

SOCIAL CRITICISM AND SOCIAL THEORY

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I

In 1999, I gave a lecture at a conference celebrating the 75th anniversary of the founding of the Institute for Social Research—and of the “Frankfurt School.” I meant to raise questions about the project of the School, but I also meant to pay tribute to the culture of speculation and controversy that it inspired. My lecture was published in the Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie (48 [2000] 5, pp. 709-718), and eight years later Axel Honneth wrote a critical response (for a conference marking my retirement from the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton). I hope that his response will soon appear in print, but I would like to attempt here what might be a premature engagement with it. I will reprint most of my original lecture and then, inside the lecture, so to speak, describe and try to answer his criticism. I have to stress that this engagement is not a dialogue; it is entirely my own construction. Though I shall represent Honneth’s views as faithfully as I can, I am sure that my version of them will lack the force and subtlety of his own presentation.

These are the questions that I want to raise about the Frankfurt School project: What is the value of a good theory for social criticism? What help does it provide? What use is it? Note that my questions are about instrumental value. I don't doubt that a good theory is a good thing. Knowledge is worth having for its own sake; systematic knowledge even more so. But it is often said that social critics need a good theory, a large-scale narrative about the social world that is, so far as this is possible, strong and true. So my summary question: What for?

I should describe here, right at the beginning, Honneth's general response to these questions. He takes them to be entirely legitimate if what we are considering is the situation of the "normalized intellectual"—a figure who appears in increasing numbers in the contemporary West because of "the successful establishment of a democratic public sphere." Honneth recognizes the importance of this success. "Never," he says, "has discussion of public matters, to which people of all stripes contribute with more or less expertise, been...carried out with such verve." Nonetheless, these "dime-a-dozen authors," while they engage critically in democratic debates and play a lively role in contemporary politics, are not engaged in "the critique of society" but rather in everyday political debate. Hence it is right to question their need for social theory—so long as we distinguish their work from the theoretical enterprise.

My questions only make sense if social theory and social criticism are distinguishable projects, but this isn't the distinction that Honneth is after. Theory, in my view, has a primarily intellectual character and purpose, while criticism has a practical/moral character and purpose. I mean, then, to reject the Marxist claim that the two are in fact the same and that morality has little to do with either. Marx believed that the correct historical/analytical account of the capitalist system was also a devastating critique, for it demonstrated that capitalism was torn by contradictions and destined for self-destruction. The announcement of the end was the crucial critical task or, at least, the crucial intellectual task; the next step was material criticism, that is, political action. On this understanding, there is no moral critique of capitalism waiting to be made, for which Marxist theory might (or might not) be useful.

Of course, Marxist writers did criticize capitalism in moral terms or, perhaps better, in terms that had moral resonance among their readers--as, for example, when they called it an exploitative system. And criticism of this sort did make use of theory--in this case, specifically, the labor theory of value. But does the discovery of exploitation, or the moral force of the argument against it, really depend on the theory? And is the critique of exploitation in any case much of an improvement on (say) Isaiah's argument, in the Hebrew Bible, about grinding the

faces of the poor? Grinding the faces is wrong whether or not the labor theory of value is right, and exploitation, I suspect, is wrong in exactly the same way.

Not at all in the same way, Honneth argues, for Isaiah's argument refers to particular instances of bad behavior by the rich and powerful, while Marx describes the human acts and decisions that had the unintended historical consequence of producing exploitation, the declining rate of wages, and the periodic crises that make capitalism unendurable—and suggest also that it won't have to be endured for long. Isaiah is the pre-democratic equivalent of a normalized intellectual (prophets were a dime-a-dozen in ancient Israel), whose critique remains within the “boundaries of acceptable [religious] discourse.” Marx, by contrast, undercuts the “institutional totality” of modern capitalism. His critique is very deep. Indeed, it is very deep...and in many places very wrong, and when it was accepted in its totalizing version, it produced a very bad politics. Consider by contrast the ethical socialism of someone like R.H. Tawney in Britain, whose critique of capitalism was more accurate than Marx's, and inspired a better politics, though it owed a great deal to the biblical prophets and lacked deep theoretical foundations.

So the theory/criticism link is at least open to doubt, and it's that doubt that I want to pursue. I had better be careful here; I don't mean to say that theory and

criticism can't be related or that they don't sometimes overlap. I am not defending a strong is/ought distinction. But the specific connection of social theory and social criticism, when it develops, is largely adventitious--as in a doctrine like "Marxist humanism," where the bonding of adjective and noun is no bar to analytical separation (or practical divorce). There are humanists who aren't Marxists and Marxists who aren't humanists.

Still, these connections exist, and they are often important. Sometimes critical values inspire the research that produces a major theoretical advance. Honneth gives the excellent example of Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of the "culture industry," which was probably inspired by their aesthetic dislike of what they saw in popular, commercial culture. Sometimes the theory shapes the way in which values are articulated and defended. But critical values also have an independent standing, and they may have to be defended independently, for their own sake or for the sake of the critical project. Marx probably had something else in mind, but this is a possible reading of his eleventh thesis on Feuerbach: it is one thing to interpret or try to understand the world, something else to criticize and try to change it. Given this crucial assumption--that the two projects are distinct (even when the boundary between them is indistinct)--I ask again: what is the use-value of social theory?

There are two possible answers, which I shall discuss together, as if they were a single answer. One has to do with the accuracy of the criticism, the other with its timeliness. We want the critic to say the right thing, at the right time. Honneth doesn't accept the second of these criteria, arguing that it applies only to the normalized intellectual, who is aiming at "instant success in a democratic exchange of opinions." The critic of society, by contrast, seeks "a long-run change in orientation"; he is not trying to be timely. But many intellectuals who join the democratic debate have no expectation of instant success; they too are looking for long-run changes. And when Engels wrote his critique of Manchester in 1844, he was certainly timely, in my sense of the word, even though his historical perspective was very long. The question of timeliness has to do with what we might call the moral need for this critical argument, right now. And it should be clear that arguments with no prospect of success can still be morally necessary.

So the suggestion I need to consider is that an objective, well-reasoned, historical/ analytical social theory is necessary if critics are to argue in the right way, at the right time--or, more modestly, that the odds favor the critic who has such a theory over the critic who doesn't. Initially, at least, the more modest description of theory's use-value sounds plausible enough —and the less modest

one isn't radically implausible. Though I doubt that either one is open to empirical proof, they invite empirical as well as speculative inquiry. But even a rough and ready empiricism raises problems: there are so many counter-examples, so many critics who said the right thing at the right time and yet were not in possession of anything like a good theoretical account of the world. Consider, for example, the prophet Amos, Isaiah's predecessor, whose theological worldview doesn't fit what I expect most of us have in mind when we speak of a good social theory. Yet his wide-ranging description and condemnation of injustice in ancient Israel seem to have had the double rightness that we are seeking. There is a further problem posed by historical cases like this one. If we were to decide that Amos's worldview was, after all, the functional equivalent of "a good theory," then we would have to consider counter-examples of the opposite kind: all those ancient Israelites who shared the worldview but, for one reason or another, rejected the critique.

So we have good critics without a good theory and--hypothetically for now, though I will provide some examples later on--good theories that don't produce good criticism. Hence, it would appear that a good theory isn't a sufficient cause of accuracy and timeliness, nor even a necessary cause. But I concede that it is a possible help, a possible source of critical inspiration. To have in hand a good theoretical account of the course of history and the structure of society makes it

more likely that critics will recognize avoidable evils and that they will describe those evils correctly. And this same theoretical account makes it less likely that they will be deterred from speaking out when they should by some false understanding of the actual situation or of their own responsibilities. But Honneth is not satisfied with this concession. He wants to make a much larger claim—that “the critique of society...unlike the interventions of the intellectual, is structurally dependent upon a theory that possesses some kind of explanatory character.” Indeed, he insists on a specific kind of explanatory theory: it must describe the existing social system or form of life as “the unintended consequence of a chain of circumstances or [of] intentional actions.” Only a theory of this sort, he insists, can produce a radical critique of the life form itself and of “all the conceptual presuppositions that determine the boundaries of acceptable discourse.” Only a theory of this sort can enable us to “destroy all the mythical powers in and around us “(he is quoting Siegfried Kracauer).

Here we see the full force of Honneth’s account of social criticism: it is in his view a truly heroic enterprise. And yet, and yet, it is very hard to distinguish this enterprise from the everyday work of his “normalized intellectuals.” I cannot think, for example, of a single American myth that has not been challenged in the debates that have gone on since 9/11, and I cannot say, looking back on these

debates, just where “the boundaries of acceptable discourse” are located.

Intellectuals, writes Honneth, are “compelled to move within the limits of [the existing] conceptual framework” if they are to sway public opinion. I know some conservative Americans who wish that such “compulsion” existed and might even be inclined to apply it themselves if they could. But they can’t. The myth of America as a freedom-loving society, as a constitutional republic, as an opponent of “old world” imperialism, as a defender of democracy abroad—all these have been, well, not “destroyed” but certainly criticized and contradicted, in an extraordinary outpouring of books, magazine articles, and films. Some of this work has a theoretical basis—in Lenin’s theory of imperialism, for example--but the best of it, I think, is based in something much more like normal, democratic discourse. Here too, of course, theories about constitutionalism, human rights, and liberal internationalism play an important enabling role. And I don’t doubt that bigger theories of the Frankfurt School sort can be (at least) equally enabling.

But, still, the counter-examples are worrying. Consider this no doubt arbitrary list:

--Luther's critique of the corruption of the late medieval Church;

--Voltaire's critique of religious intolerance (also of religion in general);

- Rousseau's critique of social inequality;
- Henry David Thoreau's critique of America's war with Mexico;
- John Stuart Mill's critique of the status of women in 19th century

England;

- Sartre's critique of French anti-Semitism;
- Camus' critique of capital punishment.

It is certainly possible that each of these would have been improved, even greatly improved, had the critic been in possession of a good social theory (Honneth thinks that Rousseau did have a good theory, but doesn't comment on any of the others). Who could possibly deny that? We just don't know what these critical arguments would have looked like had they been developed on a solid theoretical foundation, and there is no experimental way of finding out. Of course, all these critics did have theories of one sort or another; they couldn't have written at all without the presuppositions, concepts, generalized world views that theories like Augustinianism, utilitarianism, or existentialism provided for them. And it looks as if these theories served them fairly well--even though none of them fits the standard (Marxist or post-Marxist) model of a good social theory. But maybe "served" isn't the right word; maybe the theories just didn't get in the way of the critical enterprise. Mill's modified utilitarianism doesn't, after all, account for the

moral insight of his book on the subjection of women. So what does account for it?

Even more worrying, however, are what I have already referred to as counter-examples of the opposite kind--writers who have a good theory and turn out nonetheless not to be accurate or timely social critics. But this too, you might say, is entirely expected: theory is neither sufficient nor necessary! Still, it seems to me that the failed helpfulness of a good theory shakes our confidence more than the spectacle of success without theory (which might just be a matter of luck). And it is only by looking at some examples of failure that we will begin to understand what else, besides a good theory, is needed for good social criticism.

My first example is the case of Max Horkheimer in America in the 1940s and then back in Germany in the '50s and '60s. These were years of extraordinary achievement: Horkheimer sustained the Institute for Social Research in the difficult conditions of exile and then in the almost equally difficult conditions of return-from-exile; he joined in several ambitious and impressive research projects; he co-authored Dialectics of Enlightenment with Theodor Adorno; and he wrote a series of critical essays--the focus of my interest here. The essays were based on the social theory or one version of the social theory of what we (in the US) call the early Frankfurt School. The particular piece that I shall quote, "Threats to Freedom," came out in the mid-sixties, but I am inclined to believe that it was first

thought about in the American years. In any case, it is a reflection on mass society, the radical decline of individualism, and the growing dominance of conformist and collectivist ways of life. With regard to all these, Horkheimer is not inclined to see social or cultural differences between the totalitarian and democratic societies of east and west. Though he acknowledges political differences, he doesn't believe that these can be sustained over time. The "threats" appear, he argues, in both places and seem equally threatening in both.

All this was familiar enough in the years Horkheimer was writing; different people made similar arguments, working out of the same theoretical matrix. But was the theory of mass society a good social theory? I have to confess that I thought so at the time, and surely, of the theories available in the 1940s and '50s, it was one of the better ones. I shall call it "good" for the purposes of this lecture. By contrast, Horkheimer's critique of contemporary democratic societies is an example--a very useful example--of bad social criticism. Listen to his critical voice describing the "regression of freedom" and the replacement of the individual by the collectivity:

Around 1900 it was up to a person [himself] how he crossed the street. He looked right and left, listened for the horse's hooves, and walked as he chose, slowly or quickly, directly or diagonally, to the other side. Today twenty or

thirty pairs of eyes look at the light or the traffic policeman and wait for orders. The signals to which a driver must attend are far more numerous; they determine not only his stopping and going but his tempo and direction. In the larger countries, the very form of the curve in the road ahead is reproduced on a sign, and in the ensuing moments the driver must accommodate himself to the little drawing. Pedestrians, like drivers, form a group; both react to directions, and without these directions they could not be thought of as acting at all. (Critique of Instrumental Reason [New York: Continuum, 1994], pp.156-57)

This passage could, I suppose, be the result of an empirical study, but it obviously isn't. It is an imagined scene, and not very well imagined. Horkheimer doesn't notice, for example, that drivers **A**accommodate themselves**ā** to the actual curve in the road and not to the drawing of the curve. More importantly, he doesn't notice that pedestrians are often engaged in animated conversation with one another as they wait for the traffic light to change. If they are speaking freely, maybe even about politics, does their obedient waiting really matter? In fact, Horkheimer made no effort to discover whether this eminently sane conformism is in any way consequential for other, more significant areas of social life. His critical

message antedates his account of the street rather than deriving from it. Partly for that reason, though not only for that reason, he doesn't get the street right--or the larger society that the street is supposed to represent.

I will delete my second example, which had to do with the Praxis group in Yugoslavia, and focus on this one. Honneth clearly admires Horkheimer, but he doesn't defend this critical text. And he acknowledges that "just as many authors have failed dramatically at this task [the critique of society] as have mastered it." So we agree that social theory is not a sufficient condition of successful criticism, though we continue to disagree about whether it is a necessary condition. But I want to ask a different question: how do we recognize the failures of critics, when they fail, as Honneth says many of them do? Does that require a better social theory? Or do we recognize failure in some other way? Horkheimer's critique of conformism in mass society seems to fail the test of common sense. He makes us smile, which is certainly not his intention. Marcuse's critique of "one-dimensional man" and Foucault's critique of the "carceral society"--both of which Honneth cites--are admittedly not funny, but they are recognizably wrong, or they seem grossly exaggerated, to anyone who looks closely at the everyday experience they claim to describe. I mean, "looks" without the tinted glasses of a deep theory. Honneth concedes the "rhetorical hyperbole" of these two critiques, but he seems

to think that hyperbole is a necessary feature of radical criticism. And he sees no political harm in it. But what if some group of people, a party or movement, takes seriously the description of Western liberalism as already (deeply) totalitarian—and acts on it?

I want to say again—the concession may be inadequate, but it is genuine--that critical theory has produced many examples of accurate and timely social criticism from the 1930s to the present. Perhaps especially in the last two or three decades: Jurgen Habermas' critical writings over those years seem to me exemplary for the genre. Clearly, a good theory can be a big help, but it seems clear to me that help is also needed from another place. What kind of help? What other place?

II

The suggestion that I want to pursue now is that we need to think about moral capabilities and motivations. We need an account of the virtues that make good criticism possible, perhaps also of the passions. Criticism isn't just an intellectual activity. It has to be developed and argued in a rational way, but that's not all we can say about it. Good social criticism is the work of good men and women.

I don't mean "good" simply. People who are cruel to their neighbors and neglectful of their children can still be powerful social critics, even critics of cruelty and neglect. But they do require a specific set of moral virtues. Virtue is high on the philosophical agenda these days, after many years in which philosophers wrote almost exclusively about obligation and duty, and there have been some interesting explorations of particular virtues and of the moral character they constitute. I am going to attempt something in that line. Honneth is acutely uncomfortable with this project, which "accommodates," he thinks, "the contemporary tendency to personalize intellectual issues." Reading the critiques of other writers by Luther, Milton, Defoe, Addison, Voltaire, and Rousseau (a very short list, given the possibilities), I am surprised to hear this called a contemporary tendency. Surely a concern with character, especially the character of one's opponents, has been a feature of intellectual life for a very long time. Still, Honneth argues, the more legitimate concern is not with the critic's character but with his "capacity to infuse texts with the power to subvert social myths." That is certainly right, but since some critics succeed in doing this, and some, as Honneth says, fail, it seems a good idea to look for the individual qualities that make for success and failure. So I shall try to understand social criticism by giving an account of three virtues (but perhaps there are more) that make it possible. Two of

them are common to all the philosophical lists; the other, to my knowledge, hasn't been much discussed.

The first of the necessary virtues, and the most obvious, is courage. Sometimes what criticism requires is actual physical courage, to persist in the face of threats, imprisonment, and violence. Many of the East European dissidents of the communist years displayed this kind of courage, often to a remarkable degree, and have since been honored for it. But we certainly prefer, as Honneth notes, contemporary liberal societies where this kind of courage is not necessary. More important for our purposes, then, is the moral courage that sustains a critique of tyranny or oppression when one's fellow citizens are silent or complicit—and that makes it possible to condemn their complicity. It isn't easy to deal with the anger, outrage, and incomprehension that this last kind of criticism, when it comes from someone near and dear, inevitably provokes. “That's what our enemies say about us. How can you also say it?” Critics who hear that question and go on with their criticism are brave human beings--though they are only sometimes honored for their bravery.

Acknowledging that difficult bravery, and honoring it, I also have to say that some people are much too eager to go on with their criticism; they welcome every opportunity to provoke and offend their fellows; they are gleeful critics. Epatat la

bourgeoisie is, after all, a favorite activity of bourgeois intellectuals; I don't think that it requires courage. Or, if it does, the courage in question is what Aristotle would call an excess or distortion of the virtue. Willful provocation, the desire to be outrageous, derives from a kind of moral recklessness (the hyperbole of Honneth's critics often seems to me similarly reckless). And recklessness doesn't make for good social criticism because it is only inadvertently timely and rarely accurate in its substance. It severs the link between social critics and the society they are criticizing and frees them from any need to understand the people who live in that society--who live there complacently, perhaps, but sometimes not.

The best critics, by contrast, are men and women who are fearful of criticizing those nearest to them, because of the nearness, but who make the criticism anyway. They recognize the nearness not only as a moral tie but as a personal engagement, and so their critique has the sensitivity, intimacy, and grasp of detail that is a feature of confessional literature. It is directed outwards, toward a society, a group of people, a set of policies or institutions, but it doesn't pretend to distance or detachment. "I have cut myself off. I have nothing to do with those people." Courageous critics, it seems to me, don't usually talk that way. Their courage lies in criticizing people with whom they have a lot to do.

The second virtue required for social criticism is compassion. Critics must

be able to sympathize with their society's victims, whether these are the victims of political tyranny; racial, religious, or sexist bigotry; ideological fanaticism; economic exploitation; or social (or intellectual) snobbery. And they must sympathize whether the victims are strangers or relatives. Without a generalized compassion of this sort, their criticism will be neither accurate nor timely. They require some knowledge of, or sense of, the human suffering that their state or their society or (some of) their fellow citizens have caused--first, so that their anger is properly focused and, second, so that it is properly expressed. It's this kind of knowledge that made possible Mill's critique of the subjection of women. If the knowledge came to him from Harriet Taylor, as seems likely, he still had the capacity to learn, to understand the distress and anger she described to him.

“The need to lend a voice to suffering,” wrote Theodor Adorno in Negative Dialectics, “is a condition of all truth” (trans. E.B. Ashton [New York: Seabury Press, 1973], pp. 17-18). Well, not of all truth; I would say simply that men and women who don't feel this need are unlikely to recognize the critical truths about their own society.

But Honneth has a different idea about this need to lend a voice, and here we come, perhaps, to our deepest disagreement. For his social critic “does not so much identify with an articulated suffering already perceived by the victims but with a

pain surmised to lie beyond what can be socially conveyed.” I thought that lending a voice is necessary because oppressed men and women have no access to a public forum. They know that they are oppressed, but are prevented from speaking for themselves. But for Honneth, the real purpose of a good social theory is to expose oppressions that no one knows about—even the victims have not yet perceived their own suffering. So when the critic lends them his voice, he isn’t saying what they want to say or what they want him to say. He is saying what he wants to say (on their behalf), expressing the deep insight into social reality that is his and his alone. The critic, then, cannot be compassionate, since he doesn’t feel “with” his fellows. He must, indeed, be coldhearted, even bitter, Honneth says, because he is compelled to articulate forms of injury and pain that only he recognizes.

What lies behind this account of the critical enterprise is the Marxist idea of false consciousness. One might think that a good social theory helps people understand the historical sources of the injuries they experience. I am afraid that Honneth has a different view—that a good social theory exposes injuries that ordinary people, you and me, have not yet experienced, of which we are not yet conscious. We are trapped, intellectually and emotionally, “within the boundaries of acceptable discourse.” The theorist/critic has broken free and seen the world as it really is. He is a hero indeed, though Honneth is wonderfully frank in

acknowledging that he is a negative rather than a positive hero—something like Milton’s Satan: resentful and embittered (those are Honneth’s words) because of the “intellectual isolation” that follows from his critique of “an entire form of life.” I confess that I find it difficult to admire this figure; I worry about the political and social consequences of his coldheartedness.

I also worry about too much compassion—a worry that Honneth can ignore since he doesn’t believe that the critic is compassionate at all. Often, in the case of people who think themselves closely connected to the agents of suffering, to the tyrants and bigots among whom they live, compassion for the victims turns into gnawing, all-consuming guilt. And guilt is as counterproductive as glee for the critical project, for it can produce a radically uncritical acceptance of the perspective of the victims, a surrender --experienced perhaps as a sacrifice--of the critic's own judgment, the faculty most necessary to critical success. Of course, social critics are always accused of “going over to the other side,” but even when that is the right thing to do, as it sometimes is, there isn't much point in leaving your critical faculties behind when you go over. The other side needs criticism too.

Mostly, however, guilt-ridden critics don't “go over”; they stay where they are; they criticize their own people, but in a wholesale way, without distinction, nuance, or restraint (another example of hyperbolic rhetoric), as if driven by

self-hate or a desire for collective disappearance. They cannot find or acknowledge the moral strength that exists around them; they describe only the weakness and corruption. But this is still a contribution to the critical project. By contrast, someone who cannot acknowledge the suffering of the victims will have nothing to contribute. The absence of compassion is more dangerous than the distortions of guilt.

What explains this absence in normal human beings, who are perfectly capable of feeling the pain of their own children, say, or of their friends? The standard explanation--which is right, I think, in many cases--is that when the victims are people with whom we have no familial, ethnic, or religious relationship, we just don't see them; and so we can't engage emotionally with their suffering. When nationalist intellectuals refuse to criticize their own nation for the suffering it inflicts on ethnic or linguistic minorities, it is because the minorities seem so far away, so radically "other." They don't make a sufficiently concrete appearance on the nationalists' mental screen.

But the failure of compassion may have another source. Sometimes intellectuals can't acknowledge the pain of the victims because their attention is focused elsewhere by some theory about the world. Consider, for example, the role of the theory of totalitarianism in the Vietnam war. Those American intellectuals

who were most gripped by the dangers of totalitarian politics were least likely to see what their country was doing in Vietnam. Perhaps they were right about the dangers; the theory of totalitarianism was a pretty good theory; that's why it was so effective in determining what people could and couldn't see. The threat to democracy loomed so large that it was hard to look closely at anything else and, as a result, burning villages were effectively invisible.

So, the third critically necessary virtue, which doesn't figure much in the literature, is a good eye. I mean, a (relatively) unmediated experience of reality or, better, a readiness to have such an experience, an openness to the "real world." Yes, yes, I know that there is no such thing as an unmediated experience of reality, and I know that my parenthetical qualification --"relatively unmediated"--is of little help. We bring all sorts of mental equipment to our everyday experience; our perceptions are always structured by theories of one sort or another. Nonetheless, I persist in believing, because it is a feature of my own dealings with politics and society, that some people are more ready than others to look at the world and acknowledge what they see--and this readiness seems to me a moral quality, a kind of down-to-earth honesty. "Do you see the war against the totalitarian enemy?" "I see burning villages." Social criticism is well-served by this second kind of seeing.

The idea of a good eye may be elucidated through a comparison with Max

Weber's augenmass (from *Politics as a Vocation*), which is translated into English by Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills as *a sense of proportion*, that is, a capacity to make *cool* judgments about the relative importance of this and that (From Max Weber: *Essays in Sociology* [London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1948], p.115). It is surely a good thing--for social critics as well as political leaders--to have a sense of proportion. But that is not quite what I mean by a good eye. Perhaps the idiom ein gutes augenmass haben comes closer: "to have a sure eye," says the dictionary (*New Cassells*, 1958). But that is still an eye for assessment, not simply for seeing. What has to be assessed has already been seen. I suppose that a critic with a good eye both sees and judges: This, he says, must not be overlooked or excused! But the combination requires an immediacy of vision as well as distance and coolness. The immediacy comes first, and its loss is especially disastrous for the critical project.

Honneth takes a good eye to mean only "the ability to estimate accurately the prospects" of political success—hence it is a virtue only of normalized intellectuals. "Nothing could be worse [for social criticism]," he writes, "than making the exposure of questionable social practices contingent on the prospects of the critique being implemented politically." With that claim, I entirely agree,

though I take it to apply even to normalized, everyday, intellectual criticism. A critic needs a good eye, in my view, not to estimate his prospects but to “see” what is actually happening in his society. For that, Honneth believes, a deep theory is necessary. And sometimes, perhaps, it is, but sometimes you just have to know how to look. Horkheimer, for all his theoretical sophistication, couldn’t see what was happening on the street in front of him. He didn’t have a “good eye.”

But I acknowledge the possible excess of this virtue also: the inability or refusal to grasp the larger context or to recognize the value of theory in fixing contextual boundaries. Here **Aproportion** plays its critical role. The burning villages aren’t, after all, the whole story of the war. Nor are the pedestrians in the Horkheimer text, whom I imagine in animated conversation with their friends, the whole story of a society. The war may be a good one despite the burning villages and, similarly, the society may be a bad one despite the collective vitality of its members. Still, it is important to say again that many theorists of mass society missed the animation altogether, denied its very possibility, because their theoretical vision of the context forbade it.

Perhaps a good eye has to be accompanied by a certain kind of intellectual humility, a willingness to think that one's theories about the world might be wrong

or incomplete and that the evidence of one's senses could count against them. It is surprising how many intellectuals who profess to believe in the value of evidence aren't in fact humble in this way. Theoretical conviction overrides sensory data. The "big picture" defeats the good eye. But this point is probably best made the other way around: the virtue of a good eye works, when it works, against intellectual arrogance.

Courage, compassion, and a good eye are three virtues that good critics need. They must be brave enough to tell their fellow citizens that they are acting wrongly, when they are acting wrongly, but to refuse the temptation of a provocative recklessness. They must sympathize with the victims, whoever the victims are, without becoming their uncritical supporters. They must look at the world in a straightforward way, and report what they see. Saying this, I mean only to elaborate on some of the qualities of a good person and to describe (some of) the common virtues. Critics aren't saints, even if one or another of them is virtuous beyond the normal run. Hence there appears to be this anomaly in my argument: I want social criticism that is accurate and timely, and this will often be radical criticism, but I distrust it unless it is the product of common virtue, of ordinary humanity.

But I deny the anomaly. What I have offered here is simply a new

description of the “connected critic,” who stands in a certain moral relationship to his or her society. (For the first description, see my book The Company of Critics [New York: Basic Books, 1988].) The virtues of courage, compassion, and a good eye, properly understood, constitute and sustain the connection. The connected critic is, however, the featured player in a theory about social criticism that I have tried to work out and defend over the past several decades. And so I come back to the question with which I began: what is the use-value of theory? I thought that I was writing in an iconoclastic vein, where theory was the icon. But it turns out that I am a believer too. Perhaps there is a better theoretical account of the critical project than my own. But theories of this kind are, I believe, useful to actual critics--not because they provide a full-scale historical or analytical account of the social world but because they address the character of critical engagement and describe the local environment in which critics live and work. Social critics must know their localities if they are to function well within them. I don't want to deny the possible value of Honneth's large-scale “explanatory theories” in fostering accuracy and timeliness. They have sometimes done that (and sometimes not). But a more modest theory, open to the “real world” and cognizant of the experience of its members, may more consistently help critics understand themselves and their work. And it may help the rest of us recognize good and bad social criticism.

