"Critique and Social Change"

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How does critique change society? This question lies at the core of sociological thinking dealing with the possibilities and necessities for social and cultural change. Prominent sociological theories place critique at the center of their analyses by pointing at more or less contradicting principles which characterize modern societies, e.g. rationalization and subjectivation (Touraine 1995) or system and life-world (Habermas 1987). Despite many differences, these "critical" approaches in social theory share the perception that the sovereignty and self-determination of the modern subject is threatened by powerful forces such as alienation, commodification, and objectivation (see also Foucault 1982; Ehrenberg 2009). Critique inevitably arises from the individual's pursuits for authenticity and autonomy.

Such general social theories are often criticized because their presuppositions and analytical distinctions largely determine the substance of their findings (Alexander 1982). The empirical process of observing and assessing why and how actors (e.g. social movements, intellectuals, NGOs) voice their critique is at least partly neglected. Thus, these social theories run the risk of oversimplifying and overgeneralizing the historical and cultural circumstances that shape the social causes and consequences of critique. In order to bridge the gap between ideas and facts, an empirical "sociology of critique" (Boltanski 2011) is needed that captures the variety of conditions and contexts in which individual and collective actors articulate their discontent with society (Rosa 2009: 278). Subsequently, empirical studies may enrich theoretical debates by pointing at different social sources and illustrating divergent dynamics of critique in different fields or by discovering ambivalences in its impact.

Over the past three decades, the sociological interest in empirical studies of critique has considerably increased. However, there are hardly any studies trying to connect the different theoretical perspectives on critique. Such connections seem promising for gaining further insights in the causes, mechanisms, and consequences of social critique. So far three crucial bodies of research can be identified which focus on different analytical aspects:

> *Firstly*, the rise of the so-called new social movements in the 1970s initiated a wave of theoretical and empirical studies in which the growing preference for individual autonomy and subjectivity in Western societies was connected to a macro-structural shift from the industrial to a post-industrial or programmed society (Touraine 1971; Melucci 1996; Castells 1997). The class-

oriented revolutionary movements of earlier days were considered to be outdated. Their focus on material needs and social progress seemed to be displaced by "cultural movements" in search of collective identities (Touraine 1995; Johnston et al. 1994). Typical examples are the women's, environmental, and peace movement (Kriesi et al. 1995; Rucht 1994). This research program's strong emphasis on "collective identities" as a source of protest and critique in modern society considerably has shaped recent discourses on social movements in the age of globalization (Castells 2012, 1997; Crossley 2003).

Secondly, based on the pragmatic turn in French sociology, the *Economie des Conventions* has suggested a sociology of critique, which outlines a concept for understanding valuation and justification as a foundation for institutional orders (Boltanski and Thevenot 2006; Diaz-Bone 2015). Assuming that institutional orders have constantly to be justified vis-à-vis their critics, Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) explain the "new" spirit of capitalism with its capability to appropriate the criticism of the upcoming protest movement of 1968. They consider "ambiguous situations" (Boltanski and Thevenot 1999: 374) to be a central source of critique that produces a "process of realizing that something is going wrong" (ibid: 360). In such situations, social movements or intellectuals bring new ideas and articulate a "better" plan for the future. Rao et al. (2003) convincingly exemplified this pattern in their study about the transformation of French gastronomy as part of an identity movement. This line of research has considerably influenced economic sociology and produced an ever growing body of literature that studies the influence of critique in economy and society (Diaz-Bone and Salais 2012; Kern 2014; Knoll 2015).

Thirdly, calling for a "performative turn" (Alexander et al. 2006; Alexander and Smith 2002) a growing movement of cultural sociologists in the United States and beyond conceptualize social protest and critique as a kind of "civil art" that creates new meanings by linking deep cultural structures with the institutional conditions of contemporary society. Their approach provides a comprehensive theoretical and empirical understanding of symbolic processes that make up the performative power of critique in the public sphere. This approach has been successfully applied in order to uncover and explain, for example, the cultural dynamics of democratization in South Korea (Kern 2009), boundary politics in the public sphere of Hong Kong (Ku 1998), and the performative structures of the recent revolution in Egypt (Alexander 2011). In line with Eisenstadt (1982), this approach conceives the process of institutionalization itself as the original source of critique because it produces a continual tension between the "real" world and its ideal premises. As other interpretations of the world are always possible, the cultural "surplus of meaning" (Ricoeur 1976) constitutes a major source of inspiration and innovation. So even if we accept that societies have to deal with specific functional needs and problems, there are always many different ways to define and resolve them.

Critique is a permanent feature of various social fields in modern society (such as economics, politics, religion, science, law, art, and civil society) and it takes highly diverse forms of expression. We understand critique as a constitutive part of human practice. It refers to the general ability of individual and collective actors to dissociate themselves (at least to some extent) from their social environment. This dissociation is the cultural basis for every kind of resistance, resilience, protest, and conflict. Relevant social carriers of critique are typically social movements, intellectuals or the mass media. They voice dissatisfaction with the state of society and use critique to change or to conserve institutional and cultural principles. Their critique challenges "the logic of order" (Touraine 1995: 235) in different social fields, initiates their re-evaluation and causes institutional change in this way. Nonetheless, there are still only few empirical studies dealing with the institutional and cultural consequences of public critique in detail.

We welcome empirical studies that deal with the question how critique changes society and that contribute to theoretical development. The idea of this conference is to bring together different approaches, e.g. civil society and social movement research, cultural sociology, sociology of conventions, economic sociology, or intellectual history in order to analyze *why* and *how* specific actors cause institutional and cultural change through critique. This call aims at broadening the theoretical perspectives beyond existing approaches, reflecting the link of theory and data in empirical studies, and searching for innovative methodologies for the analysis of critique. Contributions should address the following topics:

1. *Critique and change*: Critique is one of the main causes for social change, but does not automatically lead to actual institutional or cultural changes. How is critique related to resilience or resistance towards change? How is critique related to incremental and/or radical changes of society?

2. *Institutionalization of critique*: To specify the role of critique, one can identify different degrees of institutionalization: What dynamics can be observed concerning the institutionalization or deinstitutionalization of critique and its carriers in historical or comparative perspective?

3. *Social carriers of critique*: Which actors voice critique? What characterizes their performance? How has the articulation of critique and its meanings changed through time?

4. *Methodological perspectives*: Empirical analyses of critique mostly apply discourse analysis. What other methods are suitable, e.g., social network analysis, qualitative or quantitative methods, international comparative research, (participant) observation or action research? Which role do specific research methods play in analyzing social critique? What conceptual problems occur by analyzing criticism in a historical perspective?

5. *Critique and its standards*: Basically, critique is grounded on certain standards and expectations which are not stable. How do these standards change? What are the reasons for shifting standards and what are the effects towards processes of valuation and evaluation?

If you are interested in contributing a paper, please send an extended abstract (400 - 500 words) to Thomas Kern (thomas.kern@soziologie.tu-chemnitz.de) by October 15th 2015.

<u>Preliminary schedule</u>:

- October 15th 2015 – submission of abstracts with paper proposals
- November 10th 2015 – notification of acceptance of paper proposals
- April 15th 2016 – submission of the full paper
- June 23th – June 24th 2016 – Conference "Critique and Social Change" with presentations of the accepted papers
- September 30th 2016 – submission of the final version of the paper
- 2017 – publishing of the Special Issue

About the Journal: "Historical Social Research/ Historische Sozialforschung (HSR)" is an international peer-reviewed journal, which is edited by the "Zentrum für Historische Sozialforschung" (Cologne, Germany). It is listed in the most important data bases, such as SocINDEX with FULL TEXT (EBSCO), Social Science Citation Index (Thomson Reuters), SCOPUS (Elsevier), Sociological Abstracts (Cambridge Scientific Abstracts), Historical Abstracts (ABC-CLIO), International Political Science Abstracts (SAGE), Social Research Methodology Database (SAGE/NIWI) and Social Science Literature Information System (GESIS - Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences).

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