

The Epistemology of Consciousness Raising

1. Recap and Introduction

I have argued for a practice-based account of ideology. Social practices and social structures depend on a collection of social meanings that provide a “stage-setting” for action and are a constituent part of the local social-regulation system. These *cultural technēs* enable us to coordinate by providing the paths and signals for our practices. An ideology is a cultural technē “gone wrong.” It prevents us from recognizing or creating forms of value, and/or, organizes us in unjust ways.

Throughout this work I have relied on the idea that some cultural technēs are ideological because they guide practices that are morally problematic. My task today is to say more about the basis for such normative evaluation.

To motivate the problem, it is important to distinguish repression from discipline or what Althusser would call “interpellation.” Ideological oppression is importantly different from repression because individuals take up problematic norms as binding on themselves, so they don’t need to be coercively managed. Ideology works by recruiting both the dominant *and* the subordinate to enact unjust practices; it does so by masking and distorting features of the world that matter. Subjects enact oppressive structures “all by themselves”!

So, under conditions of ideology there is, by hypothesis, a range of unjust social practices that oppress a group; however, not everyone experiences the oppression as such. As a result, in social movements that seek to undermine oppression, there is a risk that those engaged in the critique are illegitimately imposing their values on others. So how should we proceed?

If we know what is just and unjust, 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.

Note, however, that critique arises from *within* a cultural technē that is, by hypothesis, ideological. Recognizing this, Robin Celikates (2016) points to several challenges an account of ideology critique must address. Here are two:

i) Normative challenge: what makes an ideology problematic? Are there objective moral truths by reference to which we can judge a social arrangement defective or unjust? If not, then on what basis do we undertake critique?

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. But then the question is “which insights of which agents – given that they usually do not constitute a homogeneous category – the critical theorist articulates.” (4)

I will argue that one way of achieving a critical standpoint is through consciousness raising. Consciousness raising offers a paradigm shift in our understanding of the social world; but not all epistemic practices that appear to “raise” consciousness, are warranted. However, under certain conditions, consciousness raising produces a warranted critical standpoint and a *pro tanto* claim against others.

2. Situating Social Critique

- What counts as ideology is a matter of the injustice of its effects and the (bad) values it promotes/embodies. I assume that there are truths about what is just, good, and valuable. The claim that there are *some* moral truths cannot be avoided by those engaged in justified political resistance.
- The site of ideology critique is *the social domain*. The primary issues concern what practices we should engage in, what social norms we should embrace, how we should go on, from here, together. The potential target may be a small group (a family or a department), or a large population such as a nation. Our inquiry is *practice-directed and embedded*.
- An individual can be treated unjustly *qua* individual. But within the social domain individuals are vulnerable to perpetrating or suffering injustice *by virtue of their social positions*. The aim is to improve our social practices and social structures to eliminate this positional vulnerability.

- As social critics, we should distinguish the *justification problem* from the *illumination problem* (how do we get others to recognize their oppression and join our movement?) In critical theory they are often joined because critical theory should be emancipatory. But they need not be.
- We should also distinguish the *justification problem* from the *political problem*. The justification problem concerns whether we have a justified complaint against the current social order, i.e., that some practice or set of practices is harmful or unjust. The political problem is what we, collectively, should do about it. Rarely can all *pro tanto* political complaints be adequately addressed; majority rule is not a definitive solution. Also, power matters.

...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)

- There are many ways to organize social life, so the goal is not to ask what is the *best* way to do this; the project is *anti-utopian*, but does require imagination. The goal is to identify how our way is inadequate so we can do better. In our societies, injustice is already rampant. Rectification is a priority.
- We do not need to *know what justice is* or have a complete moral theory to engage in social critique. We can begin with knowledge of (an) injustice. (Injustice may not be a proper kind. And modal knowledge of what makes something an injustice is not essential to remedy instances of it.)
- Objective values need not be ahistorical or acontextual. They may be path-dependent. What's valuable depends, *inter alia*, on what is available to value. Jack Balkin (1998, 27-28) makes this point:

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.

3. *Oppositional Consciousness: Case Study - Combahee River Collective* ("A Black Feminist Statement" 1977)

In 1974 a group of Black women started meeting in response to their experiences both in everyday life and in the Civil Rights Movement (CRM) and the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM). Their frustration had roots in their situation: "the political realization that comes from the seemingly personal experiences of individual Black women's lives," and also the failures of both the CRM and the WLM to give them the tools to develop an adequate response: "there was no way of conceptualizing what was so apparent to us, what we *knew* was really happening." (33) Through a process of consciousness raising, they explored the experiential, cultural, and political dimensions of their experience, and developed new terms and concepts:

We discovered that all of us, because we were "smart," had also been considered "ugly," i.e., "smart-ugly." "Smart-ugly" crystallized the way in which most of us had been forced to develop our intellects at great cost to our "social" lives." (34)

Through CR, they reached the "shared belief that Black Women are inherently valuable, that our liberation is a necessity not as an adjunct to somebody else's but because of our need as human persons for autonomy..." (33) and "to be recognized as human, levelly human, is enough." (34)

The group that persisted through 1977 decided that CR was not enough. They developed a study group, and decided to promote their cause through writing, publishing, lecturing, and other activist organizing. They conclude,

We believe in collective process and a non-hierarchical distribution of power within our own group and in our vision of a revolutionary society. We are committed to a continual examination of our politics as they develop through criticism and self-criticism as an essential aspect of our practice. (37)

Jane Mansbridge uses the term ‘oppositional consciousness’ to capture a particular kind of response to oppression. She suggests that oppositional consciousness *in liberation movements* (cf. social responsibility movements) requires:

...a gut refusal to be subordinated rooted somewhere in every human being...To form an effective basis for collective action, gut refusals need cognitive and emotional organizing. They need an injustice frame...They need an apparatus involving both reason and emotion... (2001, 4)

Iris Young calls this a “desiring negation” (See 1990, 6-7)

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.

Drawing on empirical case studies, Mansbridge, et al (2001, 5) argue that certain tools are valuable in moving from a gut refusal to an “injustice frame.”

...An existing *oppositional culture* provides ideas, rituals, and long-standing patterns of interaction that overt political struggle can refine and develop to create a more mature oppositional consciousness... a history of *segregation* with some autonomy, providing “free spaces” for the elaboration and testing of ideas; *borrowing* from previous successful movements; the *synthesis* of more than one oppositional strand, creating more than the sum of its parts; mutually supportive *interaction*, bridging divides in emotional commitments; and *consensus creativity* by activists, drawing on the traditions and practices of everyday life. (2001, 7-8; italics mine)

Oppositional consciousness becomes a movement when the group “demand(s) changes in the polity, economy or society to rectify those injustices.” (1)

4. Oppositional Political Epistemology (aka the epistemology of CR)

Under conditions of ideology, a primary task is to articulate a *justified* moral claim *in the name of the subordinate group*. The claim is made against those with whom one coordinates – in a family, a workplace, a nation – and makes a demand that the terms of coordination be changed. I assume that one need not be a member of the subordinate group in order to demand justice with them (Pohlhaus 2002). But in a liberation movement, the process of articulating a claim begins with those directly affected.

It is plausible that oppositional consciousness arises and can be justified in a variety of ways. The process I am exploring begins with a reaction, moves to a complaint, and results in a *pro tanto* moral claim. I draw here on Anderson’s pragmatist moral epistemology (2018), but I will focus on practice. (Numbering is for reference only – the steps may not occur in this order.)

- 1) One has a moral “gut refusal” to one’s circumstances. Whining is an indication of displeasure, but does not rise to the level of a legitimate complaint against others. How do we transform whining into a complaint?
- 2) *Test* the reaction against the experience of others: Articulate the concern to others within the same (affected) social group. Consider: Is the problem individual or social? Is it a *positional vulnerability*? The process of inquiry and justification is collective. Create counter-publics where the subordinated can complain to each other without being “corrected” by the dominant group.
- 3) This process involves shifting *orientations* to notice facts that have been occluded – empirical facts, morally relevant facts, facts about possibilities. Shifts in orientations can be prompted by the idiosyncratic conceptions of individuals, by existing oppositional cultures (#MeToo, CRM, WLM), or by the alternative orientations gained by participation in different practices.
- 4) Individuals within the group can sometimes rely on existing identities, but in other cases new “identities” are called for (Mansbridge, 9). The shared identities (Black feminist, queer) allow for a cultivation of trust, new language, shared interests, etc. Patterns can then become more visible, new hermeneutic resources developed (“smart-ugly,” “misogyny”).

- 5) The “testing” process – at this stage and later stages – should involve forms of *bias reduction* and *consideration of epistemic injustice* of all sorts. There is compelling empirical evidence that: “Standing in a position of superior power over others tends to bias the moral sentiments of the powerful, in at least three ways: it reduces their compassion, activates their arrogance, and leads them to objectify subordinates.” (Anderson 2018, 7)
- 6) *Develop a hypothesis* about the source of the problem. Who/What is responsible for the problem? Is the coordination system faulty or are there other problems, e.g., bad actors? (See also Mansbridge 2001, 5)
- 7) *Test the hypothesis*. Is it empirically adequate? Is the hypothesis the best explanation of the phenomenon? (Cf. Neo-Nazis, Anti-Vaxers) Draw on resources in critical social science. Revise the hypothesis, as needed. [I assume a feminist epistemology that is compatible with value-laden inquiry.]
- 8) Articulate *a claim* challenging the practice, e.g., this (part of the) practice is unjust, oppressive, harmful, or wrongful. If the steps have been taken responsibly, this claim should be justified, *even if not everyone accepts it*.
Political stage (no guarantees!)
- 9) Suggest proposals for corrective procedures and practices. (Where possible, corrective practices should be tested in counter-publics.)
- 10) If deliberation concerning the claims and proposals is unsuccessful, resort to non-deliberative interventions, “from petitioning, publicity campaigns, theatrical performances, candlelight vigils, litigation, and political campaigns to street demonstrations, boycotts, teach-ins, sit-ins, picketing, strikes, and building occupations.” (Anderson 2014, 9)
- 11) Even if a proposal is met with agreement in the public sphere, we must ask: “[i] Does acting on the new judgments solve the problem as originally diagnosed? ... [ii] Does it do so with acceptable side effects? An affirmative answer to both questions amounts to a successful test of the new judgment in an experiment in living.” (Anderson 2018, 5-6)
- 12) Repeat as needed.

On this view, an oppositional consciousness is warranted insofar as it moves from a “gut refusal” to a moral claim through a collective examination of shared experience, guided by sound epistemic norms. What norms are “sound” is determined by best practices in social science, critical epistemology, and the lived experience of those in the subordinate group. The process yields a paradigm shift; it changes the cognitive and affective framing of the social world and reveals moral truths that were occluded. The resulting claim is made on behalf of a social group and warranted through their collective efforts.

An oppositional moral claim is not, simply by virtue of being the result of such a process, dispositive. Rather, it is a move in a process of contentious politics that deserves consideration in collective deliberation. The critic makes a moral demand, and the social change based on it is, *pro tanto*, justified.

5. Conclusion: The Normative Basis for Contentious Politics

So how do we gain normative standing to critique culture? Recall that under conditions of ideology there is, by hypothesis, a range of social practices that oppress a group; however, some do not experience them as oppressive. Critique sometimes targets practices that constitute value for the practitioners.

I’ve argued, however, that an important form of social critique begins amongst those affected 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 goods internal to the practice, it is harming *them* in ways that are morally problematic. They reject the ideology that makes the injustice appear harmless and articulate a moral claim against those who maintain the practice.

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. Social practices are cooperative enterprises, and if parties to the cooperation have reason to think that they are being treated unjustly, or their values being undermined, there is a *pro tanto* reason for all parties involved to reconsider the practice. Insisting on terms of cooperation in the face of the non-consent of the opposition is coercive and is a *pro tanto* wrong. This is the normative basis for contentious politics.