing itself, produces the effect of misrecognition' (Rancière, 2003: 367). Having established the structurally limited nature of cognitive access to social reality on the part of 'ordinary' actors', the sociologist now 'installs himself in a position of the eternal denunciator of a system that is capable of eternally masking itself in relation to its subjects' (Rancière, 2003: 368).²

The sociology of critique and the recognition of 'ordinary' actors

In contrast to this underestimation of actors' reflective capacities and the associated overestimation of sociological knowledge which, as we have seen, are characteristic of Bourdieu's model of critical social science, the sociology of critique begins with the assumption of a basic symmetry between 'ordinary' agents and 'professional' sociologists, rejecting the methodological break with the perspective of participants and emphasising the reflexivity involved in and required by everyday social practices. We can represent the theoretical and methodological structure of this approach with the following four principles (Nachi, 2006: Chapter 1; see also Bénatouïl, 1999: 379–96):

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- 1 The principle of symmetry: the rejection of the break which characterises the orthodox model of critical social science goes hand in hand with recognising ‘the symmetry between the descriptive languages or explanatory principles used by the social sciences, on the one hand, and the modes of justification or criticism used by actors, on the other hand’ (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006: 11; see also Anderson, E., 1993: Chapter 5).
- 2 The principle of pluralism: the rejection of the idea of a vicious circle of misrecognition with the reproduction of the status quo goes hand in hand with recognising a plurality of modes of action – for Boltanski, these include violence, love, routine and justification – which are themselves viewed as internally plural, particularly the metaregime of justification.
- 3 The principle of reflective capacities: the rejection of the understanding of ‘ordinary’ agents as ‘judgemental dopes’ goes hand in hand with recognising their reflective capacities and, more generally, ‘what people are capable of’ (Boltanski, 1990a: Part 1).
- 4 The principle of grammars of agreement: the rejection of the idea that social rules are imposed behind the backs of ignorant actors goes hand in hand with recognising that actors themselves have to constantly negotiate and renegotiate these rules so as to coordinate their actions in concrete social contexts and to produce effective criticisms of each other as well as acceptable justifications.

In the conflicts of everyday life ‘ordinary’ actors furnish ample proof of their capacity to take up different viewpoints, distancing themselves from their situation and engaging in complex discourses of critique and justification. The fragility of the social order and the plurality of regimes of justification make it possible for actors, and indeed require actors, to conduct themselves in a reflective and critical manner. Actors must not only possess a habituated ‘practical sense’ but also a kind of mastery of ‘the arts of living in different worlds’ (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006: 148) which allows them to orient themselves in heterogeneous social contexts and argumentative spaces that only partially overlap: ‘The ability to detach oneself from the immediate environment, to remove oneself from the confusion of what is present . . . constitutes the minimal ability human beings must have if they are to involve themselves in situations without getting lost in them’ (Boltanski, 1990a: 74, author’s translation).

Within the practices of critique and justification with their socially and culturally mediated repertoires of argumentation, agents can refer to a plurality of normative orders and regimes of justification (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006: 235). Both the possibility and necessity of critique depend not only on this plurality and the conflicts that arise within it but also on the ‘factual force of the normative’ – the efficacy of normative expectations – and the ‘normative force of the factual’ – the permanent frustration of these expectations:

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To be valid, critique must be capable of justifying itself – that is to say, clarifying the normative supports that ground it – especially when it is confronted with the justifications that those who are subject to critique supply for their action. Hence it continues to refer to justice, for if justice is a delusion, what is the point of criticising? On the other hand, however, critique presents a world in which the requirement of justice is incessantly contravened. It unmasks the hypocrisy of moral pretensions that conceal the reality of relations of force, exploitation and domination. (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005: 28)

The plurality of regimes of justification and the permanent possibility of tensions between them opens up two avenues for social critique that are routinely taken by ‘ordinary’ agents in the course of their everyday lives. The first avenue, a kind of internal or reformist critique, accepts the regime of justification in question (and the kind of ‘test’ which goes along with it) and questions its application in a concrete situation. The second form of critique is more radical and questions the very regime of justification itself as inadequate to the situation at hand:

The first [form of critique] is *corrective* in intent: critique reveals those features ... that infringe justice and, in particular, the forces mobilised by certain of the protagonists without the others being aware of it ... A second manner of criticising ... may be dubbed *radical*. In this instance, what is at stake is no longer correcting the conditions of the test with a view to making it more just but suppressing it and ultimately replacing it with a different test. (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005: 32–3; see also Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006: 219–25)

These two forms of critique should not be understood as symptoms of a spontaneous and naïve sociology, as suggested by Bourdieu, but rather as a very elaborate kind of ‘folk sociology’ which also employs theoretical resources introduced into social discourse by sociology: ‘All humans must be granted the same elementary capacities as social scientists when it comes to questioning ideologies and social representations. It must be acknowledged that what the social sciences produce is already included in society’s hermeneutic circle’ (Chiapello, 2003: 157).

From this description of the social world follows a methodological maxim which is both simple and demanding: ‘follow the actors themselves.’ In other words, sociologists must now take their lead from the interpretations and evaluations of ‘ordinary’ actors who alone possess relevant knowledge of the social world. No longer regarded as simple informants producing additional data, ‘ordinary’ actors are instead viewed as lay sociologists producing interpretations and explanations of their actions which are no less sophisticated than those offered by their professional colleagues (Latour, 2005: Introduction; Boltanski, 1990a: Chapter 13). In contrast to Bourdieu’s model, the sociologist’s understanding is interpreted as lagging behind. Her only chance to gain some ground

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is to take actors seriously, analysing their practices of critique and justification and avoiding a theoretical framework that turns them into 'judgemental dopes'. The sociology of critique tries to follow this maxim on three levels. On the level of 'pragmatics', it analyses actual practices of critique and justification. On the level of 'grammar', it analyses the rules and conditions to which actors must adhere if they are to successfully partake of these practices. On the level of 'topic', it analyses the repertoires of argumentation and modes of speaking employed by actors in different social contexts.

Despite the promising perspectives opened up by this approach, however, we must now ask whether the analysis proposed by the sociology of critique is sufficiently complex.

When the sociology of critique begins with the 'fact' of critique and justification, it makes two rather strong assumptions regarding the conditions of this 'fact'. The 'subjective' conditions of the practices of justification and critique equate to those capacities and competences which actors mutually attribute to each other and which the sociologist must also attribute to them in order to understand what they are doing. The 'objective' conditions equate to the existence of a 'metaregime' of justification and of a plurality of regimes of justification to which actors can refer when engaging in corrective or radical critique. But can we really presuppose that the subjective and objective conditions of the practices of critique – the starting point for the sociology of critique – are, in fact, given in social reality? Is it not the case that there exist certain social conditions under which actors' reflective capacities are blocked or constrained? The sociology of critique appears to exclude the possibility of an unequal distribution of, or structural restrictions on, the capacity to distance oneself from one's context and engage in critique. Yet a sociological approach which is sufficiently nuanced must take this possibility seriously. Similarly, regarding the 'objective' conditions of the social practices of justification and critique, a sociological approach must also consider the possibility that certain social contexts are successfully shielded from the pressure of justification and that certain hegemonic discourses of justification suppress alternative justificatory resources. Such possibilities significantly reduce the ability of actors to engage in the justification and critique of their own societies. In other words, the subjective and objective conditions of practices of critique may in fact find themselves restricted, and this possibility cannot be ignored if social theory is to retain its practical relevance (Honneth, 2008b: 84–103).

Critical theory and 'second-order pathologies'

The sociology of critique is thus confronted with a two-fold problem. Its focal point seems too restricted in that it limits itself to the critical discourses already part of 'society's hermeneutic circle' and this amounts to excluding forms of

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critique that are both more theoretical and more radical. As Boltanski himself concedes, actors are often ‘realists’ and adapt to what they take to be possible, at times ‘closing their eyes’ to factors which, from their perspective, are out of place. For critique to overcome this realist bias, it needs a critical theory that allows for the construction of an alternative position. Sometimes the only way to rid oneself of the yoke of reality and the predominance of ‘realists’ is ‘to make reality unacceptable’, that is, to show those actors concerned that a situation should be unacceptable from *their own* viewpoint, by means of a theoretical account or redescription (Boltanski, 2009; Boltanski, 2008; Boltanski and Honneth, 2009). Furthermore, as I have already indicated, the perspective of the sociology of critique does not appear to consider the social conditions of the exercise and formation of the reflective and critical capacities it assumes. Of course, the sociology of critique does not deny that actors acquire and exercise their capacities in given social contexts and are always subject to determined social conditions. But, owing to its ‘situationist’ orientation, its approach tends to reduce these contexts and conditions to mere resources which actors can employ rather than analysing such contexts as potential structural restrictions on reflective capacities and critical practices.

As Boltanski argues in an early article co-written with Bourdieu, the idea of ‘linguistic communism’, i.e. the belief in the (*de facto*) equal distribution of communicative capacities and the ability to make oneself heard, appears to be nothing more than an ‘illusion’ (Boltanski and Bourdieu, 1975: 2–33; see also Bourdieu, 1993: 43). As a function of their social position, actors possess, to radically varying degrees, a ‘voice’ and the social power to demand and produce justifications. Critical theory must therefore attempt to identify the quality of social conditions – or, following Axel Honneth, the relations of recognition – which actors require to form and exercise their reflective capacities. It is precisely this question which makes it necessary to move beyond the horizon of the sociology of critique so as to reintroduce the standpoint of critical theory without, for all that, abandoning the theoretical insights of the former’s ‘methodological egalitarianism’.

When certain social conditions block the formation and exercise of actors’ reflective capacities or, in other words, when relations of recognition are asymmetric, ideological, or pathological (Honneth, 2007b: 323–47), we appear to face a case which can be called ‘second-order pathology’ that takes the form of a ‘structural reflexivity deficit’ on the part of the actors (Honneth, 1996: 369–96; Zurn, forthcoming; Fischbach, 2009: 155–9).

In such a situation, the first-order social conditions which appear to be normatively problematic – relations of injustice, exploitation, misrecognition, etc. – are not, in the relevant sense, accessible to those affected, be it because they are not experienced and recognised as such or because they are intuitively grasped but misinterpreted and consequently accepted as either legitimate or

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natural. Social theory should therefore ask why it is that certain situations are not experienced as unjust, alienating, or involving misrecognition, and why the perception of a situation as unjust, alienating, or involving misrecognition does not always translate into a corresponding collective consciousness, let alone into transformative collective action (Honneth, 2007a: 80–96; Renault, 2004; see also Lazzeri's contribution in Chapter 9 of this volume).

An answer to these questions would need to refer to those material and symbolic constraints which can prevent actors from engaging in practices of critique. In this sense, the ideological appearance of certain practices and institutions as legitimate and natural (i.e. their misrecognition by the actors involved), can be characterised as a second-order phenomenon. It effectively diminishes the probability that those opinions, dispositions and modes of acting which can be situated on the first level and which support these practices and institutions will be reflected on and criticised. 'Second-order pathologies' can thus be understood as blocking the assessment, critique and transformation of 'first-order pathologies'. It should be noted that the diagnosis of 'second-order pathologies' need not necessarily refer to a substantial conception of a 'normal' or 'healthy' social life. If one understands these 'pathologies' in a rather formal and 'negativistic' way, their diagnosis may be based in an analysis of the structural restrictions of actors' capacities resulting from certain social relations of recognition and misrecognition.

It is crucial to note that these restrictions are in almost all cases partial: when a capacity is restricted, that is, when its formation or its exercise is blocked, this does not entail that the person affected completely lacks this capacity but rather that, under certain social conditions, she only possesses it to a limited degree. In almost all circumstances we must attribute, at the very least, certain elementary reflective capacities to actors. Furthermore, they themselves are finally the judge of whether they really are confronting a 'pathology'. Certain social conditions are unacceptable when actors themselves reflectively understand them to be so, on the basis of their self-understanding. In order to get begin, critical theory thus already presupposes a certain receptivity for its hypotheses on the side of the actors:

If the proponents of a critical theory wish to enlighten and emancipate a group of agents, they must find in the experience, form of consciousness, and belief of *those* agents, the means of emancipation and enlightenment. If we can't find the appropriate experiences of suffering and frustration and the appropriate principles of reflective acceptability in the life and form of consciousness of those agents, Ideologiekritik cannot begin, and we have no right to call the agents 'deluded'. (Geuss, 1981: 65)

The critical and emancipatory task of social theory is thus to identify, analyse and criticise, in the context of a discourse with those affected, the social condi-

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tions that hinder or block the formation or exercise of their reflective capacities. On this view, critical social theory is a reflection on the (social) conditions of possibility of critique and, in this sense, a form of ‘metacritique’ (Boltanski, 2009).

Let me now turn to an example in order to give some substance to these rather abstract methodological remarks. In ‘The souls of black folks’, the African-American sociologist and writer W. E. B. Du Bois presents an analysis and a ‘thick description’ of the social and psychological effects of ‘racial segregation’, focusing on the loss of the capacity to see oneself with one’s own eyes, that is, without the mediation of the misrecognising gaze of the white population. Du Bois links the ‘strange meaning of being black’ under these conditions to the fact that African-Americans are ‘shut out’ from the world of white people by a ‘vast veil’ (Du Bois, 1996: 100–1). The metaphor of the ‘veil’ implies that, beyond the more immediate effects of being excluded from certain activities and places (that is, political and social forms of exclusion), this exclusion also has a repercussive effect on the self-perception of the excluded and their way of experiencing the world. Unsurprisingly, Du Bois primarily takes the veil to be a testament to the blindness of the white population, but it also deforms the cognitive and perceptive capacities of African-Americans, preventing them from developing ‘true self-consciousness’: ‘It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity’ (Du Bois, 1996, 102). This experience affects the psychic integrity of the subject: ‘One ever feels his twoness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder’ (Du Bois, 1996: 102). The ‘double self’ is ‘handicapped’ and a repressive, prejudice-filled social atmosphere pushes it to permanent ‘self-questioning, self-disparagement’ (Du Bois, 1996: 102, 105). The ‘prisoned souls within the Veil’ live in ‘two separate worlds’ and their individual and collective ‘double-consciousness’ does not allow the epistemic and practical self-confidence that is basic for their agency (Du Bois, 1996: 147, 150). Under such conditions of institutionalised and structural misrecognition, actors are blocked from developing or exercising their reflective capacities, and this produces ‘ontological wounds, psychic scars, and existential bruises’ (West, 1999: 102). The permanent experience of being classified and treated like a ‘quasi-person’ with reduced cognitive capacities does not permit those affected to distance themselves from the social world on which they depend all the more because they are excluded from the dominant social ontology (see also Mills, 1998: Chapter 1).

As is well known, Du Bois thought that it would take a cultural avant-garde (the famous ‘talented tenth’) to initiate a process of emancipation by acting on behalf and in the true interest of the ill-educated masses. His solution reveals the

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temptations of elitism and the dangers of epistemological and political paternalism inherent in the diagnosis of structural reflexivity deficits and 'second-order pathologies'. Even though these deficits and 'pathologies' are not identified with an incapacity to reflect, Du Bois' problematic solution illustrates a dilemma which confronts critical theory in all its variants. As Henry Louis Gates remarks with regard to the critique of colonialism: 'You can empower discursively the native, and open yourself to charges of downplaying the epistemic (and literal) violence of colonialism; or play up the absolute nature of colonial domination, and be open to charges of negating the subjectivity and agency of the colonised, thus textually replicating the repressive operations of colonialism' (Gates, 1991: 462).

To be true to its emancipatory aims, critical theory must avoid the 'incapacitation trap', that is, the danger of further restricting actors' capacities with its diagnosis, but in so doing, it must inevitably introduce a tension into its theory (Bader, 2007: 258–9). The only way to make sense of this tension is to insist that the structural restrictions on actors' reflective capacities can only be diagnosed and critiqued in a dialogue between critical theorists and social actors themselves, a dialogue which already presupposes, to a certain degree, the very capacities that are restricted. At the same time, the 'methodological egalitarianism' and 'principle of symmetry' which are of fundamental importance for a non-paternalist and non-authoritarian account of critical theory should not hide the asymmetries in power, knowledge, influence and argumentative capacities which can be traced back to structural reflexivity deficits. In whatever manner such asymmetries are understood, their diagnosis cannot be validated from the supposedly privileged position of the observing sociologist; such asymmetries remain hypotheses awaiting empirical verification, in a discourse with those affected. The diagnosis itself – and, more specifically, its falsification and verification – is intimately connected to actors' self-understanding and cannot be assessed in independence of such understandings.

Instead of engaging in a substantial and normative critique of the self-understandings which it regards as false, critical theory should limit itself to identifying and analysing those restrictions on actors' reflective capacities which contribute to systematic distortions of the social process in which these self-understandings are formulated and reformulated. This makes it necessary to take the 'macropolitical' conditions of institutionalised and structural recognition into account (see also Deranty and Renault, 2007: 92–111). By focusing on those 'second-order pathologies' which block the social practices of critique, that is, relations of asymmetric recognition or of misrecognition, critical theory can be understood as a second-order critique: a kind of metacritique which aims to re-establish the social conditions of critique, so as to make them accessible to the reflective and transformative practices of actors themselves. 'What people are capable of' (Boltanski, 1990a: Part 1) is thus both the starting point and the

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aim of critical theory. The driving force behind this approach might well be best captured by the young Marx: 'Therefore, we can express the aim of our periodical in *one* phrase: A self-understanding (critical philosophy) of the age concerning its struggles and wishes' (Marx, 1997: 215).

Notes

- 1 For a characterisation of the orthodox model, see Anthony Giddens, who presents it as premised on understanding social action as 'the result of forces that the actors neither control nor comprehend' (Giddens, 1986: xvi). For an alternative, non-orthodox understanding of the critique of ideology see Rahel Jaeggi (2009: 63–86).
- 2 For a qualified defence of Bourdieu's approach, see Claude Gautier (2009: 419–45), as well as Christian Lazzeri's contribution to this volume (Chapter 9).