

Critique and cognitive capacities: Towards an action-oriented model

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Abstract

In response to an impasse, articulated in the late 1980s, the cognitive capacities of ordinary people assumed central place in contemporary critical social theory. The participants' perspective gained precedence over scientific standards branded as external. The notion of cognition, however, went unchallenged. This article continues the move away from external standards, and discusses two models of critique, which differ based on their underlying notions of cognition. The representational model builds on cognitive content, misrecognition and normativity; three features which are illustrated with positions adopted by prominent exponents of critical social theory. An alternative understanding relies on action-oriented disclosure and the participants' basic familiarity with the social world. On this reading, what clashes with unequal structures is skilful coping, rather than representations and normative standards. The action-oriented approach may overcome the dilemma of understanding both the impact and the possible transcendence of unequal structures, although it cannot ultimately replace representational critique.

Keywords

action-oriented cognition, Bourdieu, cognitive capacities, critique, Heidegger, Honneth, power

The role attributed to ordinary people's cognitive capacities within critical social theory has undergone a decisive change since the 1980s. The change has been described as a move from 'external' to 'immanent' critique, which values the participants' perspective over against the perspective of the scientific observer.¹ The multitude of opinions close to everyday life gained precedence over theorizing at higher levels of abstraction. The conceptualization of people's cognitive capacities – as opposed to their role – has received less attention. Critical social theory has not engaged with the intense discussion across scientific domains, starting in the late 1990s,² on the embodied and the cultural

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character of cognition. As a consequence, cognition is tacitly understood in representational terms within both 'external' and 'immanent' approaches in critical social theory. This article discusses the conceptualization of ordinary people's cognition. In particular, I wish to explore the implications of the action-oriented understanding of cognition, *if transferred to critical social theory*. Can it be transferred? What would it mean? These are basic questions. The critical test will be whether the action-oriented model can account for the impact and the possible transcendence of unequal relations of power at one and the same time.

The article starts by outlining the turn towards ordinary people's perceptions, and how it evolved out of conceptual difficulties encountered by external versions of critique at a specific moment in time. The brief account provides the background for understanding the currently strong – and in my view justified – position of the participants' perspective within the context of critical social theory. The main part of the article discusses two different models of critique, which differ based on their understanding of everyday cognition. The representational model describes the participants' perspective in terms of cognitive content, misrecognition and normativity; three features which will be illustrated with positions adopted by prominent exponents of critical social theory. In the next step, the representational model is contrasted with an alternative approach to the participants' perspective, according to which the perceptions of ordinary people are first of all action-oriented, intuitive and non-normative. The action-oriented understanding of cognition is elaborated into an action-oriented understanding of *critique*, first by incorporating the differential impact of social conditions and then by accounting for immanent contradiction without recourse to narratives and normativity. At the end, I will address the relationship between the representational and the action-oriented model of critique.

The revaluation of the participants' perspective

A number of undertakings to reconstruct critical social theory during the last decades can be read as attempts to salvage the participants' perspective. In France, Boltanski (in relation to Bourdieu), and in Germany, Habermas and Honneth (in relation to Horkheimer and Adorno) explicitly broke on grounds associated with, among other things, the competencies and the role of ordinary actors.³ The positions offered by the earlier generation of critical theorists were referred to as 'external critique'. That is, the acceptability of critique was established independently of what people thought about the account given. There was a sharp division between the theories of the scientific observer and the participants' perspective. Up until the 1980s, some of the most influential approaches can be described as external critique, in this sense. Bourdieu's critical sociology,⁴ Adorno's negative dialectics,⁵ Foucault's analytic of power⁶ and structural Marxism⁷ did not include ordinary people or their experiences in the theory construction, nor did they act liberating in relation to ordinary people, or anyone else, since they were preoccupied with laying bare the most basic conditions which shape and enable a given social formation. Ordinary people's perceptions and competencies had no or little role to play.⁸

The turn towards the participants' perspective was overdetermined by developments in social theory more generally. External critique was disqualified on the grounds of alleged determinism, essentialism, universal validity claims or an orthodox view of science.⁹ But the turn was also dictated by internal conceptual difficulties, linked to the problem of agency and the possibility of transcendence. Critical social theory seemed geared towards understanding the Hobbesian problem of order, and less concerned with, or even ill adapted to understand, the practical overcoming of an unjust order. In 1988, Axel Honneth acutely described an impasse in critical social theory. 'A central problem for a critical theory today', he wrote in the afterword to *The Critique of Power*, was to elaborate a conceptual framework which could account for the structure of social power and, at the same time, capture 'the social resources for its practical overcoming'.¹⁰ He believed that social power could be accounted for, but not in a way that gave space and sufficient attention to 'the social resources for its practical overcoming'. The impasse was partly produced by the very success of critique. By laying bare the intricate web of power relations, the first goal of critique had reached a high point at the time, with the Foucauldian analysis of power,¹¹ the Feminist critique of Marxism¹² and postcolonial studies.¹³

While critical social theory was in a better position than ever to account for the impact of unequal power structures, the social resources and the points of transcendence were more difficult to discern. The impasse reflected a widely shared understanding at that time. The conceptual loss of agency and political leverage were by no means confined to Critical Theory, in the narrow and rather specific sense of the first generation of the Frankfurt school. It was also experienced in other traditions, most notably in the Marxist tradition, and in the reception of Foucault and of Bourdieu. The impasse would be articulated in the corresponding terminologies. The need to appreciate the competence and the agency of ordinary actors was outspoken in Boltanski's settlement with Bourdieu; it was a motivating force in Foucault's turn from the analysis of power towards the subject¹⁴ and it was important in Laclau's and Mouffe's critique of Althusserian structuralism.¹⁵ In Critical Theory, the impasse was linked to the inability to fulfil some of its most central concerns. According to the classic take, Critical Theory should be emancipatory and reflexive. It should liberate and reflect on its own possible use, in relation to those about whom it was a theory about.¹⁶ People were to be included in the critical project, transforming their understanding of the world and motivating them to take action against injustices. Classical critical theory did not single out any particular social group as the addressee, such as for instance the working class. It was aimed at people in general. However, it effectively excluded the interference of ordinary people and approached them *post festum* in a top-down fashion, so in relation to them, the critique of Adorno and Horkheimer was neither emancipatory nor reflexive.¹⁷

A further ground to reassess the participants' perspective was the perceived failure of the first generation of Critical Theory to account for immanent contradiction. Immanence in this context meant that the mechanism of transcendence was embedded in the existing social conditions. Social change was seen to be propelled by the contradiction between on the one hand unjust structures and on the other hand the capacities for transcendence.¹⁸ Hence, the importance of accounting for the structure of social power and for 'the social resources for its practical overcoming' *at one and the same time*, as

Honneth had stressed. Each side of the contradiction must be understood on its own terms. Based on such an account – and only based on such account – it would be possible to locate the points at which unjust structures and people’s resources enter into contradiction. The idea of immanent contradiction is strictly speaking, as Herzog has pointed out, specific to the Hegelian versions of critique such as Marxism, or the various generations of the Frankfurt School.¹⁹ At the same time, critique cannot dispense of *some notion* of crucial tension.²⁰ Whether thought of as contradiction or not, critical social science has to identify points of friction, induced by asymmetrical relationships of power, which will propel people to take action, thus realizing Horkheimer’s originally formulated ambition of critical theory ‘to liberate human beings from all circumstances that enslave them’.²¹

The centre of attention consequently moved towards the participants’ perspective. The main thrust to deal with the impasse, succinctly articulated in the afterword to *The Critique of Power*, was to elaborate a strictly immanent critique. According to the immanent conception of critique, transcendence comes from the ground up and is rooted in ordinary people’s opinions and experiences, rather than in a top-down fashion, from a social theory which is constructed and validated independently.²² What was ultimately at stake was the perceived necessity to acquire a better understanding of ‘the other side of power’, the capacities for transcendence. While the cognitive competencies of ordinary people cannot be equated with the social resources for transcendence, there was, in the following decades, a growing consensus that they were one central component among such resources. The significance of ordinary people’s perceptions had thus increased dramatically. Yet what were they like? And how did they transcend unequal relations of power? That will be the topic of the next section.

The representational model of critique

The revaluation cleared the way for paying more attention to the nature of everyday perceptions. Once their role was theoretically secured, their conceptualization might have been next in line. Yet key assumptions on cognition have so far gone unquestioned in critical social theory. While the cognitive competencies of ordinary people were fundamentally reassessed, placed at the centre of the critical project instead of being dismissed as unreliable surface phenomena, the potential of the significant advances in the understanding of the embodied and the culturally embedded nature of cognition, which have been made over the course of the last two decades in cognitive sociology and psychology,²³ remains to be explored in critical social theory. Current versions of ‘immanent critique’, just like previous forms of ‘external critique’, has been conceived within what will be referred to as a representational paradigm. This section accounts for the representational model of critique and its three main features: representation, misrecognition and normativity. Each feature is exemplified by influential positions adopted by prominent exponents of critical social theory widely conceived, from Marx to Boltanski. They differ in many respects, and I could no doubt have devoted more space to discussing the positions of each writer in far more detail, as well as included the positions of other writers. The treatment below is limited to illustrating basic points about representation, misrecognition and normativity. The prime objective is to initiate a discussion

of the conceptualization of cognition in critical social theory. I want to suggest that the representational model of critique is precisely that: *one* model. A further objective is to make the point that the transition from external to immanent critique only marginally affected the representational model of critique. Before as well as after the transition, representations (ideas, beliefs, images, discourses and statements) were primary, whereas the idea of necessary misrecognition remained influential and the element of normativity was reinforced.

The representational model of critique relies on (i) representations as the basic unit, (ii) misrecognition of social conditions and (iii) normative judgement.

1. Cognition is representational

Cognition is thought of as reception of sensory impression followed by rule-based operations on packages of representations. The element of representations – ideas, beliefs, images, discourses and statements – is basic. We relate to the world through representations. Articulated in the terms suggested by Charles Taylor, cognition is always mediated through representations.²⁴ We form beliefs and judgements that something is so-and-so. Ordinary people, as well as everyone else, construct – based on sensory impressions and further moulded by cultural scripts, hegemonic categories or rationalities – representations of the external world and of ourselves.

The representational model of cognition is dominant in social science.²⁵ It is also widely accepted within critical social theory, more specifically. Groups and individuals are seen to relate to the social world through representations. What is taken to be the object of representations may differ. In Bourdieu's critical sociology, it was the world in general. It was envisioned in ways that shift according to social position. Tacit assumptions and articulated beliefs were the building blocks out which the social world was constructed by groups and individuals, within the confine of socially specific principles of classification.²⁶ The 'sociology of critique' associated with Boltanski employed a situational rather than structural approach to cognition. It focused on perceptions of the situation, and how groups and individuals came to construct mutual interpretations. Narrative accounts were seen to be implicated in our everyday practices, including the practice of critique. When forced to justify ourselves, following for instance a minor traffic accident, participants drew on available discourses, derived from political philosophy.²⁷ The focus on cognitive competencies displayed in an everyday setting was a novelty within the context of critical social theory. Yet the basic units were accounts and narratives cast in representational form.

In the Foucauldian tradition, the perceptions of ourselves were central; how we have come to see ourselves as certain kind of beings through historical problematizations and discursive regimes. The same applied to our perceptions of specific institutions, such as the prison, or sexuality.²⁸ Genealogy operated on established truths and offered new interpretations. The building blocks were representations, often in refined form: scientific ideas, policy recommendations and administrative decisions. To the extent that genealogy involved critique, existing interpretations were replaced by new interpretations of ourselves and of familiar institutions.

In the Hegelian tradition of critique, as continued by Habermas and Honneth, ordinary people's perceptions and practices were stepping stones in the evolution of collective self-understanding.²⁹ As such, they were part of an unfolding narrative. Recognition-oriented reformulations of Critical Theory, in particular, assumed a holistic conception of the self, pushing towards the realization of a historically available rationality. Whereas the rationality was prelinguistic and embedded in practices, critique was conceived in terms of representations – as judgements, interpretations or redescriptions.³⁰

The classical formulation of historical materialism was likewise centred around representations. When Marx wrote that the social conditions in which ordinary people find themselves 'determines their consciousness',³¹ consciousness was tacitly understood in terms of cognitive content. Within the Marxist tradition, the discussion has evolved around beliefs, values or interests. Georg Lukács saw cognition as embedded in the mode of production. For the working class, the daily experience of exploitation gave rise to beliefs and values that set it apart from other social classes. The approach was concerned with how collective interests and representations took shape, and how they in turn led to collective action. At the same time, the basic unit was true and false representations of the world, echoing Engels' notion of false consciousness.³² The tight link between cognition and class position was controversial. Following Lockwood's *The Black-Coated Worker*, the relationship has generally be seen as historically contingent; class consciousness was dependent on site-specific responses to experiences of exploitation or privilege.³³ Thompson would speak of class consciousness as the collective handling of such experiences, 'embodied in traditions, value-systems, ideas, and institutional forms'.³⁴ By the 1980s, the idea of structural determination had lost much of its hold.³⁵ Yet the representational orientation remained; beliefs and interests carried specific cognitive contents.

Thus, critical social theorists on both sides of the generational divide tacitly subscribed to the representational model of cognition. The model was unaffected by the revaluation of the participants' perspective and the move from external to immanent critique. The world and everything in it remain packaged in representational form. Inherently different approaches to critique conceived of ordinary people's cognition as representations; as beliefs and judgements that something is one way or the other. That was how groups and individuals were seen to experience social reality. Representations were the basic units, and the very idea of critique submitted that we possess the cognitive capacities necessary to form *new* beliefs and evaluations of existing conditions, or practices.

2. Cognition involves misrecognition of social conditions

Critique has to provide an account of the impact of social conditions on the cognitive capacities of ordinary people. Unlike non-critical approaches, the ambition is to uncover asymmetric relationships of power and their social repercussions.³⁶ The representational approach generally conceives of the impact of unjust structures in terms of distortion. Historically, this is the dominant approach to the relationship between social conditions and cognition, as articulated within Critical Theory, Bordieuan sociology and Foucauldian genealogy. But there are exceptions. As opposed to the idea of representations as the

basic unit of critique, the revaluation of the participants' perspective has left some traces. During the last decades, the idea of necessary misrecognition has been challenged by Žižek and Boltanski, among others.

Critical Theory, with its inherited emphasis on critique of ideology (*Ideologiekritik*), is entirely built on the assumption of misrecognition, or the idea that people fail to rebel against unjust structures because they are guided by false beliefs produced by the same structures. Current social conditions are thought to inhibit the critical capacities of ordinary people. Axel Honneth, for instance, argues that the 'social pathologies' associated with capitalism give rise to 'second-order disorders': an impaired reflexive understanding of the first-order representational content.³⁷ Unequal relations of power not only affect material representations, beliefs about the world or normative conceptions, they also affect the critical capacities. As a consequence, people in general are not in a position to process the received information correctly, nor can they reach critical normative judgements. They do not have 'reflexive access' to the relevant ethical principles.³⁸ The materially determined misrecognition is identified as a major stumbling block towards social change. Ordinary peoples' cognitive capacities are valued highly but not everyone is seen to be in the position to exercise critique.

Bourdieu used the term misrecognition to account for how the critical judgements of ordinary people were inhibited by unequal structures and arbitrary limitations. The real mechanisms that shaped their lives were necessarily misperceived, generating the undisputed and taken-for-granted character of the social world.³⁹ Further, contrary to the prevailing self-understanding within the Foucauldian tradition, the genealogical approach is built on a related assumption of misrecognition. The historization of seemingly natural institutions will force the reader to see the prison, sexuality or mental health in a new light. As opposed to Critical Theory, genealogy did not raise truth claims. It could not claim that ordinary people were systematically misled, in terms of cognitive content. However, as David Owen has argued, genealogical critique liberates us from 'perspectival capture'. We are not incorrect but trapped within a particular perspective.⁴⁰ Alternatively, genealogy may involve a particular form of critique, as it reveals the processes of social construction. This allows for critical reflection on one's own subjectification.⁴¹ In the footsteps of Nietzsche, genealogy thus opened up the possibility for changing perspective to acquire new conceptions and evaluations of existing institutions and of ourselves. The new conceptions were supposed to be superior to previous understandings, although not necessarily 'more true'.

The assumption of misrecognition has also been challenged from within the representational paradigm. Žižek, for instance, has argued that people are not deluded about the nature of social reality – 'they know very well how things really are'.⁴² Ordinary people do not believe in the justifications for existing social practices – they just act as if they do. They have for the most part seen through dominant cultural representations, do not take them seriously or realize that they mask vested interests. Yet to little effect, since changes in practice do not follow.⁴³ Further, in the 'sociology of critique', the assumption of misrecognition – so prominent in Bourdieu's work – was questioned in line with the general revaluation of ordinary people's opinions and competencies. It was replaced by the opposite assumption, or the propensity, inherited from the Ethno-methodologists, to accept ordinary people's opinions and experiences as they were. They

were the indispensable point of departure, and by ‘making use of the point of view of the actors’, social critique was understood as an expansion of everyday complaints.⁴⁴ Hence, while the idea of misrecognition has a strong standing within the critical tradition, it was no longer unquestioned. The appearance of a minority position was part of the process where the participants’ perspective gained priority over against external critique that was elaborated without recourse to what people thought about the account given.

3. Critique is normative

While the recent theoretical reassessment of ordinary people’s opinions and competencies relativized the assumption of misrecognition, the emphasis on normativity, on the other hand, was reinforced. The normative dimension was less pronounced in many external versions of critique. Within the Marxist tradition, especially in its scientific orientations, it tended to be dismissed. In the first book of *Capital*, Marx ridiculed Proudhon and other critics who denounced capitalism from an ethical point of view.⁴⁵ Historical materialism revealed the structure of capitalism and its inherent contradictions; the points of transcendence and the social forces that were historically pitted against each other, regardless of what people happened to think of it all, whether they deplored the changes or enthusiastically embraced them. The basic intuition was captured in the Marxian idea of history as unfolding behind the backs of all actors involved. In the 1980s, the harsh criticism of the external model and the concomitant shift of attention to the participants’ perspective entailed a reassessment of the normative dimension. This aspect was brought forward most explicitly by Boltanski and the ‘sociology of critique’, which investigated the critical capacities of ordinary individuals. As people moved in and out of different social contexts, in which interaction followed different logics, they came to master ‘the arts of living in different worlds’, with their corresponding principles of justification.⁴⁶ In contexts governed by the market logic, options were seen from the point of view of profitability, whereas in other context options were valued according to the public good or a sense of propriety. When individuals found institutions or practices wanting, they would express critique on that basis. Critique was thus normative, powered by the discrepancy between what the world is like and of what it should be like, as exposed by ‘people’s moral expectations’.⁴⁷

In recent contributions to Critical Theory, the normativity was less straightforward and troubled by the dilemma of distortion and transcendence. Ordinary people’s interpretations were distorted by the existing social conditions. Their explicit views could not be trusted. At the same time, everyday cognition was located on the other side of power, instrumental to its practical overcoming. The normative principles necessary for transcendence were implicit in the lives and the interpretations of ordinary people. Habermas saw the principle of authentic communication embedded in ordinary language use.⁴⁸ Honneth distilled normative ideals from entrenched patterns of interaction in wider domains of society, where recognition was institutionalized as love, individual rights or social esteem.⁴⁹ In the Foucauldian tradition, the normative aspect was even more complex. The entire tradition is torn between Foucault’s affirmations of the will ‘not to be governed *like that*’,⁵⁰ and strictly non-normative genealogical approaches to discursive regimes. In the programmatic statements on genealogy, the lack of normative

grounding was embraced.⁵¹ In the programmatic statements on critique, on the other hand, people's opinions were seen to be caught in an individualist struggle against prejudice and oppression, which were rejected on normative grounds.⁵²

Some of the main current versions of critical social theory thus evolved out of a critique of external theoretical standpoints and converged on the focus on ordinary people's cognitive capacities, in the hope of getting a better grip of the capacities for the practical overcoming of unequal relations of power. The process of transcendence was reconceived; rooted in ordinary people's perceptions and competences, rather than in a top-down fashion, from a social theory which was constructed and validated independently. In other respects, there was significant continuity between external and immanent critique. Representations remain the basic unit of critique, and while the idea of necessary misrecognition has been questioned, the element of normativity has been reinforced. Current versions of critical social theory thus essentially share the representational model of cognition with the pre-1980s versions of critique. What has changed is not the conception but the role attributed to ordinary people's perceptions. Cognition is tacitly and enduringly conceived according to the representational paradigm. That is, groups and individuals form beliefs of the world and of their situation, and take action on that basis. Information is processed into representations; the representations are then integrated into legitimizing narratives or, alternatively, into critical judgements. Critique works on existing representations and changes the self-understanding of the addressees, their views of particular institutions or their world view more generally.

Towards an action-oriented model of critique

The representational model is one approach to the cognitive capacities for transcendence among ordinary people. The alternative is to build critique on an action-oriented model of cognition, an understanding mainly influenced by philosophical phenomenology⁵³ and by recent models derived from cognitive science.⁵⁴ I will outline an action-oriented model of critique and discuss its possible implications. Like the representational model, the action-oriented model provides answers on three basic issues: the underlying notion of the participants' cognition, the impact of asymmetrical relationships of power on their cognition and the cognitive capacities for transcendence. In what follows, I will first explicate the underlying model of cognition, and then discuss the immanent contradiction from both sides, considering the impact of unequal relationships of power, followed by the potential for practical transcendence.

A. The action-oriented model of cognition

Action-oriented cognition is unexplored within critical social theory, with a few exceptions.⁵⁵ Some of the reasons for the underuse are perfectly understandable. Heideggerian phenomenology does not include the weight of social structure and may be seen to be at best unrelated to Horkheimer's original intention to subvert the powers that be. Much the same applies to the existing literature in cognitive psychology and cognitive sociology, which is often technical in orientation, individualist or situational, and framed in cultural or neurological perspectives on human interaction. But the underlying understanding of cognition is

not necessarily irreconcilable with critical social theory, as I hope to show. The action-oriented conception differs from the representational paradigm in all three central respects: cognition is non-representational rather than representational, involves a basic familiarity with the world as opposed to misrecognition and is non-normative rather evaluating.

1. Cognition is non-representational. The external world is not perceived *through* internal representations or linguistic statements. Instead, we are immersed in shared meanings and practices that enable us to disclose the world we live in.⁵⁶ Cognition is about disclosing options rather than about producing representations. Maurice Merleau-Ponty relied on football players to illustrate action-oriented understanding of cognition. ‘For the player in action’, he wrote, the football field appears as ‘lines of force’ and ““openings” between adversaries’.⁵⁷ The football field is disclosed as specific requirements for action by the practical competences of the players. It is not an object of contemplation. Only spectators adopt an observational stance. Like Heidegger before him, Merleau-Ponty broke with the Cartesian tradition and dissolved the problem of mediation – the internalization of cognitive content from the external culture, or how the exterior world was pieced together by representations. Representations – ideas, beliefs, statements and other forms of mediation – lost their centrality when cognition was about disclosing lines of action rather than observing state of affairs.

Courses of action are primary. When we enter a room, for instance, we do not perceive particular objects, such as chairs or colleagues, nor do we convert chairs or colleagues into internal representations or into propositional statements. It would be more accurate to say that we perceive opportunities for action as we enter the room: invitations to sit, invitations to chat and so on. Our relationship with the world is basically one of ‘concerned absorption’.⁵⁸ The world shows up in situational form and we constantly come to grips with circumstances at hand. People do not passively receive information but actively engage with the world around them, to access courses of action. ‘Perception is not something that happens to us’, Noë has suggested, ‘it is something we do’.⁵⁹ Options do not simply exist but are disclosed by us. They appear because we are the kind of beings we are. Or rather: we *make* courses of action appear *because* we care, because we possess certain skills, because we carry certain expectations and because we have a certain physical body.

Long ago, Marx deplored that ‘the active side’ of consciousness had been explored within idealism, but not within materialist approaches.⁶⁰ The structural determination of cognition seemed to leave little space for creativity. But on the model suggested by cognitive science, cognition is creative by its very nature.⁶¹ Courses of actions are actively disclosed, not passively registered. Individuals do not receive information on what kind of options are available and then make a choice. Instead, people disclose actions as they move into situations, and new options are made available, through skilled interaction with the environment. Like Merleau-Ponty’s football players, we intuitively respond to solicitations and make use of available affordances to come to grips with the situation. Things appear as equipment, as goals, as value, as threats or as obstacles, as we grasp them as such – as tools to be used, or as threats to managed – based on our own skills and concerned engagement.

2. We are basically right about the world and the options it presents us. Everyone is at home in their world, in the sense suggested by Heidegger in *Sein und Zeit*. Ordinary people

usually manage to navigate complex social situations. We know how to do things, and which options are available. Dreyfus describes the interaction as 'skilful coping'.⁶² It sometimes happens that we are mistaken. The situation can become problematic, as things do not work out or people do not react as expected. But our primal relationship is one of familiarity. We are mostly right about the world and the options it presents us. The basic familiarity does not relate to the content of the material beliefs that people actually entertain. From a representational perspective, we may well be wrong in many cases. But when we adopt an action-oriented approach and cognition concerns options, the 'rightness' encompasses the vast majority of people. As long as we are able to disclose available options in a manner of 'skilful coping', or 'concerned absorption', this in itself provides proof of correctness. The reality check is instantaneous. If the course of action works out, we tend not to think of it. If it runs into obstacles, on the other hand, we are made aware of that.

3. Cognition is essentially non-normative. Options do not show up as right or as wrong. Courses of action either show up or do not show up. The distinction between available and unavailable options is primary. The process of disclosure takes place mainly below the formation of conscious normative judgements. The default mode of everyday cognition is habitual and intuitive. Most of the time, we are not aware of it. Cognition tend to take place below the level of consciousness.⁶³ It may involve normativity, but only in a weak manner. Valuation is an integral part in discerning lines of action. The expectations and the concerns, with which options are disclosed, rely on notions of what is appropriate or worthwhile. Yet that is a kind of normativity, which is a tool to disclose actions rather than a standard to evaluate social institutions. As a consequence, the centre of analysis shifts from justifiability to availability.

Cognition is not always action-oriented. There is wide-ranging agreement, across phenomenology, cognitive science and social psychology, that there is a threshold above which cognition becomes active and conscious – probing, self-aware or reflective.⁶⁴ Across disciplinary borders, the core idea seems to be the same. We start evaluating options only when we have to. It was famously put forward by Heidegger, by way of the hammer-example. When we use a hammer and all works as expected, we are absorbed in the task at hand and are not aware of the hammer. Only when something goes wrong, we direct our attention to the hammer. The tool itself turns conspicuous and we start thinking.⁶⁵ And this goes generally: when something gets in the way and frustrates or jeopardizes our expectations, we switch mode of cognition. The default mode is to be absorbed in the world. But we may be forced by the circumstances to a more conscious search for available courses of action, involving deliberation, conscious control, representation and theorizing.⁶⁶

B. The impact of asymmetrical relationships of power: Building cognitive capacities

The action-oriented model of cognition, and its three constitutive features, does not amount to an action-oriented model of *critique*. Critique will have to include *some* account of the relationship between social conditions and cognition. According to the

dominant representational approach, that relationship is one of repressive distortion. But within the tradition of critical social theory, there exists a different conception of the social impact on cognition. The influence is seen to be positive rather than negative, building cognitive competencies rather than distorting critical capacities. Asymmetric relationships of power shape the skills and the concerns, which make us disclose the world in different ways, which are adequate and correct, rather than distorted, given our social position. Just like in the representational model of critique, cognition is heavily influenced by unequal relationships of power. But the influence would be less concerned with cognitive content. It would not mean incorporating a package deal of beliefs and interests and a uniformly shared world view. Instead, people acquire certain skills and concerns that allow them to disclose lines of actions in each and every situation. On this reading, the social impact turns on the underlying categories and builds the competence to perceive the world.

In *Practical Reason* and *Pascalian Meditations*, Bourdieu advocated an action-oriented understanding of cognition. He spoke of ‘a “feel” for the game’ in a way reminiscent of Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of the football player.⁶⁷ At the same time, Merleau-Ponty and phenomenology in general were criticized for not including the weight of social inequality in the analysis.⁶⁸ As an alternative, Bourdieu advanced a correspondence thesis. Structures lead a double life, he insisted; they simultaneously exist as relationships between people with unequally distributed material resources and as ‘cognitive structures’,⁶⁹ incorporated schemes of perception and action. Bourdieu overtook the idea of a correspondence between social and cognitive structures from Durkheim and French anthropology.⁷⁰ The experiences which people make under the circumstances that characterize their social position would fundamentally shape the categories of perception and were embodied as bodily dispositions to act. While he also spoke of ‘mental structures and classification’,⁷¹ ‘classificatory systems’,⁷² ‘the categories of perception’,⁷³ strictly speaking, there could be no separate cognitive categories. Actions were disclosed and performed based on the *same* structurally engendered competence, concerns and expectations. The unity of practical dispositions and categories of perception was made explicit in the notion of habitus. There was no real difference between practical skills and cognitive capacities. The know-how which made a particular course of action appear as such was the same as the ability to carry it out. In this way, cognition was calibrated in relation to frequently occurring challenges and available options, given the individual’s position in the social structure.

What Immanuel Kant called ‘the transcendental deduction’ was the endeavour to lay bare the conceptual infrastructure that enabled and shaped cognition of the outside world. It was concerned with the most basic categories, which were transcendental in the sense that they organized our cognition while they could not themselves become object of cognition.⁷⁴ Due to their foundational status, the categories lay outside the domain of empirical research. But as the philosophical advances, associated with Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty or Wittgenstein, were picked up in social analysis, the transcendental was replaced by the historical. Bourdieu, in particular, brought an action-oriented understanding of cognition into contact with the tradition of critique. Figuratively speaking, Heidegger was put on his feet.⁷⁵ Habitus assumed a basic familiarity with the world, as opposed to a distorted view of existing conditions. The familiarity was rooted in a

tight fit between individual cognition and social structure. Know-how, concerns and expectations were shaped by social class, gender, race, sexuality and geographic location. This meant that the worlds which people were essentially right about differed radically from one another according to social position. Not only did the available options – the distribution of life chances in terms of employment, consumption, housing conditions and family relations – differ significantly with the position in the social fabric. The skills, the concerns and the expectations, which make different courses of action accessible, depended on the social position that generated them in the first place. Options were made available, through skilled and concerned engagement.⁷⁶ But the nature of that engagement varied along the social fault lines. We see what we sense that we can do or are entitled to do. We do not see certain other things that are beyond our scope. Options may fail to show up, not only because one does not possess sufficient resources but also because one does not know how to do such things, one does not care about them or they are beyond ones' horizon of expectations. Whether the individual possess the concerns and the competences to handle situations and perceive opportunities will ultimately depend on the social position.

The action-oriented approach has been elaborated mainly in relation to routine cognition. Bourdieu discussed the differential social impact on cognition in relation to the practical stance to the world, and the 'practice turn' at the end of the 20th century directed attention to habitual behaviour as opposed to intentional actions and conscious choices.⁷⁷ But cognition is not necessarily less socially conditioned when people are critically aware of the options at hand. Rather, asymmetrical relationships of power must be assumed to shape the deliberative and consciously evaluating stance as well. The mode of cognition may change, from habitual and intuitive to conscious and reflexive, yet courses of action would be disclosed with the same know-how, concerns and expectations. Many if not most sociological approaches to cognition assume that the basic schemes are durable at the level of individuals.⁷⁸ While cognition can switch from automatic to controlled from one moment to another, the same does not hold true for the cognitive capacities. Options are disclosed with the same skills and evaluated with same concerns. Hence, cognition may be hyperactive – probing, self-aware or reflective – and still mirror structure. When solving problems and deliberating, or when acting in a routine fashion, we can see the same concerns, competence and expectations at work. In both cases, our know-how, concerns and expectations make courses of action accessible in ways that will reflect and possibly transcend the social structures that engendered them.

This is the first step from an action-oriented model of cognition to an action-oriented model of critique: to provide an account of the impact of unequal relationships of power. The account of the impact differs radically from most versions of the representational model. The experiences made under the circumstances associated with their respective social positions build the cognitive competencies rather than distort the critical capacities of ordinary people. Depending on the social position, different capacities are generated. The capacities to exercise critique are constituted in ways that reflect social class, gender, race and other social distinctions. Ordinary people or the population at large do not share the same know-how, the same expectations and the same concerns. It follows that the ability to exercise critique is not unevenly distributed within the

population. We cannot think of it as a matter of more or less critical capacity, aspiring – along the lines of the representational model – to attain a higher level of self-understanding or a more accurate view of the world. Instead, people are affected and equipped in very different ways through their particular insertion in the systems of social power. Some are not better off than others; it is just different. The final step to an action-oriented model of critique is to provide an account of how cognitive competencies can be resources for transcendence. This involves a new conception of immanent contradiction, or what clashes with the social structures that generated the cognitive competencies in the first place.

C. The contradiction between disclosed and available options

The action-oriented model can be seen to prolong the movement away from external critique while changing the terms in which the immanent contradiction is cast. The defining features of the model point towards a contradiction within the domain of ordinary people's perceptions. At the same time, it will differ from representational versions of immanent contradiction, which trace the tension to cognitive content and normative principles. On an action-oriented reading, the immanent contradiction has to be non-representational and non-normative and assume a basic familiarity with the world. It cannot rely on theorized experiences, political visions or entrenched moral principles to oppose injustice. Instead, what clashes with unjust structures is the skilled, concerned and future-oriented disclosure of available options. The tension resides between available and disclosed courses of action. In what follows, I will outline a notion of immanent contradiction, which would satisfy all three criteria on action-oriented cognition and exclusively unfold within the sphere of everyday perceptions. I must stress the preliminary character of this attempt.

1. Non-representational contradictions. Everyone has an encompassing set of skills, entrenched priorities and a given horizon of expectations which make them disclose options in each situation. Yet the disclosed options may be unavailable.⁷⁹ Something that the individual knows how to do, cares about and even expects may be inaccessible due to the prevailing relationships of power and economic inequality. Someone with low income and poor education can master all skills and harbour all expectations involved in going away on vacation, for instance, and therefore perceive an option that may be out of reach. In principle, everyone knows how to go away on vacation; what it means to travel, and all the practicalities involved, such as booking a ticket, arranging with passports and accommodation. For most people, it is no more difficult than online-shopping or using social media platforms, and the images of resorts, relaxing cruises, exciting skiing or adventurous travels are everywhere and hence within the horizon of expectation for everyone. Yet that particular option – going away on vacation – may be unavailable because it is too expensive. In such cases, there is a mismatch or contradiction between cognition and structure; the individual's competencies and concerns run up against the distribution of economic resources in society. With or without the money for the ticket, we still envision the trip to a luxurious resort or some other presumably desirable place to spend the vacation.

2. *Critique assumes familiarity.* People in general have an adequate understanding of their situationally available options. It is precisely the familiarity which accounts for the possibility of critique. We are at home in the world and correctly perceive available options, yet we perceive more options than are available, given the social position we inhabit. This generates a basic tension between available and disclosed courses of action. Our familiarity with the world includes awareness of available options.⁸⁰ At the same time, it includes awareness of the limited range of available options.⁸¹ There is little space for delusion or repressive distortion. Critique works on the mismatch between disclosed and available options; the recurring feature of modern life that each and every one of us – in ways that are thoroughly socially constituted – disclose courses of action that are available for some people but not for other people. Options are both within reach and out of reach. People can master all relevant skills and harbour all relevant expectations and perceive a particular option, which is within their reach precisely for this reason, due to their structurally engendered concerns and competencies, at the same time as it may be out of reach, for structural or for organizational reasons.

Take for instance the practice of planning one's own work. Most people possess the relevant skills to do so, as is visible in social contexts outside of the workplace. When arranging birthday parties for family members, or when organizing spontaneous protests, people may display extraordinary creativity, making agreements with other people, and figuring out what needs to be done. But for reasons of workplace authority, not everybody can influence how they carry out their work, in which order and when to take a break. Still, most people would be able to do it and would moreover value the ability to do so. In this way, by perceiving options beyond those which are immediately given, people transcend unequal relations of power in everyday situations. Exactly where the points of tension are located will depend on the cognitive competences and the social position of the individual. For some people, certain conditions will appear as heavily constraining, whereas for other people, the same conditions will be experienced as manageable because of the set of skills and resources engendered by their social position. Some employees can carry out the work in their own way, even though they are not supposed to. Drawing on acquired professional experience and socially acquired manners, they may disclose ways of managing reporting requirements and follow-up routines, designed to rule out individual planning and creative compliance.

3. *Non-normative contradictions.* The immanent contradiction resides between disclosed and available options. It arises through our everyday, skilful and concerned involvement with the world. Groups and individuals sense courses of action that they can and want to pursue. But some of the sensed courses of action are unavailable, for reasons which are not related to their socially constituted selves but to the current distribution of material resources and of organizational authority; circumstances, which are essentially arbitrary in relation to every individual. The character of our skilful coping is holistic; our skills and expectations are general and not tied to specific situations, and constantly opening up new lines of actions that transcend situational constraints. The structurally engendered competencies and concerns may thus enter into contradiction with asymmetrical relationships of power, as they manifest themselves in the situation in which the individual finds itself. The contradiction does not involve normative critique or any

perspective that is external in relation to the participants. It is immanent in the strict sense. Structurally engendered concerns and competencies disclose lines of action beyond the constraints imposed by the same social structures. The enabling structures and institutions make us disclose courses of action, which we appreciate, expect and master, but which may be unavailable because of the constraining, situational presence of power. In some situations, when people expect vacation trips that are too expensive, or know how to get the work done but are not allowed to, these options may be perceived quite vividly. In other situations, the unavailable options may be just vaguely discerned. Options linked to a sense of deeper satisfaction, or a fuller recognition can be highly valued within a group of people at the same time as they are at the edges of their horizon of expectations, or their practical know-how.

On this reading, the process of transcendence is initiated without recourse to narratives and normativity. Transcendence springs from the contradiction between disclosed and available options. Explicit judgement and moral standards are not necessarily involved. The contradiction unfolds within the domain of cognition. From the outset, the tension between available and disclosed options plays out below the level of ideology, deliberation and representations. What we have is a volatile, situation-bound space for individual transcendence, opened up at the most basic level, below the level of consciousness and moral valuation – but out of which conscious choice and reflected dissent might develop. As so many other things in the domain of cognition,⁸² the contradiction is experienced half-consciously and not necessarily articulated. People constantly tend to disclose options that are unavailable yet could be within their reach. Hence, instead of searching for the standards of critique that inhere in everyday practices, as shared, unfulfilled moral norms, we should look more closely into the abilities of everyone to disclose courses of action beyond those made available by confining expectations, social structures and organizational imperatives.

The situational presence of power is analytically central. It both provokes and tempers cognition. Cognition is first of all activated by power. The socially engendered concerns and expectations are jeopardized in the encounter with the lived inequality and the everyday workings of power. People are forced to manage unstable positions, complex expectations and uncertain outcomes. No one is ever fully at home in the world, as everyday encounters with power and the dynamic of desire tend to disturb absorbed coping.⁸³ But power does not necessarily provoke choice and reflection. On the contrary, one of the important features of modern societies is precisely that power does not confront us with clear choices. Power ‘conceals itself as power and gives itself out as society’, as Foucault elegantly put it.⁸⁴ Commands and constraints are not the only form in which power comes to expression. It may also align itself to existing concerns and aspirations without provoking conscious reflection, dissent or resistance. Power would thus produce a tense and familiar anticipation below the level of reflection and representations. At the same time, the structurally engendered concerns and competencies disclose courses of action beyond the situationally available options. Such situations represent the zero point for transcendence, opened up at the most basic level, below the level of conscious choice and reflected dissent.

If the participants’ view is seen to be foundational for the critical project, this is where it should start: in the situational clash between unjust structures and skilful coping. If the cognitive competencies of ordinary people are assigned a crucial role in the process of

transcendence of asymmetrical relationships of power, critique has to draw on the pre-conscious, non-representational, non-normative sense of options beyond those immediately available. Critique should start in the contradiction between disclosed and available options as it presents itself to participants. But it cannot stop there. As indicated by the examples, the transcendence associated with the action-oriented model of critique is strictly situation-based. Extending the availabilities to go away on vacation, or to plan one's own work, does not come close to the kind of liberation promised by Horkheimer. It is a transcendence perfectly consistent with the persistence of all kinds of structural inequality, rooted in capitalism or other systems of domination. Hence, elements of the representational model of critique – above all those associated with political narratives, theories and utopian visions – are necessary to extend the action-oriented critique into struggle and collective action. Critique as reflexive activity cannot afford to ignore the participants' perspective and the contradiction between unjust structures and skilful coping. At the same time, critique cannot let itself be constrained by the immanent contradiction but has to take it further. It is a crucial starting point but also no more than a starting point, because it stays close the participants' first-hand experiences and tend to be not radical in scope.

Conclusions


Partly in response to a widely recognized impasse in the 1980s, according to which it had become difficult to simultaneously account for the impact and the possible transcendence of unequal relations of power,⁸⁵ current generations of critical social theory elaborated an immanent mode of critique. Everyday cognition assumed central place in the search for existing points of transcendence in relation to the underlying social structures. The value of the participants' view of injustices was thoroughly reassessed.⁸⁶ Less attention has been paid to the conceptualization of everyday cognition. The specific model of cognition underpinning critique went unchallenged. Ordinary people were seen to relate to social reality through beliefs and narratives, before as well as after the turn to immanent critique. Consequently, critique works on existing representations and changes the self-understanding of the addressees, their views of particular institutions or their world view more generally.

I have outlined an alternative to the dominant model; an action-oriented understanding of critique, which builds on a different account of everyday cognition. People's perceptions are thought of as action-oriented, intuitive and non-normative, as opposed to the representational focus on cognitive content, misrecognition and normativity. When supplemented with a conception of the stratified social impact, the action-oriented approach to cognition turns into a model of *critique*. In line with an undercurrent within critical social theory, represented by certain works by Bourdieu,⁸⁷ the influence of unequal relations of power on the critical capacities of ordinary people is positive rather than negative, building cognitive competencies rather than distorting critical capacities. It follows that the relevant know-how, expectations and concerns are engendered by the social structures which they are supposed to transcend. Like other immanent approaches to the impasse diagnosed by Honneth, this action-oriented model shares the ground-up approach to transcendence and locates the contradiction with unjust structures

specifically in ordinary peoples' perceptions and competences.⁸⁸ The contradiction resides between available and disclosed courses of action, and not between representations and an unequal world. It is not mediated through representations but experienced immediately, in terms of availability rather than justifiability. What enters into contradiction with unjust structures is our skilful coping. Everyone tends to disclose options beyond the available ones.

While virtually unexplored in critical social theory, the action-oriented approach to cognition could be well suited to address the determinist impasse. The cognitive competencies of ordinary people, although moulded by oppressive social structures, are a significant resource for the practical transcendence of oppression as they perpetually disclose options beyond the available ones. The contradiction between unjust structures and skilful coping is the zero point for transcendence; the everyday grasping of opportunities, below the level of conscious choice and reflected dissent. However, and precisely for this reason, the friction between asymmetric power and skilful coping tends to trigger a conscious search for new openings, articulate visions and reflexive theorizing. The immanent contradiction generates a situation-based transcendence, which the action-oriented model of critique can account for. At the same time, and no less importantly, it may activate representational critique, above all elements associated with the ability to envision structural change. Action-oriented disclosure does not replace reflection and representation. The contradiction between disclosed and available options is a crucial starting point but also no more than a starting point. To disclose structures of power, which by definition are not immediately observable, and, moreover, to envision a more radical transcendence, the participants' perspective may have to be questioned or supplanted by theory and politics. This allows for bringing external critique back in – as well as for a continued discussion about how critical social theory can sustain rather than undermine immanent critique and strengthen existing social resources for transcendence.

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Notes

1. Celikates (2009); Boltanski (2011); Jaeggi (2014).
2. Brekhus and Ignatow (2019).
3. Boltanski, Honneth, and Celikates (2014).
4. Bourdieu (1977, 1984).
5. Adorno (1973).
6. Foucault (1990).
7. Althusser (1969).
8. Celikates (2009).
9. Habermas (1985); Dews (1987).
10. Honneth (1991, xiv).
11. Foucault (1979a, 1990).
12. Hartmann (1980); Hartsock (1983).
13. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (1989); Spivak (1988).
14. Hörnqvist (2010, 2012).

15. Laclau and Mouffe (1985).
16. Geuss (1981).
17. Honneth (1991).
18. Stahl (2013); Romero (2014).
19. Herzog (2014).
20. Boltanski (2011).
21. Horkheimer (1982, 244).
22. Celikates (2009).
23. Ignatow (2007); Kiverstein (2012); Noë (2004); Thompson (2007); Leschziner (2019).
24. Taylor (2013).
25. Martin (2011); Cerulo (2010).
26. Bourdieu (1977, 1984).
27. Boltanski and Thévenot (1999, 2006).
28. Foucault (1979a, 1990).
29. Rasmussen (1996); Geuss (1981); Celikates (2009).
30. Honneth (1995, 2009, 2014).
31. Marx (1976).
32. Lukács (1923).
33. Lockwood (1958).
34. Thompson (1963, 10).
35. Laclau and Mouffe (1985).
36. Heinrich (2008).
37. Honneth (2007, 2009); Zurn (2011).
38. Honneth (2014, 86).
39. Bourdieu (1977).
40. Owen (2002).
41. Schubert (2020).
42. Žižek (1989, 30).
43. Žižek (1989); Sloterdijk (1993).
44. Boltanski (2011, 30).
45. Marx (1983).
46. Boltanski and Thévenot (2006, 148).
47. Boltanski (2011, 30).
48. Habermas (1981).
49. Honneth (1995, 2014).
50. Foucault (1997, 44; emphasis in original); see also Butler (2002); Pühl (2009).
51. Foucault (1979b).
52. Foucault (1997, 2011).
53. Heidegger (1986); Merleau-Ponty (1965).
54. Kiverstein (2012); Noë (2004).
55. Parts of the action-oriented understanding – and in particular those aspects which relate to the embodied and the affective character of cognition – have been discussed in social analysis (Ignatow 2007; Leschziner 2019; Thompson 2007; Wacquant 2015), but never in relation to core issues within critical social theory, such as ‘immanent contradiction’. James Bohman has discussed critique in terms of ‘disclosure’ and ‘practical knowledge’ but insisted on talking

- about 'true and false statements about the world and ourselves' rather than about lines of action (Bohman 1994, 94; 2003).
56. Taylor (2013); Dreyfus (2014).
 57. Merleau-Ponty (1965, 168).
 58. Heidegger (1992, 197).
 59. Noë (2004, 1).
 60. Marx (1969, 13).
 61. Clark (2008); Thompson (2007).
 62. Dreyfus (2014).
 63. Vierkant et al. (2013).
 64. In social psychology, the distinction is aligned to a problematic of conscious control (Dijksterhuis 2010); in cognitive science, it is aligned to a problematic of representation (Kiverstein 2012; Wheeler 2005); and in sociological phenomenology, pragmatism and ethnomethodology, the distinction is aligned to a problematic of everyday problem-solving (Emirbayer and Maynard 2011; Strand and Lizardo 2015).
 65. Heidegger (1986).
 66. Approaches in cognitive sociology and psychology, which assume two basic types of cognition – one habitual, intuitive and non-representation and the other conscious, problem-solving and representational – are usually referred to as 'dual-process models' (Evans and Stanovich 2013; Leschziner 2019; Vaisey 2009).
 67. Bourdieu (1998, 25).
 68. Bourdieu (2000, 147).
 69. Bourdieu (1996, 1).
 70. Wacquant (1992, 12).
 71. Bourdieu (1984, 468).
 72. Bourdieu (1984, 478).
 73. Bourdieu (2000, 86).
 74. Kant (1974).
 75. The move made it possible to elaborate the action-oriented understanding in a critical direction. This may seem ironic, since Bourdieu is strongly associated with 'external critique' and believed that people were necessary misled about the social mechanisms that shaped their lives.
 76. Noë (2012); Dreyfus (2014).
 77. Thèvenot (2001); Reckwitz (2002).
 78. In this respect, the 'toolkit theory' of cognition (Lizardo and Strand 2010) and the pragmatist tradition (Garfinkel; Boltanski) provide exceptions in that they assume that people are only lightly touched by mechanisms of socialization.
 79. From a strictly phenomenological perspective, if an option is disclosed it is immediately available. Thus, by introducing a distinction between disclosed and available options, I move beyond a Heideggerian framework.
 80. Heidegger (1986).
 81. Žižek (1989).
 82. Vierkant et al. (2013); Vaisey (2009).
 83. Lacan (1992); Žižek (1994).
 84. Foucault (1979c, 66).

85. Honneth (1991).
 86. Celikates (2009); Boltanski (2011); Jaeggi (2014).
 87. Bourdieu (1998, 2000).
 88. Celikates (2009); Boltanski (2011).

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