Introduction

Criticism seems to presuppose some standard or yardstick of critique. An argument is found deficient in relation to some standard of good argumentation. For example, the principle of non-contradiction is a yardstick for a good argument. An action is found morally deficient in relation to some normative principle. Thus, the normative principle is a yardstick for moral action. What about social critique? Conditions in society – certain practices or institutions – are found deficient in relation to some standard for a good or just society. Thus, a certain conception of a good society or principle of justice is a yardstick for societal practices and institutions.

In the following I will draw attention to some varieties of normative social critique: an external, an internal or immanent, and a disclosing form of critique. I will follow the lead of an instructive article by the Finnish philosopher Antti Kauppinen (2002: 480–485). Furthermore, I will relate to and discuss some of the contributions in the volume *Was ist Kritik?* (2009). A few other texts will also be consulted and discussed.

Normative scepticism

Before entering the field of different forms of normative social criticism I will mention the alternative of normative scepticism, i.e. giving up the very idea of a normative social criticism. Perhaps Michel Foucault's genealogical critique can be said to be of this kind. As to its effects, his approach is, for example in *Discipline and Punish*, no doubt critical, but he doesn't seem to appeal to or rely upon any normative standard of critique. Foucault's strategy is rather to investigate how a certain historical development has given rise to specific power constellations. To uncover existing forms of power is as such a form of social

criticism, not in the sense that a society free from power is the goal, but rather in the sense that power should not hide itself for example under the banner of knowledge or truth. Genealogical critique writes the history of something in a way that triggers a shift of perspective, make us see something familiar in a new light, makes us see power and oppression where we didn't see it before (cf. Saar 2009). By its mode of presentation, including rhetorical exaggarations, the genealogical critique destabilizes convictions and self-images. This kind of critique is always reactive in the form of being a counter-attack on what is the case, pointing out the possibility of being something different from what we have become. Thus, writing the history of something in a certain way has the effect of being an invitation to change. A critical question to the genealogical form of critique is if it in fact operates with some kind of hidden standard or yardstick of critique. If this is the case, a critique of the genealogical critique is to uncover the hidden standard of critique.

A version of normative scepticism is in my view Luc Boltanski's sociology of critique (cf. Boltanski & Thévenot 2006). Here the sociologist retreats from the ambition of being critical and, instead, lends his ear and voice to the criticism that goes on all the time among ordinary people. Instead of being critical the social scientist let you and me do the job. This position starts out from the premise that ordinary people are not only fully capable of but also continually engaged in the critique of opinions, actions, practices and institutions, and in the justification of their own opinions and actions. Furthermore, in their critique they appeal to different standards of critique. In fact, they have access to a broad repertoire of standards of critique and justification which they put to use in different situations. The bold claim goes: "we have been able to observe the operation of six *higher common principles* to which, in France today, people resort most often in order to finalize an agreement or pursue a contention" (Boltanski & Thévenot 2006: 71). However, in an interview from July 2008 Boltanski reports that one of his friends, a French ethnologist, is of the opinion and has told him that the sociology of critique, as developed in the book *On Justification*, only works inside the freeway surrounding Paris (cf. Boltanski & Honneth 2009: 108).

1. External critique

In the case of external critique the one who delivers the critique appeals to or relies upon a standard of critique that the adressee of critique possibly does not accept or, at least, does not yet accept. Here Kauppinen makes a distinction between an ethnocentric and a universalist external critique.

a) Ethnocentric external critique

In this case someone is criticising someone/something else in terms of his/her own standard of critique. This standard is the one that the critic factually accepts: it happens to be there. What is factually accepted is determined by the society or culture the critic partakes and lives in: ”Here we dress in this way, and *not* in that way!” This kind of critique often becomes simply a statement of difference: I think that this is wrong (and therefore I’m critical), but you don’t. It is hard to see why someone who is not part of the same society or culture should be very impressed by such a critique. The reaction ”So what?” is probably never far away. But it is of course always possible to try to support the critique by arguments that eventually might convince the adressee. We are then on the move towards the next form of external critique.

b) Universalist external critique

In this case the critic appeals to a standard of critique that he/she takes to be valid for everyone – across time and place. This amounts to placing oneself in a ”view from nowhere”-position, a place not located at any particular place. Furthermore, the critic is convinced that good or even compelling arguments can be mobilized for such a universalist position. Here, so it seems, it all hangs on how good the good arguments are. Do they have the strength to convince others? However, what counts as a good and convincing argument may vary from one culture to another, and the adressee of critique might very well not be very impressed by my good arguments. Axel Honneth has called this ”the danger of merely supposed universalism” (Honneth 2002: 514). Furthermore, a weak spot for universalist forms of

external criticism is the motivation of the adressee. What is perhaps intellectually convincing is often situated at a rather high level of abstraction. How can one reach down to the sources of motivation which set people in motion? How can one bridge the gap between ”I know” and ”I will”?

The sociologist Hartmut Rosa (cf. 2009: 31–38) has suggested as a transcultural yardstick of critique the experience of resonance in our relations to the world, including an objective world (things), a social world (other human beings), and a subjective world (our own body, feelings and needs). Resonance is when the world, so to speak, responds to us and is experienced as a place where we feel at home and assured. The opposite is the case where the world is experienced as indifferent or even hostile to us, i.e. when we experience forms of alienation in our relation to the world. Rosa’s approach is thus very different from the kind of universalist positions which appeal to some kind of principle of justice. Rather than to a convincing argumentation, Rosa appeals to an immediate experience or feeling. The task that Rosa confronts is to make plausible the idea that the experience of resonance is a universal human need, the lack of which indicates that something is wrong in our relation to the world.

An approach using certain basic human needs as a yardstick for critique is in a similar position. No one has to be convinced by good arguments that the need for food and shelter is a basic (universal) human need; it is rather an immediate experience. However, at some level of refinement human needs, so it seems, have to be supported with convincing arguments in order to be accepted as basic human needs. The more refined, the more controversial: ”Is this really a basic human need?” And the same goes for basic human capabilities-approaches.

2. Internal or immanent critique

Internal or immanent critique is ”the kind of normative criticism that appeals to the commitments of the adressee of the criticism rather than those of the critic” (Kauppinen 2002: 482). By appealing to the adressee’s own standard the ”So what?”-reaction is disarmed. You cannot be indifferent to a standard that you accept as valid. And it would also be rather strange if a standard that you accept didn’t have any motivating force for you. Here Kauppinen distinguishes between, what he calls, simple and reconstructive internal critique (with further subdivisions).

a) Simple internal critique

In the case of simple internal critique actual practices are measured against an explicit standard of critique and found wanting. The practices deviate from the standard: saying one thing, doing something else. This kind of critique can take at least two different forms.

aa) When the adressee knows that he/she fails to meet the standard we have an exposing simple internal critique: ”You hypocrite!” In this case the adressee also knows that the critique is well deserved. For example, in *An American Dilemma* the Swedish social scientist Gunnar Myrdal (1975) criticized white Americans for not being true to their own basic values (the so called American Creed). They could avoid outright hypocrisy only by way of adhering to certain rationalizations about race characteristics.

bb) An enlightening simple internal critique, on the other hand, is asked for when the adressee does not know that he/she fails to meet the standard. Here the critique is at the same time a piece of information and a moral education paving the way for a change of behaviour on the part of the adressee. There are good reasons to believe that such a critique will have a rather strong motivational force: ”Yes, I will try to do better!”

In both cases the adressee is well aware of what the standard of critique is, but either tries to get away with not living up to it (exposing) or is not fully aware that he/she doesn't live up to it (enlightening). A potential problem with this kind of critique is that a certain society or culture or sub-culture might have standards of critique that are not very attractive to most people. Thus, those who find the critique relevant might be rather small in number.

b) Reconstructive internal critique

In the case of reconstructive internal critique an appeal is made to some immanent standard that is not explictely stated. Thus, this is "critique based on making implicit standards explicit" (Kauppinen 2002: 484). Given that certain norms and values are immanent in the practices and institutions of a particular society or culture, this kind of critique strives to lay bare the norms and values that the adressees of critique in fact accept, although they might not be quite clear about it. Here too we find to begin with two different forms.

aa) A *weak* reconstructive internal critique appeals or relies upon a standard that *happens* to be there in this society or in this culture. For example, in modern societies a certain notion of freedom as autonomy (individual self-determination) has become an ideal considered worth strivning for and a generally accepted yardstick of critique. Whatever intrudes on my personal autonomy, or that of someone else, in an unjustified way deserves to be criticized for that. However, just as in the case of external critique, there is a universalist version of this kind of critique.

bb) In the case of a *strong* reconstructive internal critique an appeal is made to a standard that *has* to be there, because it is implied in, let's say, all human practices. Thus, the critique appeals to a universal implicit standard of critique. According to Kauppinen both Habermas' theory of communicative action and Honneth's theory of recognition is of this kind. And when Myrdal writes that the American Creed expresses not only American but "humane ideals",

and that it is ”older and wider than America itself” (Myrdal 1975: 25), he is moving in the direction of a universalist position and a strong reconstructive internal critique.

Also the transcultural approach sketched by Rosa could be interpreted as a strong reconstructive internal critique, insofar as it suggests as a standrad of critique something that has to be there because it is a basic (universal) human need, the need for resonance in our relation to the world. Social conditions that systematically produce experiences of alienation instead of resonance deserve therefore to be criticized.

A third form of internal critique is outlined by Rahel Jaeggi. She too distinguishes between two different forms of internal or immanent critique (cf. Jaeggi 2009: 285–290).

a) First, we have a critique that uses as its standard the ideals and norms that are part of the self-understanding of a specific community or society, but which are not fully realized in the practices of major or significant parts of the members of the very same community or society. Either the ideals and norms have not yet been realized or the members have become untrue to their own ideals. This is what, following Kauppinen, was called a weak reconstructive internal critique. There is a contradiction or at least a tension between ideal and reality, between the standard of critique and certain practices or institutions. The latter are found wanting and deserve to be criticized. This kind of critique, so it seems, remains tied to a certain standard of critique. If the ideal and reality don’t correspond, it is reality that must give way and change. Why not the ideal? Why rule out the possibility that the ideal has become obsolete and irrelevant?

b) The second form of immanent critique, whose contours Jaeggi sketches, take the latter point in consideration. This is a more ambitious form of immanent critique that takes its point

of departure from *justified norms*, and which Jaeegi summarizes in five characteristics: 1) Its starting point is norms that are inherent in an existing social situation and which are constitutive of specific social practices and their institutional setting. 2) It does not argue that a certain community is or has become untrue to its own ideals. 3) It argues that the norms cannot be realized in a non-contradictory way or that they in their realization by necessity turn against their own original intention. 4) Its intention is transformative. And, 5) it intends to transform both the deficient reality and the norms or standard of critique.

The last point echoes Hegel's radical programme in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*: "the criterion for testing is altered when that for which it was to have been the criterion fails to pass the test; and the testing is not only a testing of what we know, but also a testing of the criterion of what knowing is" (Hegel 1977: 54–55). It is not quite clear what kind of justification Jaeggi has in mind when she speaks of "justified norms" (Jaeggi 2009: 286). If the norms by necessity cannot be realized in a non-contradictory way, in what sense can they be said to have been previously justified? She cannot possibly mean justified in a universalist sense, but only in a particular setting (after the model of Hegel's *Gestalten des Bewußtseins*). Anyhow, the standard of critique and the object of critique are both continually modified in an ongoing process of transformation. Furthermore, this process of transformation is to be seen as a developmental or learning process, i.e. as a change into something better (in a rather vague sense). Jaeggi calls it a "negativistic" (ibid.) version of immanent critique. This is something different from the strong reconstructive internal critique outlined above. Thus we have three varieties of immanent or internal critique:

1) Weak reconstructive internal critique: appeals to or reliant upon a standard that happens to be there in a certain culture or society.

2) Negativistic reconstructive internal critique: both the standard of critique and the criticized reality (practices and institutions) are continually modified in an ongoing process of tranformation.

3) Strong (universalistic) reconstructive internal critique: appeals to or reliant upon a standard that has to be there in all cultures and societies – across time and place.

As mentioned before, Honneth's theory of recognition is, according to Kauppinen, an example of a strong reconstructive internal critique. This might very well be true for Honneth's position up to, let's say, around 2000 (see his rejoinder to Kauppinen in Honneth 2002: 513–518). However, I think that since then Honneth has backed down from this position, and that the critical exchange with Nancy Fraser was crucial for his change of position (cf. Fraser & Honneth 2003). I would describe his present position as a version of a weak reconstructive internal critique. This is due to what he himself calls a "social theoretical turn" (Boltanski & Honneth 2009: 97), and which involves a shift of focus from the experiences of disrespect and expectations of recognition among ordinary people to the idea of an institutionalized societal recognition order. Now it is the latter that decides which expectations of recognition are justified and which are unjustified. Thus, the existing institutionalized recognition order of a certain society functions as standard of critique, instead of an anthropology or a moral psychology of recognition. However, societal recognition orders are historical constructs, rather than timeless (universalistic) ideals. Social change in a fundamental sense involves a change in the institutionalized recognition order of the society in question.

This position is further developed by Honneth in his latest book, *Das Recht der Freiheit* (2011), there he lays down that the reproduction of societies presupposes the existence of values and ideals that are held in common and that provide an orientation which is shared among the members of society. The normative societal order is legitimized through ethical values and ideals that are considered worth striving for. Furthermore, of all the ethical values, the one which has primacy and which has marked the self-understanding and institutional order of modern societies is that of freedom in the sense of individual autonomy (cf. Honneth 2011: 35–43) Our notion of social justice is bound up with the idea of freedom as individual self-determination. This is the ultimate value that is considered worth striving for. A societal order is seen as just only insofar as it allows for individual self-determination. Thus, individual autonomy is the yardstick for a legitimate, in the sense of a just, social order. Honneth also argues that only the ethical values and ideals that are necessary for the reproduction of a given society can be taken as moral points of reference for a theory of justice. Of crucial importance is that these values and ideals are realized or embodied in

existing societal institutions and practices. The institutions and practices that realize the ultimate values held in common by the members of society are, in each case, those that are just. Thus, the theory of justice that Honneth outlines is not anchored in any timeless ideal or universal standard of critique, but in a specific cultural value tradition that has become to a high degree, although not fully, institutionalized in modern societies.

3. Disclosing critique

In addition to external and internal (or immanent) forms of critique there is a disclosing form of critique, whose aim it is to open up our eyes to new ways of seeing social reality, and in the light of which society and our way of life can be seen as deficient or pathological. In this case the critique operates without any specified standard of critique. Honneth describes this kind of criticism in the following way: ”the normative validity claim is redeemed only indirectly, so that our view of social reality is so changed by the radically new description that our value beliefs cannot remain unaffected either” (Honneth 2000: 123). The new way of seeing things has the effect of bringing about a change in our valuations. Peculiar to the disclosing form of critique is, according to Honneth, that it makes use of specific linguistic resources such as narratives, suggestive metaphors, and strategic exaggerations in order to function as an eye-opener. However, the critique must in one way or the other articulate problems relating to the reproduction of societies. Furthermore, this kind of critique cannot raise a truth claim for its assertions. For this reason Honneth describes the disclosing critique as ”the calculated attempt to change the preconditions under which evaluative discourses on the ends of common action are conducted in a society” (ibid.: 124). For him the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* of Adorno and Horkheimer is an example of a disclosing form of social criticism. The disclosing critique’s ambition of being an eye-opener is shared, as we saw before, with the genealogical critique. Thus it might be more appropriate to ascribe a disclosing critique to Foucault, rather than a normative scepticism. But whereas Foucault operates with the gesture of historical scholarship, Adorno and Horkheimer evoke bold images involving some kind of philosophy of history.

In a conversation with Robin Celikates and Honneth, taking place in July 2008 in Frankfurt am Main, Boltanski introduces the idea of a meta-critique that goes considerably beyond his position in *On Justification*, which looking back, he refers to as ”positivistic-descriptive” (Boltanski & Honneth 2009: 94). Instead he now wants to focus on the constant tension between, on the one hand a socially constructed reality, and on the other hand, the world as an inexhaustible reservoir for everything that is new and other (ibid.: 102ff.). Thus Boltanski seems to be on the move from a sociology of critique to some version of critical sociology. What is called the world in this case functions as an open, not yet specified standard of critique. For this kind of critique art and literature play an important role in (this is my interpretation) opening up for new perspectives and new forms of life.

As Honneth points out in the conversation (ibid.: 106), a distinction can be made between a reformistic critique that suggests improvements on the existing reality, and a radical critique that calls into question the existing reality for having become rigid and one-dimensional, and thus excluding many perspectives and possibilities. The latter kind of critique is, according to Boltanski, a social ontological rather than a normative critique. This radical critique or meta-critique is, in my view, rather similar to the disclosing form of critique (cf. ibid.: 112f.).

Conclusion

Different forms of critique have been sketched: an external, an internal or immanent, and a disclosing critique. Is any one form of critique always superior to the others and thus preferable? I don’t think so. Depending on the circumstances any one may be a legitimate means to bring about a change. A disclosing critique is to be preferred when one wants to open up people’s eyes for radically new ways of seeing the world. An immanent critique, which appeals to the standard of the adressee, is preferable, due to its motivating force,

when one wants to bring about a change in people's behaviour. An external critique seems to be necessary and thus preferable when one in no way shares the convictions of the adressee. The alternative, in the latter case, is to refrain from critique, or eventually replace the weapon of criticism with the criticism by weapons (Marx). A universalist external critique and a strong reconstructive internal critique are for their success both dependent upon their ability to mobilize convincing arguments for their respective standard of critique.

References:

Boltanski, Luc & Thévenot, Laurent (2006 [1991]) *On Justification. Economies of Worth*, Princeton & Oxford: Princeton UP.

Boltanski, Luc & Honneth, Axel (2009) "Soziologie der Kritik oder Kritische Theorie? Ein Gespräch mit Robin Celikates", in *Was ist Kritik?*, Rahel Jaeggi & Tilo Wesche (Hg.), Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp , 81–114.

Fraser, Nancy & Honneth, Axel (2003) *Redistribution or Recognition? A Philosophical-Political Exchange*, London and New York: Verso.

Hegel, G.W.F. (1977 [1807]) *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Oxford: Oxford UP.

Honneth, Axel (2000) "The Possibility of a Disclosing Critique of Society: The Dialectic of Enlightenment in Light of Current Debates in Social Criticism", *Constellations* 7(1), 116–127.

Honneth, Axel (2002) "Grounding Recognition: A Rejoinder to Critical Questions", *Inquiry. An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* 45(4), 499–519.

Honneth, Axel (2011) *Das Recht der Freiheit. Grundriß einer demokratischen Sittlichkeit*, Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp.

Jaeggi, Rahel (2009) ”Was ist Ideologiekritik?”, in *Was ist Kritik?*, Rahel Jaeggi & Tilo Wesche (Hg.), Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp, 266–295.

Kauppinen, Antti (2002) ”Reason, Recognition, and Internal Critique”, *Inquiry. An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* 45(4), 479–498.

Myrdal, Gunnar (1975 [1944]) *An American Dilemma. The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, New York: Pantheon.

Rosa, Hartmut (2009) ”Kritik der Zeitverhältnisse. Beschleunigung und Entfremdung als Schlüsselbegriffe der Sozialkritik”, in *Was ist Kritik?*, Rahel Jaeggi & Tilo Wesche (Hg.), Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp, 23–54.

Saar, Martin (2009) ”Genealogische Kritik”, in *Was ist Kritik?*, Rahel Jaeggi & Tilo Wesche (Hg.), Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp, 247–265.