

Marx's Critical Ambition and Immanent Critique

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Abstract. In this paper, we investigate is how critical theorists have carried out Marx's critical ambition. We examine the meaning of Marx's aspiration of critique, the approach of immanent critique, and the application of this approach in various realms. Our analysis is based on the literature review of the works of critical theorists who specialize in feminism, labor, neo-colonialism, and other areas. We find that Marx aspired to achieve human emancipation through a type of critique that works within the existing system, rejects predictions and dogmas, and has the potential to transform both the system and the norm. Alternatively, we find that critical theorists have used immanent critiques as the core approach to fulfill Marx's critical ambition, and this approach has been used in various domains in society, including gender, economic, and intercultural relations. These findings shed light not only on the influence of Marx's expectation of critique on the core approach of critical theory but also on the ways critical theorists fulfill Marx's ambition. Our findings provide a theoretical ground for the transformative potential of the ongoing movements that attempt to overthrow certain unjust norms in society. Also, our findings affirm the political efficacy of the participants of these progressive social movements.

Keywords: Marx; Critical Theory; Immanent Critique.

1. Introduction

Critical theory is a historically significant social theory that pursues human emancipation through identifying and transcending contradictions in society. The origin of critical theory can be traced back to the Enlightenment movement and is associated with Kant, Hegel and Marx. Inspired by previous philosophers, in the 1940s, Horkheimer and Adorno, two Frankfurt School philosophers, co-wrote *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which is one of the core texts of critical theory. They argue that in modern times, rationality has developed into instrumental rationality which is “purely an instrument of purposes,” and they describe the modern capitalist world as “new barbarism” [1]. Later, Jürgen Habermas' critical theory displays a new perspective of the modern capitalist world. He claims that there is another dimension of rationality besides instrumental and value rationalities—“communicative rationality” [2]. Different from Horkheimer and Adorno who identify the problem of modernity as the dominance of instrumental rationality, Habermas provides a new explanation of the late capitalist world—the “colonialization of the lifeworld” [2]. Rather than examining reason solely through the instrumental lens, Habermas' critical theory takes into account both the perspectives of subjectivity and intersubjectivity and divides the society into the system, in which instrumental rationality applies, and the lifeworld, in which communicative rationality applies. Rejecting Habermas' ambition to achieve universalist normality through communicative rationality, Michel Foucault focuses on the constructed nature of knowledge and norms. Applying a genealogical approach, which is inherited from Friedrich Nietzsche, he reveals the entanglement of knowledge and power, which bears a basic affinity with critical theory. He identified a type of power that is different from the traditional sovereign power: disciplinary power, which is not only oppressive but also positive that it creates norms, knowledge, and truth to maintain its exercise and operate on rational minds.

Critical theory endorsed Marx's diagnosis of capitalism and embraced his ultimate concern for human emancipation. The core approach it applies in order to achieve transformative social changes is immanent critique, a method that diagnoses social contradictions within the existing system by

analyzing norms that underlies these contradictions. It has its root in Hegel's "critique of reification (as objectification)" which reveals the nature of history as being produced by human beings and laborers' potential of transforming the world [3]. Marx, influenced by Hegel, believes that the overcoming of immanent contradictions would contribute to the goal of human emancipation, but he rejects Hegel's presupposed Spirit and establishes his analysis within the practical historical context. In describing his critical ambition, Marx writes that "we do not anticipate the world with our dogmas but instead attempt to discover the new world through the critique of the old" [4]. In this paper, we are going to elaborate on the meaning and implication of his critical ambition and how critical theorists carry out this task. The question we will address is how critical theorists have fulfilled Marx's critical ambition. First, we will explain three aspects in which Marx influences the characteristics of critical theory. Next, we will examine the specific technique that critical theorists apply to fulfill this mission—immanent critique. Lastly, we will discuss three spheres in which critical theorists utilize this technique: gender, economic, and intercultural relations.

2. Method

The method we will use in this paper is literature review. We will examine Marx's early critical and its influence on critical theory by reviewing the works of the representative critical theorists, including Max Horkheimer, Seyla Benhabib, and Michel Foucault. Then, we will explore its application by reviewing the works of Nancy Fraser, Judith Butler, Moishe Postone, Glen Sean Coulthard, and Amy Allen. The sources of materials include books, academic essays, and letters.

3. Marx, Critical Theory, and Immanent Critique

3.1 Marx's Critical Ambition

Marx's early critical ambition—"we do not anticipate the world with our dogmas but instead attempt to discover the new world through the critique of the old"—establishes the general development direction of critical theory [4]. His ambition has shaped the features of critical theory in three ways. Firstly, by rejecting "anticipation," Marx indicates that critical theory does not intend to paint a definitive blueprint for the future world. As Marx and Horkheimer argue, prediction is implausible since people are not able to have a "corresponding concrete perception" of the change brought by critical theory until it actually takes place, and people would detect new problems when "the material conditions for its solution are already present," that is to say, when changes have taken place [5-6]. The critical theory emphasizes a critical approach, which is different from the previous ones and is essential to uncover problems of the existing system, rather than predictions about the future.

Secondly, Marx refuses to analyze the world using "dogmas". There are three types of dogma: external universal norms, uncritical internal norms, and empirical facts. Critical theorists do not seek to set up objective standards that transcend social context and are binding on all. They argue that metaphysical theories that are detached from specific social practices lack validity and persuasiveness. In addition, they regard critique which is solely based on existing social practices without consideration or questioning as conservative and inadequate. Analyzing completely within the framework of the specific cultural context runs the risk of entrenching the oppressive norms in this culture. The result is likely to be an endless critique of untransformed situations. What's more, Marx and the critical theorists are opposed to the domination of so-called scientific facts that are drawn from "empirical inquiries" and are claimed to be independent of "subjectivity" [5,7]. They believe that the objectivity of such facts is questionable so people should not wholeheartedly treat them as doctrines. This criticism of empirical facts reaches its zenith in Michel Foucault who reveals the entanglement of knowledge and power that the "production of truth" is through "power" [8]. Marx's

critique of vulgar materialism lays the foundation for critical theorists to uncover the constructive essence of empirical facts and thus dissolve their dogmatic sublimity.

Lastly, the second part of Marx's aspiration—to "attempt to discover the new world through the critique of the old"—emphasizes that the foothold of critique is historical reality rather than a metaphysical field divorced from social context. His critique of capitalism in *Capital* is a perfect manifestation of this principle that he starts his critique with the examination of the "cell-form" of the capitalist system [9]. The breakthrough point of his analysis lies not in a detached philosophical standard but within the context of the capitalist society. Then, he also implies that reality and normativity are not separate. Ideals do not appear out of thin air but are based on unrealized contradictions in reality. Horkheimer points out that the motivation of critical theorists rests in the task to "reduce the tension" between their insight and "oppressed humanity" [5]. The normativity of critical theory is built on the historical analysis of the gap between the ideal of no oppression and the factual world. It pursues its ultimate goal of human emancipation through the critique of specific social practices. The last piece of information Marx connotes is that unrealized contradictions have the potential for self-transcendence. The normativity of critique is established upon the expectation to "transcend the tension" that existed in social practices to achieve "transfiguration" of current norms [5,10]. Critical theorists try to point out that the existing norms are not necessary principles prescribed from outside but principles generated by the world along the way which people might be forced or induced to accept even if they are "not aware", thus these norms have the potential of self-transcendence from current social practices [9].

3.2 Immanent Critique and Its Application

Carrying on Marx's critical ambition, critical theorists develop the approach of immanent critique. Corresponding to the critical task, there are three main features of immanent critique. First of all, its analysis is within the social context. The standards analyzed by immanent critique are not the purely external "ought to be" standards, but the standards that people have actually followed either explicitly or implicitly. It is social rather than metaphysical, and it is applied to illuminate struggles and aspirations in the contemporary world. Secondly, immanent critique criticizes not only the descriptive contradictions but also the normative values underlying these contradictions. It regards unquestioned social norms as the possible contributor to people's unfreedom and the theories that solely seek the consistency of practice and norms are insufficient to bring about essential transformation. It strives for describing the facts of oppression while also pointing out the oppressive elements of cultural or social beliefs that people are subject to and take for granted. Lastly, in order to overcome oppression and achieve the commitment of the critical theory of human emancipation, immanent critique concentrates on disclosing the contradictions between the normative aspiration and the factual world to realize the potential of transcendence of the current social practices. For many critical theories, identifying contradictions is the starting point of their diagnoses of the pathological system, and transcending these contradictions is the task of their critique.

The application of immanent critique takes place in various spheres of the capitalist system where oppression exists. In the field of gender relations, Nancy Fraser and Judith Butler provide insightful analyses of patriarchal practices and social understanding. Fraser points out the flaws of the current feminist claims that concern either redistribution or recognition and the antithesis of these two dimensions per se. She conceives of gender as a "bivalent collectivity" that contains both "political-economic dimensions" and "cultural-valuational dimensions" [11]. As a result, people do not have to choose between redistribution, which pursues universalism, and recognition, which embraces differences. Rather, in order to combat gender oppression, people need to give consideration to both. Then, she criticizes the deficiencies of the existing feminist efforts and initiatives. From the perspective of recognition, protectionism leads to "over feminism" while ant protectionism leads to "under feminization" [11]. From the perspective of redistribution, Universal Breadwinner not only fails to destabilize the androcentrism order but also increases the burden on women since it "valorizes men's traditional sphere—employment" and leaving "caregiving still feminized," while Caregiver

Parity exacerbates women's economic vulnerability and does little to shake up androcentrism either since the allowances for caregivers "entrench[es] gender disparities in income" and most two-partner families would maintain the status quo of the division between breadwinner and caregiver for the sake of cost performance that caregiver jobs "pay considerably less" [11]. By displaying the defects of current movements, Fraser implies that the normative basis of gender oppression remains unrevealed. She identifies it as the "differentiation of breadwinning and caregiving" [11]. The normativity of her critique thus centers around the overcome of this differentiation. Butler interprets the patriarchal order from the perspective of the construction of the category of women. She pinpoints the problems of this category as both the underpinning of the "implicit gender hierarchy" and the ignorance of the "multiplicity of cultural, social, and political intersections" of people within this category [12]. She embraces Foucauldian poststructuralism by unmasking that the feminist subject is constituted by power and rejecting the essentialist and foundationalist conception of women. The feminist discourse, though having emancipatory intention, actually entrenches the male dominance through reinforcing the binary framework of the oppressive practices and the neither existent nor desired unity of the array of women. Sex, she contends, is a "performatively enacted signification" instead of an "interior 'truth' of dispositions and identity" [12]. In other words, rather than being a woman, it is more accurate to say that a person has a woman. Although examining the masculine oppression through distinct perspectives and differing on the issue of subjection, both Fraser and Butler envision deconstructing gender as the normativity of their critique [11-12]. They believe that only through the transformative deconstruction of the category of gender can patriarchy be defeated.

Besides the gender sphere, immanent critique is also applied in the economic field. Through reanalyzing Marx, Moishe Postone locates the contradiction between the ideal emancipation and the practical oppression in wage labor. Rather than regarding labor as the standpoint of critique of capitalism, Postone treats labor as the "object of the critique" of the capitalist system [13]. He claims that the oppressive element of capitalism rests in the specific form of labor—wage labor. Marx, influenced by Hegel, conceives humans as *homo faber*, that is to say, he recognizes the species-essence of human beings as labor. However, under capitalism, labor is divided into "manual and intellectual labor," which leads to the situation that people neither understand nor are willing to do their work and they are not in control of the product of their labor [13]. As a result, labor is no longer a means of self-realization but is reduced to a means of subsistence. People are no longer the masters but the servants of their work. This alienated labor is where the oppression lies in that it deprives people of their subjectivity and oppresses their human nature. By emphasizing Marx's critique of wage labor, Postone proposes the antidote to oppression—"overcoming the concrete labor done by the proletariat" [13]. The contradiction of capitalism is between wage labor and the inadequacy of wage labor, so the abolition of wage labor would lead to the emancipation of dehumanized people. By then, they will have regained their potential for "full development" and become "full and richly developed being[s]" [13].

Another field in which immanent critique applies is intercultural relations. Glen Sean Coulthard and Amy Allen both uncover the colonial implication of the previous critical theories. Coulthard's critique targets the Eurocentric framework of social constructivism that Seyla Benhabib promotes. Following Habermasian perception of culture as fluid, Benhabib rejects cultural essentialism as "overly restrictive and rigid" while proposing social constructivism as "democratic and emancipatory," so the emancipation of Indigenous people requires "deliberatively policing" the cultural forms [14]. The problem with her proposal is that she leaves the constructivist view uncritical and neglects the complex oppressive relations that exist within the indigenous society, including the colonial relation. Her claim has two connotations: that this "excessively fluid form" of culture is adaptable to the cultural expression of indigenous people and that colonial countries legitimately play the "adjudicative role" in assessing the claims of the indigenous group [14]. She imposes the Habermasian view of culture, which has its root in Enlightenment, on a non-European group and takes for granted its suitability without questioning whether it could accommodate the recognition claims of this group. What's more, she justifies the political intervention of colonial countries, which

are fundamentally oppressive per se, in the cultural affairs of the indigenous, which greatly weakens the “self-determination” and “sovereignty” of the Indigenous [14]. Therefore, the normativity of Benhabib’s critique lacks legitimate grounding that it remains the inherent colonial tendency of social constructivism uncritical. Scrutinizing broader theories, Allen casts doubt on the idea of progress that runs through the formation and development of critical theory. She states that the “backward-looking conception of progress,” which acts as the foundation of the normativity of Habermas’ and Honneth’s theories, is Eurocentric in its essence [15]. Deeming progress as a matter of fact is oppressive from two dimensions. Politically, it justifies imperialism and racial subordination; Epistemologically, it fails to account for why European modernity counts as progress. Consequently, Allen puts forward the remedy for this patronizing understanding of progress as taking a “more modest and contextualist” stance toward the European history and Enlightenment and “disentangling” the forward-looking notion of progress as an imperative from the back-looking notion of progress [15]. She believes that avoiding fully adopting the Habermasian context-transcendent normative position and guarding against the tendency of self-congratulation would mitigate the oppression of non-European countries. Both Coulthard and Allen disclose the Eurocentric inclination of the idea that rationalization is progressive. Their critiques point to the oppressive grounding of the normativity of critical theories which ignores the power relations in the intercultural context.

4. Conclusion

This paper examines Marx’s critical ambition and how critical theorists contribute to this cause. Marx aspires to access human emancipation through criticizing contradictions within the historical reality, and he describes this process of critique as a ceaseless, anti-dogma, and materialist process with no anticipated blueprint. He highlights the nature of this type of critique as an approach of analysis rather than a prediction of the future. Also, he distinctively identified the problems of three types of dogmas: external universal norms, uncritical internal norms, and empirical facts. He claims that the first lacks validity due to its detachment from social practices, the second traps itself in untransformed situations, and the third is constructed and processes questionable objectivity. Then, he argues against metaphysical theories and embraces analyzing within the social context. He points out the connection between reality and normality, which brings about the potential of self-transcendence of unrealized contradictions.

Inspired by Marx’s ambition, critical theorists develop the approach of immanent critique that starts from the internal social context and examines both the factual oppression and the normative principles that underpin it. Immanent critique is an approach that is based on historical social context rather than a detached metaphysical realm, criticizes both the practical contradictions and the underlying norms, and aims to realize the potential of transcendence of the current contradictions. Critical theorists apply this approach in various spheres of society, including gender relations, economic relations, and intercultural relations. They concentrate on different contradictions within the capitalist society: the constructed nature of gender that upholds the oppressive patriarchy, the alienation of wage labor that upholds class hierarchy, and the presupposed adjudicative role of colonial countries on the culture of previously colonized people that upholds the Eurocentric dominance on the discourse of culture.

In the current capitalist society, internal contradictions still exist. The gender conflict led to the wake of the #MeToo movement, which raised awareness and empower the victims who survived sexual assault. Also, the racial conflict led to the wake of the #Blacklivesmatter movement, which mobilizes people against racial discrimination and selective police brutality. These contradictions reveal that critical theory and immanent critique are still of practical use in capitalist societies as long as the existence of oppression. Based on the analysis of the application of immanent critique in various realms, it is reasonable to hold a positive attitude toward the potential of these attempts that aim to transform the current system. Moreover, the political efficacy of the participants should not be underestimated.

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