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# Methods of Social Critique

**Abstract:** Social critique takes aim at institutions, practices, and structures from a position embedded within those institutions, practices, and structures. It is not a project in ideal theory, but does it depend on ideal theory? This paper considers three methods of nonideal theory: the medical model, the applied ideal theory model, and the critical theory model, with a focus on the latter two. It argues that the method of applied ideal theory, understood as a domain-specific, relatively a priori reflective equilibrium (as Scanlon interprets Rawls), suffers from a version of normative status quo bias. This is inadequate to challenge the effects of ideology. The paper goes on to sketch a version of social critique that draws on oppositional consciousness and suggests that some forms of consciousness raising can provide a better epistemic basis for social critique.

**Keywords:** Social critique, ideal theory, nonideal theory, medical model, critical social theory

## 1 Social critique

The target of social critique is, in the first instance, a practice or set of social practices.<sup>1</sup> For example, social critique might take aim at the consumption of the flesh of dead animals, the hetero-bio-normative construction of families, or the construction of sexual desire through pornography. But because the practices in question are linked to other practices, policies, and laws, social critique quickly widens to target broad social structures and systems. Practices of food consumption occur within and are shaped by the imperatives of capitalist food production and distribution; the practice of traditional marriage, parenting, and gender socialization is an enforcement of compulsory heterosexuality and the sex/gender binary; and the mass consumption of pornography reinforces rape culture. The project of critique is to reveal the systematic and harmful forms of social coordination as they unfold in a particular historical context and to promote change. As a consequence:

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<sup>1</sup> A further articulation of ideas developed in this paper, with some repetition, will appear in my "Political Epistemology and Social Critique," forthcoming in *Oxford Studies in Political Philosophy*.

- The site of critique is *the social domain*. This includes both individuals and the state. But the primary issues concern what practices we should engage in, what social norms we should embrace, how we should go on, from here, together. Our inquiry is *collective, practice-directed, and embedded*.
- There are many perfectly acceptable ways to organize social life, so the goal is not to ask what the *best* way to do this is; the project is *antiutopian*, but does require imagination and hope (Wright 2010; Solnit 2016). The goal is to identify – from an embedded standpoint – ways in which our practices are inadequate so we can do better. Injustice is rampant. Rectification is a priority.

What methods are apt for social critique? Note that the project of social critique is not the same as the project of political philosophy, narrowly construed, i.e., as concerned with the legitimacy and boundaries of the state. For example, in the context of liberal democracies, there are limitations on what the state can do to interfere in forms of life and cultural expression. These limitations are not, or not obviously, binding on individuals (cf. Murphy 1998). If I am a participant in a community in which the consumption of violent pornography is rampant, or one in which adopted or nonbinary children are ridiculed, it is perfectly reasonable for me to regard these practices as bad for the community and to work to change the social norms and practices that govern us. This is not the same thing as a state passing laws or policies to prohibit such activities. I have argued elsewhere that culture is a proper target of critique, for culture is a crucial component of social structures; state actions alone are not sufficient to bring about social change for the better (Haslanger 2017). Social critique is also not, or not obviously, situated within ethics, narrowly construed. The question is not simply what I should do, as an individual, given my concerns with the actions of others in their personal consumption of pornography, or with actions that marginalize certain children or families. The questions are about what social norms should govern us as a community, what values we uphold, how we should live together.

There are two steps in the project of critique. The first is epistemic: If the community is currently organized to uphold certain values through its social norms, on what basis can an individual or group legitimately challenge these values or norms and make a warranted claim against the community to change the culture, i.e., change the form of life? Even if the state may not intervene, surely there are other measures that might be taken. This happens all the time. Schools and universities articulate mottos, mission statements, and the like, and expect their members to conform their behavior accordingly. Teachers can demand that students in their class interact on terms that cannot and should not be enforced outside the classroom. Parents uphold values in the daily prac-

tices of family life. Friends and social groups do the same. In some of these contexts, if one is unhappy with the terms of coordination, one can simply exit; or if a group does not want to hear the complaints of a member, they can be ignored or encouraged to leave the group. But these are not always acceptable or feasible options. More importantly, if there is a warranted critique, then the social practices should be adjusted. This leads us to the second step, which we might consider broadly political: How should warranted critique be taken up? What process should be employed for deciding what changes are apt and how to implement them? Again, this is not a question of state intervention. It is about shaping a community.

My focus in this paper is on the epistemic question. Can social critique rely on the standard methods of political epistemology? What else is available? I will begin by sketching two different models, the “medical model” and the “applied ideal theory model.” I will then propose that critical social theory provides a better option. I will not address the political question of what we should do – how we should proceed – in the face of a warranted critique.

## 2 Ideal and nonideal theory

In social/political philosophy, there has been an ongoing debate about the value of ideal theory. Although what counts as “ideal theory” is controversial, one version relies on two related methodological principles. Following Mikkola (2017), they are:

- The (normative) *priority thesis*: We need to know what justice is in order to remedy current injustice.
- The *distancing thesis*: In order to know what justice is, we must abstract away from the messy reality of our lives and understand the nature of justice through reflection on cases that isolate the normative aspects of the phenomenon. This requires consideration of distant and idealized possibilities.

Some theorists endorse only one or the other thesis (or modified versions of each),<sup>2</sup> but Adam Swift embraces the combination quite explicitly:

[...] only by reference to philosophy – abstract, pure, context-free philosophy – can we have an adequate basis for thinking how to promote justice in our current, radically nonideal, circumstances. (Swift 2008: 382)

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<sup>2</sup> For example, Shelby (2016: 11, 13) explicitly embraces the priority thesis, but seems to reject the distancing thesis.

The issue of ideal theory has also been raised in other philosophical domains as well: Should we focus first on cooperative (versus uncooperative) communication; on knowledge (versus ignorance)? And the answer has increasingly been no, or not always.

Setting aside the question of how to define ideal or nonideal theory, it is undeniable that in undertaking social critique, we need to understand the complexity of the actual situation to diagnose the problem. We cannot critique the racism in the public-school system, or the sexism in pornography, or the marginalization of the poor, unless we have a theory of where and how the wrong occurs. Empirical research is required. So, insofar as social critique requires application of moral considerations to real world circumstances, it is plausibly a form of nonideal theory. But the question still remains, how should we proceed? How do we undertake nonideal theory in pursuing social critique? What is the relationship between empirical inquiry, moral inquiry, and critique?

### 3 The medical model

In a number of works, Tommie Shelby has described and criticized a “medical model” of social critique. In a critique of Anderson (2010), he says:

On [the medical] model, the persistent cries of injustice and other grievances of members of society are conceived as symptoms (like headaches, fatigue, and insomnia) to be treated by empirically grounded interventions, which are conceived as potential cures for social ills. The justice doctor, concerned about the health of the polity, attempts to discover the “underlying causes of the complaints” ([Anderson 2010] p. 4), which may differ, perhaps radically, from what those who initially raised the complaints believe is the proper diagnosis. After careful empirical analysis and social experiments, the linchpin of the social problem is identified and actions are taken to remove it, with the hope that the troubling symptoms eventually fade away and the patient is healed. (Shelby 2014: 256)<sup>3</sup>

According to the “social engineering” approach Shelby has in mind, technocrats analyze the problem piecemeal rather than treating it as systematic; they pro-

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<sup>3</sup> Shelby introduces the medical model in the context of discussing Anderson’s (2010) book. He allows that there are different threads in her methodology, and this is only one. I myself interpret Anderson as a more thoroughgoing pragmatist who places great weight on the power of social movements (see Anderson 2014). Moreover, the brief description of the model quoted is a bit misleading, for what is essential is not simply that it provides an empirically informed “diagnosis” of the problem and seeks a “cure.” His criticism is aimed at those who offer targeted fixes that make the symptoms go away without addressing the deeper injustice that requires substantive normative theory to identify and address.

pose targeted interventions rather than broad structural changes; they avoid substantive normative inquiry; and they mostly rely on nudging individuals to act in ways that, as judged by experts, further the common good.<sup>4</sup> Examples of such nudges include using “the structure of welfare benefits to deter nonmarital child-bearing,” and “the promotion of marriage or stable unions and cohabitation between parents who share a child” (Shelby 2016: 121–122).

Shelby (2016: 2) offers several criticisms of the medical model, as it applies to ghetto poverty in particular:

- 1) *Status quo bias*: “[...] policymakers working within the medical model treat the background structure of society as given and focus only on alleviating the burdens of the disadvantaged.” To address the problems systematically, we must make broad structural changes.
- 2) *Downgraded agency*: “[...] the technocratic reasoning of the medical model marginalizes the political agency of those it aims to help.” The oppressed are “passive victims in need of assistance” and resistance is often interpreted as pathology. Instead, we should view the oppressed through a lens that properly recognizes forms of resistance and dissent that affirm self-worth and a commitment to justice (2016: ch. 9).
- 3) *Unjust-advantage blindspot*: “[...] focusing on the problems of the disadvantaged can divert attention from or obscure the numerous ways in which the advantaged unfairly benefit from an unjust social structure.” The advantaged claim credit for agency that is simply enabled by their circumstances. The relationality of oppression is obscured.

Paul Taylor (2017) mentions another concern in the background of Shelby’s discussion: On the medical model “the normative and political-theoretic dimensions of the problem too easily drop out, giving way to putatively dispositive appeals to the empirical.” This aptly calls attention to Shelby’s emphasis on the

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<sup>4</sup> Titus Stahl has pointed out that these various elements of what Shelby calls the “medical model” might be usefully separated. In particular, setting aside the issues concerning systematic versus targeted approaches and the avoidance of normativity, one might take the essential feature of the medical model to be an epistemic privileging of moral “experts,” i. e., the justice doctors. If an adequate approach should not invoke moral expertise, then plausibly all three of the views face this problem in some form. Stahl would suggest that, in contrast, the Frankfurt School Critical Theory tradition avoids this by pointing out the epistemic barriers to coordination on just terms and by empowering communities to rethink their own forms of coordination without such barriers (Stahl 2017; also Celikates 2018). As should become clear in my discussion below, I am skeptical of attempts to draw sharp lines between the epistemic and the moral.

importance of moral theory in the context of policy debates (see 2016: Introduction).

By what method does the medical model promote social justice? According to one interpretation, the project is to employ social choice theory to maximize (informed?) preference satisfaction. We assume that preferences are revealed through behavior (and we adjust for ignorance and irrationality?). We then find ways to incentivize people to form and pursue their preferences in actions that achieve and sustain some state of optimality.

The method just sketched can look very “empirical” and “value neutral”: The theorist takes personal preferences at face value without “imposing” their own values; identifies problems that prevent preferences from being satisfied; and proposes empirically tested interventions to produce better solutions, as determined by a more optimal distribution of preference satisfaction.

However, the method has serious drawbacks for social critique. First, the claim that we ought to maximize preference satisfaction is a controversial moral claim that is not “value neutral.” The normative assumptions are simply assumed rather than defended. Second, the approach is unable to cope with the problem of ideology or adaptive preferences. Maximizing revealed preference satisfaction is unlikely to achieve justice if individual action is rationally pursued within a choice architecture that unjustly limits one’s options. Moreover, choice is constrained by the symbolic resources that are available within a social milieu: What we choose is constrained by what we can conceive or find intelligible. Under conditions of ideology, the cultural frame for agency is distorted. Third, the conception of preference employed by the approach is a poor indicator of what people value and what is valuable. It does not distinguish wants, needs, and commitments; it assumes a monistic conception of value on which all that is valuable is comparable; and it assumes a stability – context independence – of preferences that does not recognize the extent and depth of our sociality. (This third concern is elaborated in, e.g., Anderson (2000); Anderson (2001); Ben-Ner/Putterman (1998); Banerjee/Duflo (2019: ch. 4).) I agree with Shelby’s criticisms of the medical model, so I will not offer further critique of it here. Are there other models?

## 4 Applied ideal theory

An alternative to the medical model is the applied ideal theory model. Rather than consider all forms of purportedly ideal theory, I will focus on one, but a familiar one, and argue that it is not well-suited to provide the normative basis for social critique. According to this model, we (philosophers) undertake a form of

relatively a priori theory to establish the principles of justice. In spite of controversy over the term ‘ideal theory,’ a common practice in political theory is to employ a relatively a priori method of *domain-specific reflective equilibrium*. Following Scanlon’s interpretation of Rawls, in the domain of normative inquiry, the goal is to provide a consistent theory that does justice to our considered moral judgments and intuitions concerning normative matters, specifically, judgments and intuitions that are empirically and metaphysically uncontroversial. Such a method can be used to generate normative principles about what we owe to each other, how we ought to organize society, and answers to a broad range of other questions; the task is to reflect on the judgments and intuitions from the perspective of a deliberating agent (Scanlon 2003: 148–149). In seeking social justice, an “ideal theory,” as I will use the term here, is one that relies on this method to generate the principles governing how we ought to live together in communities.<sup>5</sup>

To apply the resulting “ideal” theory, we consult with social scientists to give us the more controversial facts, and by applying our principles to the facts, we determine where and how our current circumstances fall short of the principles. This presupposes the priority thesis: To make a (warranted) judgment of injustice, one must apply a (warranted) principle of justice. We then rely on policy makers for suggestions about how to bring about change satisfying the principles, making sure that the content and methods for implementation do not violate the normative requirements. Thus, the method distributes labor between (relatively) a priori enquiry, empirical social science, and strategic policy initiatives. On this view, the focus on unjust conditions and *corrective justice* are what make the philosophical project one of nonideal theory.<sup>6</sup> In short, nonideal theory is a form of applied ideal theory.

For our purposes, there are two features to note about this method. First, the reflective equilibrium is domain-specific, i.e., it is concerned only with certain normative judgments and intuitions that “seem to us most clearly to be true about moral matters if anything is” (Scanlon 2003: 145), rather than all of our judgments, intuitions, and other attitudes. The result is not, therefore, what

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5 Stemplowska (2008) defends ideal theory against those who complain that either it implausibly assumes compliance, that it relies on false premises, that it does not yield “viable recommendations” that can be acted upon, or that it can never be realized. Note that I do not characterize the ideal/nonideal distinction in these terms, nor am I raising these concerns here. Not all mainstream theories of justice employ this method, e.g., the Capability Approach does not, neither is it an ideal theory, on my view.

6 This is in keeping with the Rawlsian idea that ideal theory assumes full compliance and non-ideal theory is theory that does not make this assumption.

would be required of rational agents *per se* (since rational agents should, presumably, take all considerations, all evidence, into account). Second, in order to have wide acceptance, the method must avoid starting with controversial judgments and intuitions; otherwise we could end up with a parochial theory that did not function as a tool for guidance in the face of moral disagreements.

Scanlon considers the criticism that this method of reflective equilibrium can yield only consistency in normative inquiry. Consistency may be necessary for an adequate theory, but it is hardly sufficient, as his example of a consistent but false astrology demonstrates:

Morality will be in an analogous situation [to astrology] if, but only if, it too has “external commitments” – that is, only if the reasonableness of taking moral judgments seriously depends on claims that go beyond morality itself and lie in, for example, physics, psychology, metaphysics, or the theory of rational choice.

Rawls holds that morality, or at least justice, has no controversial empirical or metaphysical presuppositions. (Scanlon 2003: 146)

In other words, astrology can get things (factually) wrong because it makes controversial empirical claims. Morality cannot get things (factually) wrong because its empirical and metaphysical presuppositions are so obvious and, presumably, hold across all relevant possibilities. This is one place where the distancing thesis plays a role: Because we are seeking principles that capture the nature of justice, we must be prepared to claim that they hold in all possible situations. To achieve this, we must abstract away from actual circumstances to focus on those commonalities that hold between the actual world and others very distant from us. This is why elaborate thought experiments are necessary.

Note that if we do not allow empirical facts specific to our world to impinge upon our moral theorizing, this leaves open the threat of relativism; different individuals (or social groups) will begin with their own judgments, intuitions, and “uncontroversial” assumptions and find their own reflective equilibrium (2003: 152–153). Scanlon suggests that we should accept relativism as a distant possibility, but because “we” are so far from achieving reflective equilibrium, the threat of relativism should not lead us to give up on objective morality (2003: 153). He recommends that those engaged in the different efforts to reach reflective equilibrium – efforts with different starting points – should continue until they get things straight before worrying about whether or not there are fundamental moral disagreements that would lead to relativism.

Moral theory cannot avoid all empirical claims, but on this approach, it cannot get things (factually) wrong because its empirical and metaphysical presuppositions are so obvious and, presumably, hold across all relevant possibilities (see Scanlon 2003: esp. 146). However, if our starting normative judgments



and intuitions are misguided, the method is unlikely to reveal it. It would seem, then, that the method builds in a normative status quo bias. If we do not have an uncontroversial description of the phenomenon in question, or do not have an agreed upon normative vocabulary for making judgments about it, then the method treats it as outside the scope of the project and offers no resources for addressing it. Outlier judgments are set aside. However, such redescriptions of the social domain and resulting outlier judgments are typically the source of social critique.

This suggests that applied ideal theory is not the best strategy for social critique. In the next section I will provide reasons for thinking that the priority and distancing theses both limit ideal theory in ways that are problematic. I will then consider whether the limits of ideal theory can be overcome once we draw on empirical methods to provide descriptions of the unjust circumstances we are trying to address. I will argue that, at least in some cases, social critique does not fit the model of applied ideal theory. Rather than relying on theoretically derived moral principles and empirical research, such critique disrupts both our modes of valuing and our understanding of the social world. Because values inform our interpretation of the facts, and the facts, in turn, shape the specification of the relevant values, the distinction between facts and values becomes, at best, blurred.

## 5 Limits of ideal theory for critique

I argued in the previous section that an ideal theory developed through a relatively a priori domain-specific reflective equilibrium is at risk of status quo bias. This is not to claim that it is never useful, or that we should avoid it. My claim is that the social critic needs to draw on other resources and strategies. In particular, the social critic should reject the priority claim. We do not need to *know what justice is* or have a complete moral theory to engage in social critique (thank goodness!) (Wolff 2018; Hampshire 2000: Preface). For example, injustice may not be a proper kind: Iris Young argues plausibly that there are five irreducible faces of oppression (Young 1990). And although we may need something like a moral theory – or modal knowledge of what sorts of things make something an injustice – to solve *all* of our problems, it is surely not the case that such knowledge is required in order to make moral progress or to remedy significant wrongs. After all, even ideal theory *begins with* moral commitments, e. g., that slavery is wrong, that rape is wrong, that we should not cause unnecessary suffering. We do not need *theory* to recognize these wrongs or to make

progress in preventing them. We can begin with knowledge of particular forms of injustice.

The distancing thesis is also dubious because some objective values are path-dependent, so reflection on possibilities epistemically accessible from where we are now may not be a good guide to how we should go on from here. Envisioning new ways of life not only needs imagination, but cultural and material change that may not be anticipated or imagined. Jack M. Balkin (1998) makes this point persuasively. What is valuable depends, *inter alia*, on what is available to value:

Values are not so much what humans 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, and refined. (Balkin 1998: 27–28)

To develop this idea, Balkin relies on examples of music:

Before culture there are no electric guitars, violins, or orchestras. There is no art of orchestration, no sonata-allegro form, no idea of jazz or the blues. There is only the human delight in producing and listening to interesting and beautiful sounds. Throughout human history people develop different ways of making and organizing sounds, which they test against their developing sense of beauty and interest. Their sense of the beautiful and the interesting in turn is developed through exposure to and use of the cultural tools available to them within their culture. (Balkin 1998: 28)

More generally, over time, the cultural articulation of value involves both a refinement of old values and a creation of new ones (Balkin 1998: 28). This line of thought also applies to moral value.

We concretize our indeterminate value of justice by creating human institutions and practices that attempt to enforce it and exemplify it [...]. Hence the institutions that people construct to exemplify justice may be different in different eras and different lands.

It follows [...] that human beings can also generate ever new examples of injustice and oppression through their cultural constructions. In different times and places, human beings find new ways to work evils on their fellow creatures, and to create monuments to brutality and repulsiveness. (Balkin 1998: 30–31)

Balkin here focuses on evolving forms of injustice, but it is easy to think of ways in which our moral landscape changes due to the effects of technology. Consider, e.g., assisted reproductive technology. Normative questions arise about parenthood, surrogacy, parental responsibility, human enhancement, eugenics, all with an overlay of concerns about gender, race, class, sexuality, and disability.

There is no doubt that the biotechnology revolution has disrupted, contested, and changed “family values” as well as what counts as a family and even what counts as human.

If value is path-dependent, a moral theory that makes recommendations based on currently uncontroversial judgments and intuitions misses the evaluative resources provided by the ongoing evolution and creolization of culture. Reflection on and from the values entrenched in the status quo is normatively unreliable. Critique is part of a process of further specifying, elaborating, and creating value and typically relies on resistance and disruption. It is inevitably controversial.

The path-dependency of value does not leave critique without normative resources, however. Social critique can, at the very least, rely on an inchoate and indeterminate sense of justice; and what more is our idea of reciprocity (see Kymlicka 2002: 2–4; Dworkin 1977: 179–183; Wolff 2018)? We rely on such indeterminate ideas about what is valuable when we collect our considered judgments and intuitive principles to begin moral theorizing. But rather than rely on reflection to further specify our intuitions, social critique actively seeks input from experience (especially the conflicting experiences of different participants in the domain in question), from science broadly construed, the arts, the humanities, and the articulation of indeterminate values in other contexts. In short, rather than rely on domain-specific (relatively *a priori*) reflective equilibrium, social critique begins with concerns about the concrete manifestation of values in our social context to demand better alternatives to the current practices.

Suppose we are considering the division of labor in the family. The question is not how a particular family should divide labor. Rather, it is a question about social norms, the formation of gender identity, and the socialization of individuals through particular practices of intimacy, sexuality, parenting, and economic cooperation. Where do we begin? Do our considered judgments and intuitive principles yield a determinate specification of what form of family we should promote, e. g., that we should form nuclear families? Do they tell us that families should include one man and one woman and their biological offspring? (This is not, after all, a universal family form.) How should we organize intimacy, childcare, the transmission of culture, economic dependence? Should we uphold a gender binary? Historically, philosophers have taken existing gender roles and family structures for granted, and this has been reflected in their considered judgments and intuitions.

Many feminist critics reject the existing gendered division of labor and the processes by which individuals are shaped to fit its requirements. But what are the uncontroversial empirical and metaphysical claims the feminist is entitled to rely on in developing the critique? For example, can we assume that

men and women have the same capacities for nurturing young children? This is not only a radical claim in the context of the history of the family, but it remains controversial in many contemporary contexts. Insofar as it is a controversial empirical claim, it cannot play a role in the normative reflective equilibrium that yields our ideal theory. (And neither can its denial, which is also controversial.) So what norms and values does ideal theory offer us for understanding gender relations in the family? Uncontroversial but vague notions such as reciprocity and equal respect do not give the social critic adequate normative resources to challenge the status quo.<sup>7</sup> But such challenges are the task of social critique.

Possibly, ideal theory helps us address some questions about the family, e.g., perhaps it can tell us that individuals rather than families ought to be the unit of political and economic agency. But how culture grows, evolves, and creates new forms of human life is not something that can be decided simply by reflection on our current considered judgments and uncontroversial empirical and metaphysical beliefs. Our embeddedness in culture has deeply shaped us; the necessities of and possibilities for reshaping are conditioned not just by our “bare” humanity but also by who we are as the products of culture. Somehow, we must find a space of critique where we accept our inevitable social embeddedness while also gaining a critical perspective on the particular instance of it at hand. Relatively a priori moral theory tends to either ignore our embeddedness and assume we are just solving a problem for rational agents or embrace our embeddedness uncritically and simply aim to avoid inconsistency in what culture has taught us. Neither of these are adequate.

## 6 Critically applying ideal theory

One might argue, however, that in considering applied ideal theory, I have neglected the role of social science to illuminate the relevant phenomena and the potential for intervention. After all, we are considering *applied* ideal theory, so we must have good grasp of the conditions we are addressing. Current racial injustice in the United States is shaped by the history of slavery, and Jim Crow and the possibilities for moral intervention are constrained by such empirical facts. This can be accommodated within applied ideal theory: We must be informed by social science as we bring the principles of justice to bear on actual

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<sup>7</sup> This can be seen as a version of Wolff’s (2019: 15) point that moral theory under-determines how we should go on.

circumstances. Once we come to know the relevant facts, an application of the principles may yield surprising and controversial conclusions.

For example, much progress toward social justice has been achieved by holding societies accountable for violations of their own explicit principles. It is hard to understand how a government conceived of as “of the people, by the people, for the people” could deny voting rights to so many for so long. It is hard to understand how so many could suffer violations of fundamental human rights seemingly guaranteed by founding documents. Drawing attention to such failures by bringing principles to bear can, of course, be a radical act of critique.

However, there is an important difference between “applying a principle” and, as Balkin puts it, “concretizing our indeterminate sense of justice.” (Balkin 1998: 30–31) The critic is embedded in a social context that violates her sense of justice, and she challenges the principles – or the interpretation of the principles – that purport to justify it. Iris Young (1990) calls the starting point a “desiring negation”:

Desire [...] creates the distance, the negation, that opens the space for criticism of what is. This critical distance does not occur on the basis of some previously discovered rational ideas of the good and the just. On the contrary, the ideas of the good and the just arise from the desiring negation that action brings to what is given.

[...] Each social reality presents its own unrealized possibilities, experienced as lacks and desires. Norms and ideals arise from the yearning that is an expression of freedom: it does not have to be this way; it could be otherwise. (Young 1990: 6)

Critique is not (or not always) an exercise applying moral principles. Even if we are able to articulate a principle, it will require interpretation and reinterpretation over time, often prompted by circumstances that were never imagined. We find a principle’s unclarity and weakness as we attempt to apply it to controversial, complex, or unforeseen cases. Enduring principles are ones that are suggestive without being precise, for they allow for an evolution of meaning in response to the evolution of our circumstances and our values. So either we establish principles that are precise enough to guide action, and they will be continually overthrown; or we make do with vague articulations of our sense of justice and we reformulate them in response to our confrontation with social reality.

The “desiring negation” of resistance is only a beginning, of course. Emancipatory, or critical, social science may be needed to develop an account of social reality that explains and justifies the resistance. More specifically, a successful critical theory provides the epistemic tools to challenge ideology. One key move is to offer an alternative description or explanation of a phenomenon

that reveals morally relevant aspects that ideology masks.<sup>8</sup> The hope is that once these aspects are revealed, or diagnosed, the phenomenon can no longer be viewed as innocent. For example, once one sees industrial agriculture up close, e. g., the animal and human suffering it causes, the wasted natural resources, the damage to public health, one cannot reasonably regard it as a morally innocent or benign economic system (Crary 2016). Social explanation, and with it, social ontology, is central to this effort. Of course, as Erik Olin Wright points out:

It is not enough to show that people suffer in the world in which we live or that there are enormous inequalities in the extent to which people live flourishing lives. A scientific emancipatory theory must show that the explanation for this suffering and inequality lies in specific properties of institutions and social structures. The first task of emancipatory social science, therefore, is the diagnosis and critique of the causal processes that generate these harms. (Wright 2010: 11)

What counts as morally significant is not given in advance by an ideal theory but emerges through reworking or developing new tools for inquiry; better understanding of our social, material, and cultural milieu; the exercise of our affective and perceptual capacities; and deliberation with others. This is a process of developing an “oppositional consciousness” (Mansbridge/Morris 2001). Rather than rely on theories developed a priori, we aim to “concretize our indeterminate value of justice” in new ways, i. e., not just to “apply” our worked-out principles, but to explore other terms for living together. The work is done by those engaged in a social movement. As mentioned before: it is collective, practice-directed, and embedded. This, more than the applied moral theory model, grants political and moral agency to those directly affected by including them as full participants in normative inquiry.

## 7 Conclusion: Critical social theory

I have argued that the project of social critique is not best undertaken either on the medical model or the applied ideal theory model. I have also suggested that

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<sup>8</sup> For decades, feminist theorists (and others) have argued that value-laden inquiry is not only inevitable, but more insightful and objective than purportedly value-free inquiry (Anderson 1995). What questions we ask, what methods we choose, and what terms we employ in describing phenomena depend on the goals and purposes of inquiry. Especially in the context of critique, values play a crucial role in the empirical work of identifying, describing, and diagnosing the phenomena that call for intervention (Anderson 1995; 2002; 2004).

critical social theory is a value-laden empirical inquiry that is a crucial part of social critique. How, then, should we proceed in the project of social critique? It is not my aim to provide a *method* of nonmoral moral/political theorizing. My goal, instead, is to highlight the epistemic importance of critical social ontology in undertaking critique.

Very briefly, as social critics, we begin with a “desiring negation” – a phenomenon that we experience or judge to be harmful, unfair, or wrong. This, rather than a theory of justice, is our starting point. The tools that we have to understand the problem are inadequate, so we engage in a process of theorizing to diagnose the problem in ways that reveal its systematic shape, while also preserving the moral and epistemic standing and agency of those affected. The theory should meet a variety of ordinary epistemic norms, e.g., consistency, empirical adequacy, etc. Some experiences of resistance are unwarranted or based on false presuppositions; we can conclude that these do not form a warranted basis for social change.

An adequate theory should also reveal normatively significant facts that give us the resources for critique. As mentioned before: it is collective, practice-directed, and embedded. Rather than rely on theories developed a priori in philosophy seminar rooms, we attend to our current situation and “concretize our indeterminate value of justice” in new ways, responsive to our social and historical circumstances. This, more than applied ideal theory, grants political and moral agency to those directly affected by including them as full participants in normative inquiry.

Note, however, that being able to develop a warranted critique of a practice or a structure does not give one an answer to how we should go on. There will usually be many ways to improve our current practices. We often do not have the information needed to predict outcomes of substantial changes. And rarely can all *pro tanto* political complaints be adequately addressed; solutions to collective action problems distribute, but do not eliminate, benefits and burdens. Danielle Allen reminds us:

[...] the phrase “the common good” generally ignores the differential distribution of losses and benefits throughout a citizenry that result from collective action, and manages the problem of loss in politics (or, the defeat of a citizen’s interests in the public sphere) simply by asking citizens to bear up in moments of disappointment. (Allen 2001: 858)

Trust that the distribution of burdens and benefits will balance over time is essential for democracy. Such trust is eroding, leaving us with critique but little basis for hope. Yet ...

[...] hope is not like a lottery ticket you can sit on the sofa and clutch, feeling lucky. I say it because hope is an ax you break down doors with in an emergency; because hope should shove you out the door, because it will take everything you have to steer the future away from endless war, from the annihilation of the earth's treasures and the grinding down of the poor and marginal. Hope just means another world might be possible, not promised, not guaranteed. Hope calls for action. [...] To hope is to give yourself to the future, and that commitment to the future makes the present inhabitable. (Solnit 2016: 4)

Because critique is not based on an ideal moral theory, but on an awareness of and commitment to the world's unrealized possibilities, we can have hope, and must go on.

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