

Left Rawlsianism and social philosophy

A response to 'Philosophy in Germany'

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Reading 'Philosophy in Germany', the exchange between Simon Critchley and Axel Honneth in *Radical Philosophy* 89, I found myself perplexed by a basic assumption the participants appear to share: namely, that so-called 'Left Rawlsianism' and 'social philosophy' are alternative paths for the future development of Critical Theory. I've been working on two books over the past few years – *Reflective Authenticity* and *Justice and Judgment* – which, in the light of the above assumption, I would have to understand as falling under the headings of 'social philosophy' and of 'Left Rawlsianism' respectively. At the same time, however, I see these two projects as closely related – in fact, the former constitutes a sort of broader philosophical backcloth against which the latter stands out as a more specific formulation of the same general thesis, from within a more focused perspective – and not in the least as alternative. Am I developing a sort of split intellectual personality, I found myself wondering, or is there something problematic about the understanding of the prospect for Critical Theory depicted in the exchange? And if the latter is the case, where is the problem?

There are two distinct problems with the assessment of the situation of critical theory that appears to be shared by Critchley and Honneth. First, so-called 'Left Rawlsianism' seems to me a reductive misnomer for something much larger. In recent years, political philosophy has come to occupy the pivotal position that epistemology and the philosophy of science used to occupy in the 1960s, at the time when the *Methodenstreit* between Adorno and Popper was under way. Just as answering the question 'What does it mean for a statement to be true?', back then, was thought to be the key for answering all other kinds of questions, so today answering questions of institutional and constitutional legitimacy is broadly seen as the key to answering

other sorts of questions. The reasons for this shift – which I certainly do not take as definitive or irreversible – cannot be explored here, but are not unrelated to our loss of confidence in our ability to provide substantive 'foundations'. From this perspective, the kind of Critical Theory somewhat disdainfully labelled 'Left Rawlsianism' simply appears as the strand of Critical Theory which has proven most receptive to these developments. Incidentally, I don't think it is fair to call 'Rawlsianism' – let alone 'Left Rawlsianism' – 'mainstream political theory or political philosophy', meaning by that something 'uncritical'. To do so is to say something wildly out of touch with the reality of contemporary political thought and philosophy, the real mainstream of which is constituted by precisely the kind of 'interest-pluralistic' (Dahl), 'democratic-elitist' (Schumpeter) or simply 'majoritarian' view of democracy that 'Rawlsianism' targets for critique.

Second, the representation of what is at stake between 'Left Rawlsianism' and 'social philosophy' as the *interruption* or the *continuation* of the original critical spirit of the Frankfurt tradition is misleading, not only because the critical side of Rawlsianism is overlooked, but also because the selectivity of the 'diagnosis of pathologies' linked with the social philosophy project is somewhat glossed over. There is a fracture between the first and the third generation of Critical Theorists, and that fracture is represented by the linguistic turn. Horkheimer, Marcuse and Adorno could take the critical angle on contemporary society that Honneth wants to rescue under the heading of 'social philosophy' because, among other things, they did not have to take seriously that 'fact of pluralism' which we have come to understand as an inescapable condition. Instead, they arrogantly despised anything that smacked of 'pluralism' – Adorno had only scornful expressions for Mannheim (a true 'social philosopher'

not on Honneth's list). Adorno chose *Reflections from Damaged Life* as a subtitle for his *Minima Moralia* and one of his most famous aphorisms runs: '*Es gibt kein richtiges Leben im falschen*' ('Wrong life cannot be lived rightly'). The kind of Critical Theory misnamed 'Left Rawlsianism' is simply the one most sensitive to the hidden arrogance that has rendered these expressions problematic for us.

Damaged lives

Despite our cherishing their critical intent – an intent which we certainly want to preserve in *our own* horizon – we have come to think that the *life* to which Adorno refers when he purports to write from the vantage point of the 'damaged life' *only comes in the plural*. For our society and our institutions to move closer to the *richtiges Leben*, then, inevitably means to move *away* from *another* vision of life – the 'false' one. For society and single institutions to move closer to embedding 'equal respect' for all citizens means to lose touch with racism; for them to move closer to the idea of a life whose basic decency cannot be jeopardized by the market means to lose touch with another vision of life as a bottomless struggle for existence. Thus in a world where different visions of life coexist side by side, any deliberation and any argument concerning whether and 'which' life is being 'damaged' or is to be considered 'false', presupposes an agreement on standards and ultimately on who we are and who we collectively want to be. The dimension of democracy – and consequently a theory of democracy – must become part and parcel of the critical project, not because we want to overcome this pluralist predicament, but because the inescapable condition of pluralism typical of our complex societies prevents us from being able to count on an *antecedently* shared understanding of what constitutes a damaged and a non-damaged, a *richtiges* and a *falsches* life. If such a common understanding is ever to materialize, it will do so as a *result* of a democratic process.

In this sense, it would be easy for a defender of whatever is meant by 'Left Rawlsianism' to read in the social philosophy 'alternative' – where the naturalistic medical metaphor of 'social pathologies' looms large – the risk of returning to old 'pre-postmetaphysical' forms of critique no longer adequate to who we have come to be. The problem with the metaphor of 'social pathologies' is not that it tends to 'freeze' our view of society into the two realms of the normal and the pathological. On the contrary, since medical science concedes that what is normal at one stage of a healthy organism may be pathological at another, we could in

principle have a historically indexed understanding of what is normal and what is pathological in our society. The controversial point is rather the inherently naturalistic, 'realist' view of the pathological character of what is believed to be pathological. The point of the metaphor is that such pathological quality will assert itself anyway, no matter how you and I interpret the phenomenon at hand – that is, the metaphor carries an implicit 'anti-hermeneutic' thrust that clashes with our hermeneutic sensibility.

Perhaps the whole idea of social pathologies could be rescued from these naturalistic connotations and be reformulated along more hermeneutic lines. The social philosopher could then be reconceived as a kind of art critic who points out what is 'out of place' in a life-form. By virtue of their superior aesthetic sensibility for and familiarity with works of art, critics point out to the public things that are good or bad in a work of art, aspects of it which 'fit' and others that seem 'out of place'. A critic cannot enjoin me to like a certain novel or a movie under penalty of being labelled 'unreasonable' if I don't, but through her critical reconstruction she can make me see certain things – good or bad – that otherwise I would have missed. This reformulation, however, entails certain consequences. A literary critic is not someone who just trashes literary works but someone who articulates his/her sense of what is aesthetically *good* or *bad* in a more sophisticated way than most people. Similarly, a social philosopher need not be someone who by definition only looks at the negative or pathological aspects of a form of life, though it should certainly be someone who does not *overlook* them.

The canon of social philosophy – Rousseau, Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Nietzsche, Lukács, Plessner, Horkheimer and Adorno – stands, then, in need of justification. For example, the polemical target of Rousseau's critique of mid-eighteenth-century Parisian life – where just 'as the clocks are ordinarily wound up to go only twenty-four hours', so individuals 'have to go into society every night to learn what they're going to think the next day' – is the same metropolitan and modern life-form in which Montesquieu and Diderot saw the exhilarating eruption of an unheard-of multiplicity of possibilities for living one's own life, an emancipation from the stultifying and stifling power of tradition and custom, ultimately an increase in individuation. Now, are Montesquieu and Diderot barred from the title of social philosophers just because their appraisal of modern life is not 'critical' in Rousseau's sense?

Let me say, in passing, that I find Honneth's assessment of the reasons underlying the peripheral role

played by French philosophy on the German scene not entirely convincing. Habermas's anathema certainly did contribute something to that effect – I can still recall quite vividly Habermas, lecturing on the philosophical discourse of modernity in Frankfurt in 1983, indicating how in Husserl and Derrida we can see, in its purest form, what the difference is between 'a real philosopher' and someone who is 'just an intellectual'. But it seems unrealistic (and somewhat unfair) to me to blame the under-representation of the French tradition in Germany so heavily on Habermas's influence. Part of the story also has to do with some peculiar features of French philosophy after Sartre. Over and beyond the so-called *question du sujet* little else seems to stir genuine philosophical interest in France. Looking at it as an Italian, the French scene strikes me as being dominated by a monofocal debate on how the subject is to be conceived – as unitary or plural, as transparent or opaque, as using power or constituted by power, as the locus of a presence or of an absence? Almost every topic, including questions of political philosophy, of democracy, of multiculturalism, of 'foundations', gets filtered through this peculiar concern. This makes contemporary French philosophy a fascinatingly self-enclosed tradition that speaks only to those prepared to share that idiosyncratic angle.

It is not my intent to endorse 'Left Rawlsianism' over 'social philosophy'. My intent is rather to call into question the suggestion that they might be mutually exclusive. In my view, the question implicitly addressed by Honneth, 'Which of the two options carries the greatest potential for keeping alive the tradition of Critical Theory?', really ought to be reformulated as: 'What in the tradition of Critical Theory ought to be preserved?' From the standpoint of the latter question, the two 'alternative' avenues for the future development of Critical Theory lose much of their 'alternativeness'. Let me go back to democracy. Our century has been largely a sceptical century that has demolished all the certainties handed over to it by the previous one – with one notable exception. When it comes to democracy and the 'goodness of democracy', our century not only has *not* undermined that notion, but has contributed to an unprecedented expansion and articulation of it through universal suffrage, the Welfare State, the new rights – social and cultural, privacy, the public sphere, and so on. Perhaps one day we will come to see this development as *not disjoined from* the tremendous 'destabilizing' effect that twentieth-century philosophy and critical thought has had on most established traditions, in the sense that

democracy flourishes when people no longer think that they have access to ultimate foundations.

Now, the turn on the part of some critical theorists toward 'Left Rawlsianism' (or, better said, toward *political philosophy*) is connected with this impulse, but this impulse – and here I agree with Honneth – cannot by itself exhaust the entire project of Critical Theory. There will always be more to Critical Theory than elucidating the principles underlying the constitutional essentials of the 'well-ordered society'. This only means, however, that the turn toward 'political philosophy', in order to avoid ending up as a merely methodological reflection on *how* to go about assessing and changing significant aspects of the life-form we inhabit – a reflection that never gets to the business of *what* to change or preserve – has to be *connected with*, not considered an alternative to, the critical impulse that Honneth tries to reconstruct under the heading of 'social philosophy'. If these two moments are allowed to come apart, Critical Theory is doomed to remain entrapped either in an ineffectual methodological horizon or in the role of one-sided denouncer of pathologies that are such only 'in the eyes of the beholder'. If, on the contrary, these two moments are integrated in a theoretically articulated division of labour then there is a chance, but only a chance, for Critical Theory to be once again something more than just a proper name for designating a certain number of people and their recognized academic successors.

The final few lines of the exchange, in which Honneth calls for a 'fruitful dialogue' between the kind of social philosophy he's thinking of and a 'democratic culture', and Critchley articulates the thought that 'philosophy' could be seen 'as an essential moment of democratic reflection', point in the direction I have been arguing. Let me end this brief comment, then, by noting that had the discussion between Honneth and Critchley proceeded from the idea that a philosophical discourse on the nature of modern society and its impact on the self should be seen as part of a broader democratic discourse on the sort of social order in which we want to spend our lives (an idea somewhat beyond the horizon of Adorno and Horkheimer), they could not have considered 'Left Rawlsianism' and 'social philosophy' as *alternative* programmes that can stand on their own. We should be grateful to Honneth and Critchley, however, for producing a text which forces all of us who at some point of their *Bildung* have had a significant exposure to Critical Theory to confront questions about the sense of what we're doing.