

Idiosyncrasy as a Tool of Knowledge: Social Criticism in the Age of the Normalized Intellectual

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Contrary to repeated claims of the disappearance of the intellectuals, their participation in public discussion has never been livelier than in today's advanced democracies, Axel Honneth argues. Instead, he traces an epochal transformation that has brought about two fairly distinct types of reflexive positions: the constantly growing number of normalized intellectuals as the cultural byproduct and manifestation of the successful establishment of a democratic public sphere on one hand, and the marginal position of the social critic on the other. The public learning processes initiated by the latter are of much greater persistence and durability than any day-to-day intervention of normalized intellectuals could bring about, Honneth argues. His essay for our [Academia & the Public Sphere Essay Series](#) comes from the concluding chapter of his most recent translated essay collection.—ed.

In an article with the suggestive title “Courage, Sympathy, and a Good Eye,” Michael Walzer energetically sets the debate about social criticism on the track of virtue ethics.^[1] The argument with which he grounds this reorientation initially sounds as plausible as it is timely. Since social theory can provide neither necessary nor sufficient grounds for successful social criticism, its quality cannot be measured primarily by the merits of its theoretical content but, rather, more urgently by the qualities of the critic. According to Walzer, he or she must have developed a capacity for sympathy and finally a sense of proportion when applying it.

What sounds plausible in this conclusion is the fact that the forcefulness and practical effect of social criticism seldom results from the measure of the theory in which it is invested but, rather, from the perspicuity of its central concern. And today this results in a turn to the virtues of the critic, since it feeds the devaluation of sociological knowledge and meets up with the tendency to personalize intellectual contexts. All the same, the self-evidence with which Walzer still regards even the intellectuals of our day as born governors of social criticism is surprising. He does not speak of bold Enlighteners—we might think of figures on the model of Émile Zola—but of the ubiquitous sort of author who participates with generalizing arguments in the debates of a democratic public sphere. Is this normalized intellectual, a spiritual agent in the fora of public opinion formation, really the natural representative today of what was once called “social criticism”? Here I first trace an epochal transformation in the form of the intellectual before outlining a completely different physiognomy of the social critic than that found in Walzer's work.

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Of the two broad prognoses contained in Joseph Schumpeter's excursus on the “Sociology of Intellectuals,” one has meanwhile been mostly fulfilled, the other largely refuted.^[2] Schumpeter clairvoyantly assumed that, with the expansion of education and the spread of media, the number of intellectuals would rise dramatically in the coming decades. This trend has been completely confirmed by ensuing developments, so that even in Germany, despite the setback produced by National Socialism, we can speak of a normalization of the role of the intellectual. The successful establishment of a political public sphere in which people can argue over questions of general interest has led to a pluralization of the type of authors involved in this use of his or her specific expertise in the reflexive interrogation and consideration of public issues. In newspapers and radio, on television and the internet, today an ever-greater number of intellectuals take part in enlightened opinion formation about an ever-greater number of specialized problems. Thus, the talk of the disappearance of the intellectual that pops up in the culture and opinion pages with dumb regularity is anything but justified. Never has the discussion conducted on all sides with more or less expertise about public issues been brisker or livelier.

There are at least four professional milieus from which personnel are recruited to take positions on the key problems of the day with the self-evident attitude of generalists. In the first rank is the media industry itself, into which public

demand has drawn more and more authors and pundits with broad competence in matters of moral and political relevance. The growing establishment of issue-specific commissions and expert committees in which specialized academic knowledge is sought has undone traditional reservations about the media within the professoriate, so that today the universities are also increasing as a recruiting ground for media intellectuals. Another milieu that feeds the intellectual contributions to the formation of public opinion is the academic apparatuses of the parties, churches, and unions, which have undergone a hefty expansion in the last decades. Finally, we must consider the army of unemployed university graduates, who, by means of insecure contracts, perform regular supply work for the big media companies and outlets, and thereby also participate in the production of public positions. Individual writers or artists whose intellectual engagement occasionally attracts attention, in contrast, do not constitute a unified milieu, since they lack the precondition of group-specific professional socialization.

This social expansion has naturally produced a normalization of the role of the intellectual not only in a quantitative but also in a qualitative sense. The intellectual position-taking that today fills the op-ed pages, television talk shows, and computer screens emanates from the whole breadth of the political spectrum. Now even conservative thinkers and authors, who once saw in the intellectual the danger of a politicization of the mind or a “disintegration” of civic loyalty, have adapted to the rules of the democratic public sphere to the extent that they inject their opinions and convictions as arguments into the established channels of the print and visual media. However, the second prognosis that Schumpeter advanced in his “Sociology of the Intellectual” remains entirely unfulfilled. For he had predicted not only an expansion of the intellectual class but also its social radicalization, since their insecure, precarious professional situations would cumulatively strengthen the critique of capitalism.[3] Today we can probably say without fear of exaggeration that the opposite has occurred. The specific function of the public sphere, which by means of internal conduits provides only a few transfers of attention that can be managed by the media, has contributed to a constantly growing number of intellectuals who by and large deal only with questions of day-to-day politics. A social reservoir for a form of criticism that inquires behind the premises of publicly accepted problem descriptions and tries to see through their construction is no longer found in the class of intellectuals.

At the same time, it would be negligent to see in this only something to be regretted or bemoaned. Rather, this seems to be the cultural byproduct of what can be described as the successful establishment of a democratic public sphere. Its vitality grows with the influx of objectively generalizable convictions in which citizens can recognize their own untutored opinions so that, with the help of the additional information and perspectives, they can come to decentered and carefully weighed judgments. The publicly available arguments and convictions that take on this enlightening function must therefore be universalizable not only in their structure but, taken together, must be able when possible to represent the whole spectrum of private opinions. To this extent, the normalization of the intellectual that we see everywhere today is nothing other than the cultural manifestation of an intensification of the democratic public sphere. Personal convictions crystallize on politically relevant issues—be it abortion, military intervention, or pension reform—that can further develop under the influence of intellectual positions and enter into the process of democratic opinion formation. But with this development, the tight interlocking that once existed between “intellectuality” and social criticism is definitively broken. To the extent that an interrogation of what can be said in public is no longer to be expected from the intellectuals, social criticism no longer finds its home in the field of intellectual exchange. Walzer’s mistake consists in transferring virtues that are only useful for describing normalized intellectuals to the business of social criticism.

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Walzer clearly takes the personal characteristics or virtues for his sketch of the conditions for successful social criticism from key intellectual figures from the first half of the twentieth century.[4] For the most part, these intellectuals had to act in a political public sphere that was far from the liberal conditions that prevail in Western democratic societies when it comes to legal guarantees of freedom of speech and opinion. Whereas then it was necessary to risk life and limb, these kinds of demands are completely inapplicable to the Western intellectuals of our day. To this extent, as Ralf Dahrendorf says in his reply, at least in our latitudes today “courage” no longer represents a quality that can meaningfully be ranked among the intellectual virtues.[5] The position of an Ignazio

Silone, who as an oppositional writer in totalitarian Italy had to win Mussolini's ear, is in no way comparable with the personal situation of someone who today, for example, speaks out against the death penalty in the United States.

In contrast, the two other virtues that Walzer names in his catalogue can be understood as thoroughly helpful dispositions—not for social critics, however, but for present-day intellectuals. The latter require both the ability to identify with the social suffering of oppressed groups and a sense of the politically achievable, so that publicly neglected interests and convictions can be lastingly asserted in the processes of democratic will-formation. Indeed, it may be just these two properties that today distinguish widely visible intellectuals from the innumerable gaggle of those whose skillful generalization of issues and demands connected to their expertise goes with practiced routine and without rhetorical imagination. But all that has very little to do with the conditions for illuminating, let alone successful, social criticism, since not even the cultural or social mechanisms that establish the conditions of acceptance for positions in public debate are put into question.

While today intellectuals have to abide not just by procedural rules but also by the conceptual guidelines of the political public sphere in order to win a public hearing, social criticism confronts a completely different task. What Siegfried Kracauer described seventy years ago as a central concern of intellectual activity still applies: it has to involve the attempted “destruction of all mythical powers around and within us.”^[6] Along with such myths, which he elsewhere calls “natural powers,” Kracauer means all conceptual presuppositions that establish behind our backs what publicly counts as sayable and unsayable. To this extent, it might be even better to speak of a conceptual picture or an apparatus that holds us captive in the sense that, owing to our fixed descriptions, certain procedures seem to us like parts of nature from which we can no longer detach ourselves. If the intellectual of the present depends on moving within a conceptual framework of this kind because he wants to win quick public agreement for his positions, social criticism must conversely devote itself entirely to skillfully drilling holes in these tried and tested frameworks and tentatively suspending them.

The interest by which this is led is of a fundamentally different kind than that which inheres in the activity of intellectuals today. For intellectuals, it is a matter of correcting the perspective of public issues within the descriptive system accepted by the democratic public sphere, whereas for social critics, it is a matter of interrogating that descriptive system itself. The normalization of the role of the intellectual has in a certain sense completed the change of position that made them agents in the fora of political will-formation as long as the task of social criticism could no longer even be perceived. For that would require stepping out of the horizon of the publicly apportioned self-understanding that is today the ultimate reference point for their own activity. Walzer's diagnosis collapses on the results of this internal displacement, since it is in no way suited to determining the behavioral dispositions that are constitutive of social criticism after its final separation from the intellectuals.

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An element of outsidership has always been a spiritual source of social criticism. Be it through political persecution leading to exile or cultural isolation on the periphery of their own country, the most important critics of society often take a position that gives them a certain distance from socially rehearsed interpretive models—Rousseau disgustingly turned his back on the vanity fair of Paris; Marx lived out the uprooted existence of a political exile; Kracauer is said to have had a physically based inferiority complex; as a Jew, Marcuse like many others belonged to a cultural minority. In none of the cases can their marginal position be located in a simple topography, within which the contemporary discussion often distinguishes only between “inside” and “outside.”

These social critics were neither so alienated from their cultures of origin that they had to take a simply external perspective nor did they have enough trust and loyalty with regard to them to be able to enjoy a simply internal critical perspective. If a topographical picture can be helpful here at all, it would be that of an “internal abroad”: from the side, from an internal perspective that has been displaced to the outside, they observe the whole of practices and convictions that have spread in their own culture of origin with a growing distance as a second nature. It was such a marginal position that put them in a position to see a unified mechanism in the immense multiplicity of public statements and events. But only their remaining connected to this culture enabled them to put the verve, care, and

energy into their work that is necessary for a successful critique of social self-understandings. Two peculiarities of social criticism result from the fact that it is written from a perspective of connection with a social lifeworld that as a whole has become alien.

Unlike the activity of contemporary intellectuals, which despite all its appeals to generalizable norms nevertheless constantly raises publicly relevant issues, social criticism always has a holistic character. It does not interrogate the dominant interpretation of a particular specialized problem, public ignorance about dissenting opinions, or the selective perception of the material available for a decision; rather, it questions the social and cultural network of conditions under which these processes of will-formation arise. Rousseau's critique of the self-referentiality of modern subjectivity is as good an example of what I am calling "holism" here as Adorno and Horkheimer's culture-industry thesis. What these writings criticize is not individual events, particular mistakes, or relative injustices but the structural properties of the constitution of a social sphere as a whole. What drives social criticism is the impression that the institutional mechanisms and need interpretations that underlie public will-formation like a quasi-natural precondition are themselves highly dubious. It must therefore put everything into producing a picture of these apparently self-evident presuppositions that problematizes them. The second peculiarity of social criticism also results from the attempt to get a distance from a whole network of conditions: unlike the interventions of intellectuals, it structurally depends on using a theory that in one or another way possesses an explanatory character.

What Walzer wrongly claims about the task of social criticism may apply to the activity of intellectuals today. Intervention in the political public sphere that aims at correcting dominant interpretations or propagating new perspectives not only depends on theoretical explanations; it can also be easily influenced by them. For the greater the investment in sociological or historical explanation, the greater the danger of losing sight of the practical political demands of the addressees. If contemporary intellectuals must therefore practice a certain abstinence with regard to explanatory theories, social criticism, to the contrary, now as ever is fundamentally reliant on them. To be able to justify why accustomed practices or convictions are questionable as a whole, social criticism must offer a theoretical explanation that allows the development of an apparatus to be understood as the unintended consequence of a chain of intended circumstances or actions. As much as the theoretical contents may be distinguished from one another, as manifold as the explanations may be, their task within social criticism is the same in all cases: they help show that we cannot endorse the institutional totality or form of life we practice everyday because it is the merely causal result of a developmental process that can be understood in its individual components.

This common function also explains a generic characteristic of all theories that can be used in social criticism. Despite their methodological differences, they must provide an explanation for the mechanisms through which it was historically or socially possible for a practical model, needs schema, or attitudinal syndrome that contradicts our most deep-seated desires or intentions to penetrate into our institutional practices. According to the temperament of the critic and the epistemic culture, Rousseau's theory of civilization delivers as appropriate an instrument as Nietzsche's genealogy, Marx's political economy as tested a tool as Weber's concept of rationalization. But sociological action theories, as developed in different ways by Bourdieu and Giddens, can fulfill this function within the framework of critique of society. Essentially, there are hardly any limits to the explanatory possibilities as long as the demand is met of explaining how a chain of intended circumstances leads to the unintended consequence of a form of life that is questionable as a whole.

Of course, just like intellectual interventions, the political line of attack of social criticism can spread across the whole spectrum of contemporary positions. The difference between the two enterprises does not lie in the fact that pluralism prevails today in the intellectual field whereas there is an underlying consensus in the field of social criticism. It is the kind of pluralism that allows two types of reflexive positions to be distinguished in the present. If the normalized intellectual is bound to a political consensus that is the expression of all the moral convictions cutting across the plurality of worldviews,^[7] social critical is free from limitations of this kind, since it seeks to put precisely the background convictions of this consensus in question. Although they can afford ethical exaggerations and one-sidedness, intellectuals today are largely compelled to neutralize their worldviews, since when possible they must seek agreement in the political public sphere. The limits on social criticism thus arise from what a public composed

of highly mixed worldviews is prepared to understand; those the intellectual comes up against, however, are established by the liberal principles of a public sphere that reasons democratically. The intellectual must promote his opinion with artful arguments while respecting these principles, whereas the social critic can try to convince us that accustomed modes of practice are questionable by using an ethically laden theory. This difference also establishes the difference between the cognitive virtues of the two enterprises.

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Probably the virtue that is least useful for social criticism is a “good eye.” Even if Walzer is not entirely clear whether by this he means a sense for real political pressures or social context, the immediate advantages of this ability for contemporary intellectuals are undisputed. To be able to make their argumentative interventions in public discourse convincing, they must not only possess a correct view of what can be achieved politically but also appropriately judge the chances of arguments prevailing socially. Nothing would be more detrimental to social criticism than making its revelation of questionable social practices depend on their prospects of political implementation. Social criticism does not aim at rapid success in the democratic exchange of opinions but at the distant effect of gradually growing doubt about whether given models of practice or schemas of needs are in fact appropriate (for us). It is paid in the coin not of momentary argumentative convincingness but in justified reorientation in future processes.

For this task, the sense of proportion that Walzer demands from criticism proves to be a hindrance rather than a benefit. Those who look to favorable political circumstances and the intellectual climate will hardly be able to achieve the change of perspective necessary to burst habitual forms of life like a soap bubble. The disposition social criticism requires is the hypertrophic, the idiosyncratic view of those who see in the beloved everyday of the institutional order the abyss of failed sociality, in routinized differences of opinion the outlines of collective delusion. It is this easily displaced perspective that looks in from the margins that also allows us to understand why social criticism, unlike intellectual activity, requires the application of theory. For its task is to explain the distance between perceived reality and the public self-understanding of social practices.

Empathy, too, is a virtue whose characteristics can prove to be highly ambivalent for the practice of the social critic. Of course, the ultimate emotional basis of his or her critical initiative is nothing other than identification with the pain and suffering that the mechanism of social action he or she takes to be questionable causes in individuals. How else could the energy he or she puts into formulating a theoretical account with dubious prospects of political implementation be explained? But this identification is not with an articulated suffering that is already subjectively perceived but with a pain that is only suspected, in a certain sense attributed, beyond what can be socially articulated. The social critic takes the generalizable interests of all members of society to be injured when he or she speaks of the questionability of a socially practiced form of life. “Empathy” is surely not the word for the affective situation at play here. Instead, it is a matter of a kind of higher-level though no less intense identification with a suffering that under given conditions cannot even find linguistic expression. This abstract, broken sympathy also explains why a tone of bitterness and even coldness creeps into the language of social criticism. It is not pure arrogance that diffuses an atmosphere of distance but bitterness and resentment that the hypertrophically perceived suffering still has not found resonance in the public space of articulation. These ingredients of social criticism can certainly not be called virtues, personal dispositions worthy of imitation, or model elements of texts. But in this case, there is a bit of necessity even within the sin that results from spiritual isolation which, in contrast to intellectual position-taking, compels the interrogation of a form of life.

The virtues that really distinguish social criticism are not properties of its representatives, however, but of the texts themselves. While personal abilities may be of particular importance among the intellectuals of our day since they help make their arguments convincing to the public, in this second case they largely recede behind the linguistic form of their interpretations. This is also why it seems to be so much easier to speak evaluatively of the figure of the intellectual, whereas regarding social criticism it is difficult to reach judgments about the personality of the author. The success of their activity is not measured, this would mean, by quickly convincing a quarrelsome, divided public but, rather, through the long-term re-orientation of a public confident in prevailing ideas. What among intellectuals is

a sense of proportion, a convincing argument, or recognizable engagement for a minority must be almost completely replaced for the social critic by the creative ability to give texts a disintegrating effect on social myths. The task of rhetorically equipping dry explanations with suggestive power therefore represents the real challenge of social criticism, and as many authors as have mastered it may have dramatically failed.

Of the many tools available to social criticism, two rhetorical figures in particular stand out for their widespread use. A creative element that is used again and again is the skillful application of exaggerations, with which the theoretically deduced condition is cast in such a garish, bizarre light that its questionability will appear as the scales fall from the readers' eyes. Rousseau's *Second Discourse* is as good an example of this kind of art of exaggeration as the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.^[8] Here, of course, the rhetorically exaggerated result must not be confused with the process by which theoretical explanations are brought to bear in these forms of social criticism. Only the questionable condition of the present itself is outfitted with the stylistic elements of the art of exaggeration, whereas its historical genesis is soberly explained as the unintended consequence of intentional processes.

The tool that no doubt most often finds application in social criticism is the coining of catchy formulas in which a complex explanation of social processes is compressed and given expression in a single denominator. If Foucault speaks of the "disciplinary society" or "biopolitics," if the "colonization of the lifeworld" runs like a leitmotif through Habermas's work, or if Marcuse uses the expression "repressive tolerance," hidden behind these expressions are demanding theories in which a questionable condition of our social form of life is explained as the result of a developmental process that has not yet been completed. Here again, the rhetorical emphasis applies only to the result, not to the historical event that is to have caused it. The formula clearly and effectively captures the features especially worthy of criticism in this condition that has emerged "behind our backs" through a historical chain of intentional processes. In this respect, there are hardly any limits to the application of rhetorical tools, as long as the theoretical demand of making comprehensible the genesis of a problematic social order by means of causal explanation is vouchsafed.^[9]

Unlike the interventions of intellectuals, however, social criticism that is suggestively charged in this way possesses only a highly indirect, long-distance effect that can hardly be empirically measured. In general, it does not precipitate dramatic ruptures in public opinion or the statements of public officials. That social criticism is nonetheless not without prospects of success, that in the long run it can contribute to a change of orientation, is impressively shown by a social-theoretical formula whose catchiness seems not to have suffered from rising doubts about its theoretical explanatory content. When Horkheimer and Adorno coined the concept of the "culture industry" to criticize various processes of commercialization in the cultural sector, they could not have suspected that they had set in motion a cultural learning process that led to demands for higher quality in radio and television in Germany than in almost any other country.

The way this efficacy hesitantly came about can stand paradigmatically for how social criticism can contribute to the transformation of social conditions. First of all, with the rhetorical means of the chiasmus, a formula was made whose content was much too cumbersome or even incomprehensible to change the perceptions and convictions of the reading public. Moreover, understanding it assumed a familiarity with social-theoretical arguments—the conventional opposition of the concepts of "culture" and "industry," the particular point that the fusion of the two concepts had to insist on—in order to have direct influence on scattered opinion formation in the public sphere. There the idea of a "culture industry" initially influenced only a small circle of intellectuals, students, and culture producers by giving them a heightened sense of the dangers connected to the infiltration of commercial imperatives and profitability perspectives into the cultural sphere. Only from here did this leitmotiv-like formula find a larger public by way of the complex tracks of cultural communication, where, without clear awareness of its theoretical origins, it reinforced reservations against economic tendencies that seriously threatened the cultural standards of radio, television, and book production.

At the end of a process rich with detours there were finally political and legal measures whereby price limits on books, public self-supervision, and the guarantee of so-called culture quotas were to ensure that the production of

the cultural media was not completely subjected to the pressure of commercialization. The history of this public learning process in Germany has not yet been written, but the few insights we have into the subterranean effects of Horkheimer and Adorno's idea make the influence their social criticism had on the sensibilities and perceptions of the German public sphere clear enough.^[10] And if today the price limits on books and the diverse programming on television are threatened, the resistance that is stirring is probably fallout from the indirect effect that the social-critical formula of the culture industry left in the political consciousness of the educated public. Compared with the productive flow of normalized intellectuals, the rare products of social criticism need a long time before their effects can unfold in the form of a transformation of social perceptions. But the change of orientation it subcutaneously promoted is of much greater persistence and durability than any intellectual position taking could bring about today.

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1. Michael Walzer, "Mut, Mitleid und ein gutes Augen: Tugenden der Sozialkritik und der Nutzen von Gesellschaftstheorie," *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 48 (2000): 709–18; published in English in *The Company of Critics: Social Criticism and Political Commitment in the Twentieth Century*, 2nd ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2002), xi–xviii.↑
2. Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, 3rd ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1950), 145–55.↑
3. *Ibid.*, 143.↑
4. Walzer, in *The Company of Critics*.↑
5. Ralf Dahrendorf, "Theorie ist wichtiger als Tugend," *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 12 December 2000.↑
6. Siegfried Kracauer, "Minimalforderung an die Intellektuellen," in *Schriften* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1990), 5: 353.↑
7. On the idea of an "overlapping consensus," see John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, new ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).↑
8. For more, see Bert van den Brink, "Gesellschaftstheorie als Übertreibungskunst: Für eine alternative Lesart der 'Dialektik der Aufklärung,'" *Neue Rundschau* 1 (1997): 37–59.↑
9. I have discussed rhetorical tools of social criticism in more depth in Axel Honneth, "The Possibility of a Disclosing Critique of Society: The Dialectic of Enlightenment in Light of Current Debates in Social Criticism," in *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007).↑
10. Alex Demirovic, *Der nonkonformistische Intellektuelle: Die Entwicklung der Kritische Theorie zur Frankfurter Schule* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1999).↑

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