

Is there an emancipatory interest? An attempt to answer critical theory's most fundamental question

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1 | INTRODUCTION

The idea that human beings have a deep-seated interest in overcoming dependencies and heteronomy has always been a hallmark of the tradition of critical social theory deriving from Marx. Some of the Left Hegelians already held that in the absence of such an emancipatory interest on the part of the entire species, the demand for social progress would remain a merely moral “ought,” lacking any support in historical reality. Marx was convinced that under capitalism, this interest was represented by the proletariat, forced by its particular situation to fight on behalf of all of humanity for fully noncoercive and nondominating social relations.¹ When Georg Lukács took up this thought in the early 1920s, even surpassing its original ambitions through a bold appropriation of Fichtean ideas, the revolutionary ethos of the working class had already been in decline to such an extent that his construction received little acclaim even from those sympathetic to it.² Max Horkheimer was therefore cautious enough to rely in his development of a critical social theory only on the claim that such an emancipatory interest was revealed in the ineradicable human tendency to revolt against structures of domination. Without attempting to provide a more detailed argument for this assumption, he thereby reiterated on a more abstract level the Marxian thesis that the epistemological foundation of his theory would have to lie in its connection with “critical conduct.”³ It was only with Jürgen Habermas's path-breaking monograph *Knowledge and Human Interests* that new life was breathed into this century-old idea. Through original re-interpretations of Kant, Fichte, and Hegel, Habermas develops the thesis that we as human beings have an interest in dissolving previously unrecognized dependencies and “pseudo-objectivities,” and he finally draws on Freud to fully rehabilitate the thesis as amounting to an anthropology of knowledge.⁴ Even though Habermas has in the meantime distanced himself from some of the book's central assumptions,⁵ it is still a good point of departure for thinking through the theoretical intentions associated with the idea of an “emancipatory interest” and for understanding what is at stake in dispensing with this idea. In what follows, I will therefore start out from this book and recapitulate its central argument. In a second and third step, I will endeavor to salvage its fruitful central idea by supplying it with a new and less vulnerable foundation.

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In *Knowledge and Human Interests*, Habermas pursues at least two theoretical goals, which are intertwined to such an extent that a neat demarcation between them is barely possible. On the one hand, the book aims to undermine the epistemological basis of the “positivist” methodology prevalent at its time of publication, by showing that both the sciences and the humanities are “functionally” or “transcendentally” rooted in encompassing, anthropologically given

¹I dedicate this lecture to my much too early deceased friend Mark Sacks. As long as I had the privilege to be his friend, he was a permanent source of surprising intuitions and warmest care; without his engagement, this journal would not exist.

practical aims whose pursuit determines the methodologies of those types of inquiry. Habermas's first thesis is that because mainstream philosophy of science does not attend to this constitutive dependency of these two branches of knowledge, it remains wedded to a "positivist" misunderstanding and fails to adequately comprehend the constitutive connection between "Knowledge and Human Interests," between the construction of theories and social reproduction.⁶ But independently of this, Habermas also seeks to defend a second and more far-reaching thesis, which aims to provide an epistemological foundation for critical theory itself. According to this second thesis, the type of theoretical pursuit known because Marx as "social critique" is itself rooted in a distinct third form of human practice, whose aim is to overcome pseudo-natural dependencies and whose methodology must therefore rely on entirely different sorts of procedures.⁷ Both these explanatory goals of *Knowledge and Human Interests* are of closely related in that the functionalist or transcendental derivation of the natural sciences and the humanities from underlying and invariant epistemic interests serves as the model for searching for a similarly foundational and anthropologically basic practical interest with regard to social critique. Moreover, the first thesis turns out to presuppose the second, because the postulated emancipatory epistemic interest is supposed to first supply us with a way of understanding the interrelation between social reproduction and scientific practice that Habermas asserts against the positivist doctrine. However, in what follows, I will leave to one side the entire part of the book devoted to the epistemological critique of positivism and focus only on the second thesis, that is to say, the claim that there is a self-standing epistemic interest in emancipation rooted in invariant features of a specific human practice.

What pushed Habermas towards this thesis will easily be apparent independent from any familiarity with the theory of human knowledge held by Habermas at that time, sometimes characterized as "transcendental anthropology." If the respective "epistemic interests" underlying the natural sciences and the humanities can be properly understood only by tracing them back to forms of activity necessary to the goal of social reproduction—activities whose rational improvement those kinds of inquiry serve—then the so-called critical science too requires a demonstration of their practical sources if they are to be something more than just a combination of the methods proper to the two other branches of inquiry. In order to vindicate the methodological autonomy of the kind of science properly termed "critical," its methods must be derivable from a distinct type of epistemic interest as fundamental to our human form of life as the two other interests, that is, the interest in material reproduction through labor and the interest in symbolic reproduction through linguistic communication. Habermas's argument in support of such an emancipatory epistemic interest will therefore have to proceed in at least three independent steps. First, he needs to identify a specific form of human activity that is as invariant as labor and interaction, but which in contrast with them serves the overcoming of heteronomy and previously unrecognized dependencies (Step a). Second, he must show that this further practical interest gives rise to a specific type of knowledge that is sufficiently distinct from the kinds of knowledge latent in labor and in communicative action (Step b). Third, he has to demonstrate that rationally satisfying this "third" epistemic interest requires a methodology of its own, rather than just a combination of methods taken from the sciences and the humanities (Step c). As far as one can tell from the text, Habermas clearly recognizes all three of these tasks, but he has a harder time discharging some of them than others. I will briefly comment on his proposed solutions in the order just named, in order to identify the most pressing problems faced by the approach developed in *Knowledge and Human Interests*.

- (a) In my view, the first of the three tasks presents Habermas with the most serious problems. The ambitious goal here is to show that in addition to labor and interaction, we human beings necessarily engage in a third invariant type of activity, which in contrast with the other two is founded on an interest in questioning and combating existing social orders insofar as they are characterized by relations of domination. One could also put it as follows: This third type of activity must allow us to grasp the interrelation of social reproduction and practical critique in such a way that it becomes apparent why societies can be maintained only through social conflicts and social struggles. This is indeed what Max Horkheimer must have had in mind when he referred in his famous essay to what he termed "critical conduct,"⁸ which he viewed as in some manner furnishing the epistemological foundation of Critical Theory. It seems probable that he too was concerned with the thesis that any established

social order gives rise to some form of resistance or struggle which shakes the foundations of that social order but which finally results in its being reproduced in a different shape or at a higher stage of development. But if Horkheimer did not succeed in offering persuasive arguments for the claim that there is an internal connection between social reproduction and practical critique, neither does Habermas in *Knowledge and Human Interests*. So far as I can tell, Habermas fails to discharge this self-imposed task because in explaining the role of struggle in the process of social development, he chooses psychoanalysis as his model. Taking the psychological development of individuals as his example, he intends to show how the presence of unconscious dependencies and constraints generates an internal struggle on the part of each individual, resulting in a desire to be healed by being liberated from inner heteronomy. To a certain extent, he thereby manages to show how the successful development of an individual can be conceived of as a process of recurring struggles against the danger of newly emerging constraints on an individual's self, and how these "struggles" are an intrinsic part of any normal process of self-formation. Yet the drawback of using the process of individual formation as a model in this way is that doing so gives rise to the misleading idea that in the case of social dependencies and heteronomies, the struggle is internal to the human species understood as a collective "subject," rather than taking place among different social groups. The struggle or conflict that was supposed to constitute a third basic form of human activity is thus understood as a type of self-estrangement rather than as a genuinely practical struggle between two opposing parties. There may of course be some use in conceiving of an individual subject's intentional self-affectation as a form of activity, but in that case, there is no longer any connotation of an external intervention in the world. That Habermas is inclined towards this kind of conception, and thus towards viewing the third type of social activity not as an activity proper but rather as a mental process writ large, becomes apparent at the point in his book where he offers a first synopsis of his three invariant forms of activity. He there writes that the three "cultural preconditions of our existence" are "labor," "language," and "power." It is striking that the third item is "power" rather than struggle, conflict, or disagreement, as one might have expected.⁹ Habermas thus points to the social structure to which conflictual activity may be a response, rather than to the pursuit of that activity itself. He hesitates to place struggle as a third and equally fundamental type of activity alongside labor and interaction. As a consequence of this neglect, which results from his focus on the model of conflict developed by psychoanalysis, Habermas finds himself in a difficult position right at the beginning of his project of deriving a third, specifically critical epistemic interest. He is unable to tie it back to a pragmatic motive, to some fundamental practical interest, in the way he had done with regard to the two other branches of knowledge. Instead, the third kind of epistemic interest seems from the very outset to be characterized primarily as a type of cognitive striving without any apparent motivational basis in worldly goals or activities.

- (b) When it comes to discharging the second task, that is, to identify the specific type of knowledge that is supposed to emerge from the third of the invariant practices proper to our form of life, this shortcoming of the first step leads to an odd reduplication. Instead of a real, substantial practice, we were offered a self-referential struggle of the human species with itself, a certain kind of collective mental process. Habermas is now unable to conceive of this already cognitive activity as the basis of some further and distinct epistemic achievement. The initial definition, according to which the third kind of practical interest aims at a "mental" liberation from self-imposed but unrecognized dependencies, is then merely reduplicated. This tendency becomes apparent in the way in which Habermas derives the third, emancipatory epistemic interest from the notion of an "interest of reason" found in Kant and Fichte. He begins by criticizing Kant's introduction of the idea that reason as such may have an interest in its own realization by charging this approach with a failure to overcome the division between theoretical and practical employments of reason. Habermas grants that by claiming that a feeling of "respect" could allow the faculty of reason to affect our sensibility, Kant had offered an argument for the view that rational guidance by the moral law could be motivationally efficacious. But because Kant did not extend this line of thought to the case theoretical knowledge, the demonstration of an internal connection between reason and human interest had remained incomplete.¹⁰ In Habermas's view, only Fichte succeeded in overcoming this weakness of the

Kantian derivation of an interest of reason, and he did so by resolutely subordinating theoretical reason to practical reason. What allowed Fichte to do this, according to Habermas, was his assumption that the human self or "I" has an essential interest in mustering all its rational powers—the theoretical no less than the moral ones—in order to emancipate itself from all determinations not produced by itself and thus eventually to be able to conceive of itself as completely "free."¹¹ We can leave it open whether Habermas is right to claim that Fichte managed to demonstrate an "interest in the self-standingness of the self inherent in the very operation of reason" or whether what he demonstrated was rather human beings' interest in the comprehensive use of their rational faculties, or in other words, whether the interest identified by Fichte belongs to reason itself or rather to human subjects. The crucial point regarding Habermas's method is that he intends to appropriate Fichte's line of thought to some extent in order to employ it for his own project of identifying an "emancipatory epistemic interest," even while adhering to "materialist assumptions." Regarding the second of his three tasks, then, his proposal is that this cognitive interest prompts a process of self-reflection aimed at a recurrent liberation from various sorts of dependency and heteronomy that had remained invisible during previous developmental stages of the human species.¹² As Habermas himself admits, the particular kind of knowledge in which we human beings here take an interest is identical with the activity already adverted to in relation to the first task. The second characterization of this interest, as a cognitive interest in emancipation, adds nothing to its first characterization as a practical motive, because both are eventually supposed to coincide. In retrospect, this central step in Habermas's argument only serves to bring out the fact that the third fundamental practice inherent in human culture, in addition to labor and interaction, cannot be conceived as an "activity" in the proper sense at all. In contrast with labor and interaction, it is not the case here that there is first a pressure towards a certain practice and then, on a further level, an interest in acquiring some methodologically secure type of knowledge. Instead, with respect to emancipatory resistance and struggle, Habermas conceives of the relevant activity as being identical with the attempt to acquire methodologically secure knowledge of the previously undiagnosed dependencies whose gradual elimination would successively render the "self" of the human species more and more free. But this sort of conception of the emancipatory epistemic interest means that his first problem—his lack of a robust conception of social struggle—is complemented by a second, closely related one. The bearer of this interest in understanding the conditions of one's own heteronomy must be the human species as a whole, as though the diversity of conflicting interests regarding the type and content of the desired knowledge were merely apparent. Where there are no social conflicts, there can be no conflicting epistemic interests. Both problems result from the way in which Habermas's attempt to characterize our emancipatory interest is guided by the model of psychoanalysis. In the first step, this theoretical orientation had led him to a conception of social conflict as a subject's reflexive struggle with itself. In the second step, it leads him to the dubious claim that like an individual subject, the human species has a common interest in some unitary type of emancipatory knowledge. Neither of these two assumptions enable us to see why human history should give rise to a type of activity whose success requires the attainment of a specifically critical sort of knowledge.¹³

- (c) Even though the model of psychoanalysis thus turns out to stand in the way of developing a satisfactory answer to the first two questions, it is surprisingly helpful in solving the third problem. The task here is to identify the characteristic methodology of those kinds of knowledge, which serve to satisfy the emancipatory epistemic interest in a systematic way. I am not going to dwell on this topic at any length, because it is of secondary importance for the question with which I am concerned here, that is, whether there is such a thing as an emancipatory interest at all. The methodological particularity of the critical sciences only becomes an issue once it has been established that there is some distinct epistemic interest that makes it possible for such sciences to exist in the first place. As we have seen, Habermas justified the existence of such a third class of sciences by way of an "anthropology of knowledge," arguing that the human species, just like individual subjects, has a deep-seated interest in liberating itself on an ongoing basis from previously unrecognized dependencies and pseudo-natural constraints, so as to attain a condition of intersubjectivity free from coercion and domination.

As in psychoanalysis, the practical realization of this interest consists in coming to recognize unconscious determinants of one's own agency and in using that knowledge in one's relation to oneself. And satisfying this interest in a more advanced fashion requires organizing it into a methodologically controlled discipline, which is to say, institutionalizing it as an autonomous science. The general knowledge this science is meant to yield, like the knowledge of psychoanalysis, must aim to understand the causes of those unrecognized dependencies that have hitherto posed obstacles to human interaction. And like psychoanalysis, this critical science must combine explanatory and hermeneutic methods in such a way that it employs an idealized model of the "normal" developmental process of the human species so as to identify the "deviations" from this process that have given rise to undesirable dependencies and thereby to defective forms of interaction. But the mere identification of such pathologies of social development does not yet complete the project of critical science. Again like psychoanalysis, it needs to take the further step of presenting its findings to the relevant parties in such a way that they are enabled to overcome or remove the obstacles thus identified. Critical science has reached its emancipatory goal only once this has been accomplished, only when those to whom it is addressed have effectively transcended a given stage of previously unrecognized dependency. This conception of the method of a critical theory, clearly derived from the model of psychoanalysis, has been widely criticized in the literature on many points, which do in fact invite misunderstanding. This includes the following charges: First, unlike for the case of psychoanalysis, there are no clear criteria on which social analyses can rely for a meaningful distinction between developmental successes and failures. Second, with regard to whole societies, there is nothing that corresponds to the psychosexual problems of individuals in determining their future development. Third, there is a suspicion that in the model under discussion, theorists claim to possess some form of secure knowledge that is immune to the uncertainties involved in understanding one's own present. In short, transposing the psychoanalytic method onto the practice of critical social theory must fail because the latter stands in an altogether different sort of relation to their object than the analyst does to his or her patient.¹⁴ Yet there is something in the methodology outlined by Habermas that seems to me to be worth preserving. It is the thought that critical social theories should proceed in a "reconstructive" fashion so as to identify idealized developmental paths that can be conceived of as actualizations of already accepted norms and which can then be used to diagnose the deviations that mark *de facto* developmental processes.¹⁵

As I said before, I want to set aside the further problems arising in this context and turn instead to the two previous basic assumptions of Habermas's project. His claim was that we can think of critical social theory as a distinct type of science only if we can show that it is rooted, like the natural sciences and the humanities, in a distinctive form of human activity, and only if the latter gives rise to a distinctive epistemic interest. My goal was to show that Habermas does not offer sufficient support for either of these two claims because his adherence to the psychoanalytic model led him to conceive of the relevant type of activity as consisting in a cognitive self-affection of the human species as a whole and thereby to sever the connection between practical critique and an opposition between groups or classes. Those who would like to adhere to Habermas's starting intuition are therefore confronted with two basic challenges that need to be addressed separately. First, can we identify a uniform type of action or activity that is characteristic of our form of life and that, contrary to Habermas's conception, is in fact bound up with a "struggle" or conflict among groups? Second, can we say of this type of activity that it contains a distinct epistemic interest that might serve as the foundation of an autonomous group of sciences? In the remaining two parts of my talk, I will suggest positive answers to both questions, in order to outline an alternative to the theoretical project pursued in *Knowledge and Human Interests*.

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Against the background of contemporary social ontology, the first of the two questions just mentioned could be reformulated as follows: Are we justified in treating conflict or struggle among social groups as a type of social action

that is an ineliminable explanatory element of any viable social theory?¹⁶ Looking back at the history of social philosophy and political thought one quickly comes across a number of strands that have suggested a positive answer to this question. Numerous past thinkers were convinced that social conflict is an invariant element of all social life. At the same time, there is considerable variation in the reasons that have been given for this assumption, ranging from claims about the psychological disposition of human beings to explanations appealing directly to social tensions. To approach this difficult territory, let me point to four typical sorts of explanation to consider the plausibility of the respective arguments. A first position—which we could call the Rousseau-Kant view—asserts that a tendency toward permanent strife is intrinsic to our form of life because human individuals constantly seek to prove their own superior standing and value relative to others, resulting in a “vain” and interminable struggle for superiority. Kant holds that the “unsociable” aspect that is inseparable from human sociability consists in individuals’ striving to distinguish themselves from others through actions or accomplishments that are meant to elicit special esteem.¹⁷ The second position—which we could call the Freudian view—also explains the inevitability of social struggle by appealing to a psychological disposition, but does so by focusing on a quite different sort of desire. It holds that adult human beings necessarily experience some degree of internal resistance and hostility to authority because their early relationship with their parents is inevitably marked by hatred as well as love. According to Freud, social life can never reach a state of equilibrium but will always give rise to new conflicts and struggles because each of us is psychologically forced by his or her early childhood experiences to rebel against being governed by others, even where such government has been democratically authorized.¹⁸ The third position—which I will call the Marxian view—explains the inevitability of social struggle by appealing not to psychological dispositions but to social tensions. The reason why conflicts remain an ineliminable feature of all forms of human sociality is here said to lie in the fact that the relations between different social classes must be marked by conflict and strife as long as the relations of production make one class predominant and provide it with greater opportunities to realize its own particular interests.¹⁹ But the further remark that class struggle is inevitable only “for the time being” indicates that this third view is not strictly speaking a thesis in social ontology. According to Marx, social conflict will be a thing of the past once the revolution, which is to be expected sooner or later, has brought about a classless society. By contrast, the fourth position I would like to mention—and which for a lack of undisputed proponents I am going to call the Hegel-Dewey-view—advances a thesis that belongs to social ontology in the strict sense. This fourth view asserts that social conflict is inevitable in all societies simply because the norms accepted by their members will again and again give rise to new moral claims that cannot be satisfied under existing conditions and whose frustration will therefore result in social conflicts.²⁰ Here, the explanatory burden rests on the thought that the interpretation of socially valid norms is an essentially unfinished process, in which one-sided interpretations and resistance to them take turns with each other.

Even though there may be yet other views that treat struggle as an ineliminable component of human social life—such as social Darwinism or Georg Simmel’s famous doctrine that social strife is a mode of social integration²¹—I will leave it at these four proposals. The key concepts employed by them, in the order in which I mentioned them, are *amour propre* or vanity, affective ambivalence vis-à-vis authority, conflicting economic interests, and the hermeneutic openness (“Geltungsüberhang”) of the norms of social integration, which contains a potential for collective social protest. Because we are in search of a class of actions that will lead to a struggle among social groups in the context of any social structure whatsoever, it seems to me that the first two explanations are off the table. The first one asserts, more clearly in the case of Kant than in the case of Rousseau, that the motive for recurrent revolts against established normative orders is individuals’ desire to assert their superiority or preeminence over other members of their society. There is no reference to a conflict between two groups here, only to a struggle of individuals with respect to the public opinion of others, to whom they desire to demonstrate their own virtues and abilities. Moreover, Rousseau’s own interpretation of “*amour propre*” suggests that this psychological feature may be a product of cultural forces, whose “toxic,” conflict-enhancing effects may be reduced or altogether eliminated given a future state of social equality.²² The Rousseau-Kant view thus seems ill-suited for explaining a struggle among groups as an invariant feature of social action. The same is clearly true of the Freudian view. This view, too, locates the motive for resistance in the dispositions of individuals. Although these dispositions can sometimes find an outlet in various forms of

collective reaction, from the cult of the charismatic leader to Freud's so-called "patricide," the Freudian view comes no closer to demonstrating the necessary recurrence of collective strife than does the view that focuses on the dissatisfactions generated by our vanities.

Things are different with respect to the third view, which I have subsumed for the sake of simplicity under the Marxian doctrine of class struggle. It is central to this view that history has throughout been characterized by a struggle for economic predominance waged among social classes. In this regard, the Marxian view is indeed committed to the idea that past social structures cannot be adequately described without reference to conflicts between collective agents. Yet even setting aside the fact that this social fact does not have a properly ontological status, because it obtains only up to the threshold of a classless society, the Marxian doctrine also runs into a further limitation that makes it unsuitable for our purposes. We are given no convincing reason to believe that the relevant struggles were only ever motivated by economic interests. This claim certainly seems to be false with regard to those past social structures in which economic action was embedded in the social life-world in such a way that their economic concerns did not form a separate social sphere at all.²³ But even regarding our capitalist present it is more than doubtful whether we can really understand conflicts among social groups as caused primarily by opposing economic interests. The Marxian doctrine of class struggle fails above all because it views all conflict among groups or classes as economically motivated, whereas historical reality suggests that experiences of injustice and of frustrated hopes have had far greater motivating power.²⁴

This brings me to the fourth of the views according to which conflict is a necessary aspect of all forms of sociality. Everything that remains underemphasized in the Marxist tradition takes center stage in the context of this fourth position. In the tradition that includes Hegel and Dewey as its main exponents, the source of recurrent social struggles is thought to lie in the fact that any disadvantaged social group will attempt to appeal to norms that are already institutionalized but that are being interpreted or applied in hegemonic ways, and to turn those norms against the dominant groups by relying on them for a moral justification of their own marginalized needs and interests. We should distinguish between two aspects of this complex thesis, which need to be argued for independently of each other. First, it needs to be shown that the norms regulating social interaction do in fact always lend themselves to being called into question by pointing to their one-sided interpretation. Second, it must be shown that groups who experience exclusion or discrimination due to hegemonic interpretations of norms do in fact tend to call these interpretations into question and to rebel against existing social orders. If these two claims can be defended, they will support the claim that social reproduction necessarily includes practical critique or a struggle among groups. In what follows, I will only make some brief suggestions about how one might argue for both of these theses.

The first thesis requires that the norms that enable social integration are by their own nature sufficiently open as to admit recurrent re-interpretation appealing to previously neglected needs or interests. A corollary of this claim is that any such norm always stands under the proviso that it has hitherto only been interpreted in a one-sided, hegemonic way. We can see that this is indeed so by considering the fact that the norms enabling social integration result from a reciprocal empowerment on the part of all individuals to be liable to others' criticism for misapplications of these norms. We cannot understand what it even means for such norms to exist except by reference to a reciprocally granted right to object to deviations from them.²⁵ And we can expand this observation by adding that in guiding themselves by these norms, agents must treat each other as subjects who possess the authority to criticize others' application of those norms. Insofar as social action is possible only on the basis of shared norms,²⁶ it is always informed by agents' mutual expectations that they are recognized as members of a community in which everyone is licensed to criticize the normatively guided activity of others. These fundamental enabling conditions of social norms explain why we can treat any given interpretation of a social norm as essentially contested or conflictual. It is always possible that someone will offer reasons to doubt that a given norm is applied or interpreted in a way that is consistent with the underlying expectation of mutual recognition. It is thus intrinsic to the constitutive norms of any given society that they can be criticized for being insufficiently responsive to the concerns or interests of particular individuals or groups.

In contrast with this first thesis, which can be supported by a conceptual explanation of the essential properties of social norms, the second thesis is much more difficult to establish. What is now required is evidence for the steep

assertion that previously disadvantaged groups regularly and recurrently rely on the interpretative openness of social norms in attempts to win recognition for their own neglected interests by way of re-interpretation. So what is at issue now is the question what empirical grounds there are for the claim that social reproduction generally involves a type of practical critique that yields a subversive re-interpretation of existing norms with the aim of expanding the reach of mutual recognition. The argument has to proceed indirectly, because it would border on the presumptuous to attempt an inductive proof here. It may be that we can find attempts by some historians and historical sociologists to establish general propositions concerning the logic of the oppositional practices of oppressed groups,²⁷ but none of these are likely to be sufficient for our purposes. What we might do instead is to consider what alternative forms of action are open to disadvantaged groups, other than to advance transformative re-interpretations. As soon as we frame the issue in this way, it becomes evident that the options are very limited here. When individuals realize that not they alone but an entire group of similarly positioned people are denied appropriate recognition within some structure of socially practiced norms, their only recourse will normally be to call into question the established interpretations of those norms by articulating creative and more inclusive re-interpretations guided by their own particular concerns. Relatively well-studied cases such as the slave revolts in both the Americas, the civil rights movement in the United States, the European workers' movement, and the British suffragette movement serve to show that this was often the procedure of choice.²⁸ Regardless of how violent or peaceful, how illegal or how legal were the means taken to these various ends, they were justified both outwardly and inwardly by pointing to the fact that they would have to be considered legitimate under a morally sound, expansionary re-interpretation of already existing norms. Even if this "revisionist" approach was sometimes subsequently abandoned because the available norms proved to be too restrictive to accommodate the relevant demands, giving rise to a desire for altogether "new" ideals of social life, we can nevertheless consider it the standard case of the genesis of practical critique. People's experience that institutionalized norms are inexplicably inapplicable to their own social situation and position leads them to re-interpret these norms in a cooperative hermeneutic effort in order to then be able to draw on them as a normative resource for the legitimation of socially transformative goals. In order to derive a general model of the dynamic of practical critique from the relatively contemporary examples just named, we need to abstract from them in two or three steps. First, it would need to be demonstrable for all social formations that they recurrently witness the emergence of social groups who are disadvantaged or discriminated against, relative to the expectations of recognition embedded in the established norms of social integration. Second, it would have to be the case that such groups sooner or later develop a sense of dissatisfaction or indignation about the disappointment of these legitimate expectations. Third, this collective outrage would have to lead the relevant groups to initiate struggles involving the attempt to invest established norms with a new, expansive interpretation suitable to justify their demand for social change. In generalizing from our cases in this way, we rely above all on the assumption that social groups will not permanently submit to states of affairs in which they are manifestly disadvantaged by the lights of widely accepted social norms. If this assumption is true, that is, if we can expect sentiments of injustice to manifest themselves on a regular basis, then it seems to me that we are warranted in accepting the dynamic model of practical critique as capturing an essential element of all social reproduction.

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Even though I have not presented you with a conclusive proof for this thesis, I am going to rely on it from now on. Perhaps it is sufficient if I have shown that it is not far-fetched to regard what Horkheimer called "critical conduct," that is, the transformative re-interpretation of established social norms as a recurring practice of oppressed social groups in all societies. In continuing the project of taking up the theoretical aims of Habermas's *Knowledge and Human Interests* even while giving them a different twist, we next need to consider whether the practice just described involves some epistemic interest that is recognizably different from other cognitive concerns we have. If that is the case, that is to say, if social struggle entails an interest in a distinct type of knowledge, it might be that on further

scrutiny this prescientific knowledge could turn out to be an epistemic source of a critical theory. Before I can turn to this problem, I should first guard against a misunderstanding that might be invited by what I have said so far. If, as I have done, we think of critical behavior as a cooperative practice of interpretation, this could be taken to suggest that I think of the struggle among social groups as a purely intellectual business, as simply a matter of argument rather than a tangible conflict.²⁹ This misleading impression arises when the part is mistaken for the whole, as though it was being claimed that the relevant sort of conflict is exhausted by a process of critical and creative re-interpretation. But that is not so. So far I have merely asserted that such a normative-interpretative practice must be one component of critical behavior, if this behavior is to be intelligible to those engaged in it. Whether in setting fire to buildings, in occupying factories, or in erecting barricades in the street—all of them activities that may become part of a social struggle—those who are fighting in this way must be able to give at least a minimal account of the point and appropriateness, the goals, and the legitimacy of what they are doing. My thesis is that this internal aspect of their activity, the work of persuasion that they perform vis-à-vis themselves as well as others, consists in a cooperative re-interpretation of existing norms. This is no idealizing reduction of social struggle to intellectual activity. Rather, I proceed on the assumption that any social struggle involves conceptual and normative operations as well as outwardly directed resistance, insurrection, or rebellion. Both aspects belong together and should not be artificially isolated from each other.

With this conceptual clarification out of the way, I can now turn to the question whether there is anything to be said in favor of reading a distinct epistemic interest into these sorts of struggles. Do those who participate in the practice of cooperative re-interpretation have some cognitive interest that is clearly distinct from the dominant types of inquiry belonging to the established social order? The beginnings of an answer can be found in the chapter on “Lordship and Bondage” in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, however overused that chapter may be.³⁰ The relationship between lord and bondsman (or master and servant) is there presented as one in which both parties are initially limited to incomplete forms of self-consciousness. The master is lacking in self-consciousness because he is related to the objects he desires only indirectly through his servant and hence has no experience of their fluid and changeable nature. The servant, on the other hand, is unable to attain full self-consciousness because his goals remain dependent on the master, and he is therefore unable to experience himself as a self-determining agent. Thus, each of these two characters fails to meet a certain necessary condition for the attainment of self-consciousness that is satisfied by the other. The master remains in a relationship of dependency vis-à-vis the world of external objects because he is incapable of transforming objects through labor. The servant remains in a relationship of dependency vis-à-vis his master because he is subject to the latter's will and is unable to influence it. In using Hegel's line of thought as a point of departure for my attempt to answer the question at hand, I am going to set aside all the further complications of this famous chapter. The servant's fear of death and the master's hedonism are not going to play any role in what follows. The only thing relevant for my purposes is the contrast between the two protagonists regarding their respective relations to the world of external objects. Whereas the master experiences his external surroundings only as an in-itself whose structure and modifiability remain unknown to him in his passive stance, the servant forced to execute the tasks imposed on him relates to external objects in the mode of “formative activity”³¹ and thus turns them into something that is “for-him.” If we now think of the relevant external object as consisting in the social norms established at some moment in time, Hegel's reflections will have helped us make some progress. For now, we can think of the master as someone who remains in a position of passive dependency vis-a-vis those norms, whereas the servant encounters them as objects of his own formative activity. This transposition of Hegel's scenario may perhaps appear forced or arbitrary, but it helps us understand the respective reasons for two quite different attitudes towards an existing set of norms. Those who experience no need to be skeptical of the dominant interpretations of shared social norms because they themselves derive advantages or privileges from them will tend to accept those norms as an “in-itself,” as something unchangeably given. But those who are forced to call those interpretations into question because their own claims or desires are not reflected in them will seek to conceive of those norms as existing merely “for-them” and relate to them with a formative and transformative attitude. I would now like to use this contrast as a key to understanding whether the intellectual side of social struggles entails an interest in a distinctive type of knowledge.

Let us begin by considering the situation in which oppressed or disadvantaged groups generally find themselves. Initially, the sense that the existing conditions are somehow unjust because they block the satisfaction of seemingly legitimate concerns will only be shared within relatively small circles. Even at this initial stage, individuals relate to the established norms in an interpretative mode, because those norms are relied on as reasons both for regarding the needs articulated by the group as morally legitimate and as perceiving the frustration of those needs as an injustice or a wrong. Without some such reference to norms shared by all the members of a society, it would be difficult to apply the terminology of “justice” and “injustice” in a way that is publicly intelligible and open to public scrutiny. At the same time, at this early stage, it is not yet understood that the existing norms are in need of re-interpretation. Their established and institutionally embodied interpretation is still treated as fully authoritative, and what is questioned is only the fairness or justice of their application. Only at a second stage does the oppressed group raise doubts regarding the hegemonic interpretation of the established norms. It seems to me that this would be the point at which those involved become aware of an interest in a type of knowledge that is distinct from the existing, official forms of knowledge developed in their society. For what exactly is the sort of knowledge that the disadvantaged group must acquire in order to undertake the work of expansive re-interpretation? It seems to me that the step from reliance on a traditional interpretation to its questioning and transformative expansion requires at least two insights for which there seems to be no use within the practices of an established social order. First, agents need to learn that any existing norm is amenable to a range of quite different interpretations, because it does not itself specify to whom and exactly in what way it is to be applied. Second, they need to develop an understanding of why, or on the basis of what interests, specific interpretations are dominant within an existing social order. Taken together, the awareness of the plasticity of social norms and the awareness of the reasons for their one-sided interpretation amount to what is known as “emancipatory knowledge.” The thesis, in short, is that oppressed groups have an interest in acquiring this type of knowledge insofar as their goal is to change interpretations of existing norms in their own favor.

The two cognitive elements just identified as the components of emancipatory knowledge need to be described in some more detail if the thesis is to be convincing. We already saw earlier that the norms enabling social integration are only ever valid in a qualified way, in that their previous interpretations through social practices can always turn out to have been partial or one-sided. It is a fundamental property of such norms that those whose actions are governed by them may always bring complaints regarding their current interpretation. To jointly follow a norm is to accord to one another the authority to criticize others for their application of the shared norm. But between this basic fact and actual critique lies a considerable step, which requires that implicit knowledge turns into explicit practical knowledge. It is this cognitive step that I am claiming oppressed groups must be able to take when they come to revolt against a dominant social order. Before a disadvantaged or oppressed group starts engaging in the cooperative re-interpretation of some established norm, it first needs to have become aware that such norms admit a far greater range of interpretations than is suggested by the congealed form they have assumed in a given institutional environment. The semblance of naturalness that in everyday life attaches to any established interpretation first needs to be ruptured before agents can then jointly explore, which new and creative interpretation is most suited to accommodate their hitherto excluded interests and concerns. This de-naturalization of hegemonic interpretations of norms is one type of knowledge in which those engaged in social struggles have an essential interest. In acquiring it they are able to draw on an intuitive kind of knowledge, which is shared by all the members of a society but which the members of dominant groups lack any motive to articulate explicitly. The latter cling to the semblance of naturalness that accompanies habituated interpretations, and they do so because those interpretations lend legitimacy to their institutionally entrenched advantages and privileges. By contrast, those who rebel against those privileges need to be able to reveal the semblance for what it is in order to make room for a re-interpretation of the same norms.

But the groups engaged in a social struggle also have an essential interest in a second type of knowledge. It is not enough for them to pierce through the pseudo-objectivity of existing interpretations of social norms. In addition, they must be capable of determining which interests underlie people's attachment to those dominant interpretations. This second cognitive step is required because in its absence, it would be impossible to cite reasons for attacking the one-sided interpretations on which the established social order is based. The demonstration that such an interpretation is

designed to legitimize the partisan interests of some can lend moral urgency to the demand that the shared norms be given a new interpretation. It is one thing to identify an existing interpretation of a norm as insufficient by pointing to the fact that it is unresponsive to one's own interests and concerns. But such a demonstration becomes a positive reason to replace the given interpretation by a better and more inclusive one only once this demand itself has been cleared of the suspicion of partisanship, by uncovering the way in which the current interpretative practice is bound up with an interest in domination. In an oppressed group's struggle for hermeneutic authority, the interest in understanding the interpretative openness of social norms thus goes hand in hand with an interest in the type of knowledge known as ideology critique. Both the de-naturalization of hegemonic interpretations and the deciphering of the interests underlying them are forms of knowledge whose motivational roots are found in the process of social struggle. Social groups that rebel against an established social order because their own concerns are not adequately reflected in it must necessarily take an interest in both these types of knowledge.

In conclusion, I would like to relate this thesis back to Habermas's project in *Knowledge and Human Interests*, which I outlined in the beginning. In this early work, Habermas proceeded from the assumption that all types of human knowledge serve the function of enabling or facilitating actions or activities that are ineliminable elements of our social reproduction. From this starting point, he was led to the thought that the "transcendental" role of the natural sciences is to serve our interest in controlling nature, whereas the humanities serve our interest in intersubjective communication. What remained unclear in this sketch was what place might be assigned to the so-called "emancipatory" sciences whose epistemological roots were after all the main object of Habermas's inquiry. One way of approaching this problem was by drawing on the model of psychoanalysis, whose methodology was to show how the development of a theory can serve to provide individuals with the means to liberate themselves from the self-perpetuated type of dependency embodied in neuroses. I tried to show that the transposition of this theoretical model from the case of individuals to the analysis of whole societies gave rise to some fundamental difficulties that could not properly be addressed within the framework developed by Habermas. Not only did his approach produce the misleading impression that the human species could be viewed as a single, large-scale individual, it also failed to establish a connection with some type of human activity and thus with the alleged transcendental source of all branches of knowledge. To avoid these calamitous implications, it therefore seemed natural to me to approach Habermas's original problem from the opposite direction and to start out by examining whether in addition to labor and interaction, there might be a third type of human activity that could serve as the "functional" source of "emancipatory" forms of knowledge. In pursuing this line of thought, I follow the traces that Habermas himself, following Horkheimer, had laid out when he occasionally spoke of "struggle" as a possible candidate for the practical context in which critical theory might be embedded. The result of my investigation of this proposal, nascent in the recent philosophical tradition, and of various alternatives to it, was that we can conceive of such an activity of "struggle" as a permanently recurring feature of social reproduction only if we see it as connected to the essential interpretative openness of social norms. We found that the norms that enable social integration can always be scrutinized with regard to the question whether the interpretations prevailing at a given time live up to the promise of recognition implicit in all such norms. It is therefore very likely that oppressed or disadvantaged groups will periodically attempt to deepen or expand the semantic content of those norms through creative re-interpretation. To its participants, this sort of struggle therefore always has an ineliminable conceptual and normative dimension, whereas the representatives of the established order experience it as an insurrection and a confrontation that may, depending on circumstances, show a violent face. Provided that the occurrence of such struggles is indeed an ineliminable feature of our social life, the crucial task for my purposes was then to find out whether there is some essential and distinct form of epistemic interest inherent in them. Or to put it in a slightly different and more functionalist way, I could say my task now was to show to what extent this sort of struggle requires its agents to acquire certain understandings and insights that are not straightforwardly available within the dominant epistemic culture. My proposal for a solution was to distinguish between two kinds of epistemic achievement that any group fighting for its emancipation would each need to aim for in order to succeed in its practical goals: First, such a group must develop an awareness of the essential interpretative openness of established norms, in the face of a stubborn tendency towards their naturalization. Second, it must gain an understanding of the interests that account

for the entrenchment of the existing, institutionally embodied interpretative practice. And, to repeat, both of these epistemic achievements amount to forms of knowledge in which groups struggling for social inclusion must take an interest insofar as they increase the chances that their efforts will meet with success.

These conclusions bring me back to the considerations with which I began my talk. I said at the outset that the tradition of critical theory was committed because its inception to viewing its own scientific activity as nothing but a methodologically disciplined extension of epistemic efforts undertaken by oppressed groups in their daily struggles. Horkheimer was still guided by this idea when he developed his groundwork for a critical theory, as was Habermas in his *Knowledge and Human Interests*, albeit without complete success. The only remaining question for today then is whether the concept of social struggle that I have outlined is better suited to establish the often asserted but never sufficiently explained connection between a prescientific epistemic interest and the discipline of critical theory. Can my proposals about the two forms of knowledge and their functional role within social struggles be read as pointing to the cognitive interest proper to a critical social analysis? I am hoping that it will not appear presumptuous if I give a cautiously affirmative answer to this concluding question. In my view, it is indeed that case that critical theory is nothing but the continuation, by means of a controlled scientific methodology, of the cognitive labor that oppressed groups have to perform in their everyday struggles when they work to de-naturalize hegemonic patterns of interpretation and to expose the interests by which these are motivated. The insights generated in this way quite without any reference to standards of scientific inquiry are the undisciplined germ which a critical theory should bring to fruition within the sphere of the established sciences. In the end, what has been offered over time under the rubric of social critique has always consisted in advancing plausible historical accounts as scientific proof of the fact that a tangible interest in domination generally ensures that socially prevailing norms are given scandalously one-sided interpretations. Taken together, the de-naturalization of hegemonic patterns of interpreting social norms and the uncovering of these motivating interests forge a path along which a critical theory can proceed towards its goal of furthering the process of social emancipation by means of scientific inquiry.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Cf. Axel Honneth, *The Idea of Socialism. Towards a Renewal*, Cambridge: Polity Press 2017, pp. 39–42.
- ² Georg Lukács and Rodney Livingstone, *History and Class Consciousness. Studies in Marxist Dialectics*. Translated by Rodney Livingstone. London: Merlin 1971, pp. 1–272. Georg Lukács, *Geschichte und Klassenbewußtsein* (1923), in: idem, *Geschichte und Klassenbewußtsein. Werke, Frühschriften II*, Neuwied and Berlin 1968, pp. 161–517.
- ³ Max Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory”, in: idem, *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, translated by Matthew J. O’Connell and others, New York: Continuum 2002, pp. 188–243.
- ⁴ Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, Boston: Beacon Press 1968.
- ⁵ Jürgen Habermas, “Nach dreißig Jahren: Bemerkungen zu Erkenntnis und Interesse”, in: Stefan Müller-Dooch (ed.), *Das Interesse der Vernunft. Rückblicke auf das Werk von Jürgen Habermas seit “Erkenntnis und Interesse”*, Frankfurt/M. 2000, pp. 12–22.
- ⁶ Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, loc. cit., Ch. II.
- ⁷ Id., Ch. III.
- ⁸ Max Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory”, loc. cit., pp. 210 f.
- ⁹ Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, loc. cit., p. 286.
- ¹⁰ Id., pp. 198–205. A slightly different, more differentiated reconstruction of Kant’s idea of an “interest of reason” has meanwhile been developed by Axel Hutter: *Das Interesse der Vernunft. Kants ursprüngliche Einsicht und ihre Entfaltung in den transzendentalphilosophischen Hauptwerken*, Meiner: Hamburg 2003.
- ¹¹ Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, loc. cit., pp. 205–210.
- ¹² Id., pp. 211.
- ¹³ Habermas has acknowledged some of the mistakes here identified (cf. especially: Thomas McCarthy, *Kritik der Verständigungsverhältnisse. Zur Theorie von Jürgen Habermas*, Frankfurt/M. 1980, esp. pp. 112 et sqq.) in his reactions to

some critiques. However, he later never has tried again to pursue the attempt to determine an emancipatory interest as developed in *Knowledge and Human Interests*, any further so that the consequences of these revisions for such a program cannot be sufficiently evaluated.

- ¹⁴ Compare as an example: Hans-Joachim Giegel, "Normative Orientierungen und sozialwissenschaftliche Erkenntnis: Rückblick auf Erkenntnis und Interesse", in: Stefan Müller-Doohm (ed.), *Das Interesse der Vernunft. Rückblicke auf das Werk von Jürgen Habermas seit "Erkenntnis und Interesse"*, loc. cit., pp. 42–70.
- ¹⁵ Compare my own attempt in such a direction: Axel Honneth, *Freedom's Right. The Social Foundations of Democratic Life*, Cambridge 2014.
- ¹⁶ I follow here the relevant determinations by Titus Stahl who lets himself be informed by Quine, compare: Titus Stahl, *Immanente Kritik. Elemente einer Theorie sozialer Praktiken*, Frankfurt/M. 2013, pp. 191 et sqq.
- ¹⁷ Allen W. Wood, "Unsociable Sociability", in: *Philosophical Topics*, 19 (1991), 1, pp. 325–351.
- ¹⁸ Sigmund Freud, James Strachey. *Civilization and its Discontents*. New York: 1961, pp. 21–151, esp. Ch. IV. Sigmund Freud, *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*, in: idem, *Gesammelte Werke*, Frankfurt/M. 1948, Band XIV, pp. 419–506, esp. Ch. IV.
- ¹⁹ Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, London 2002.
- ²⁰ Compare John Dewey, *Lectures in China, 1919–1920*, Honolulu 1973, esp. pp. 64–81. With regard to Hegel compare: Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition. On the Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, Cambridge 1994, Ch. 2.
- ²¹ Simmel, George, and Kurt H. Wolff. "IV." *The Sociology of George Simmel*. New York: Free, 1964. Georg Simmel, *Soziologie. Untersuchungen über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung*, Leipzig 1908, Ch. IV.
- ²² Compare the interpretation by Frederick Neuhouser. *Rousseau's Theodicy of Self-love: Evil, Rationality, and the Drive for Recognition*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010, esp. Part III. *Pathologien der Selbstliebe. Freiheit und Anerkennung bei Rousseau*, Berlin 2012, esp. Part III.
- ²³ Compare, for example: Mauss, Marcel. *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*. Miami: HardPress, 2014. Compare, for example: Marcel Mauss, *Die Gabe. Form und Funktion des Austauschs in archaischen Gesellschaften*, Frankfurt/M. 1968.
- ²⁴ Barrington Moore, *Injustice. The Social Basis of Obedience and Revolt*, London and Basingstoke 1978.
- ²⁵ Compare for this and the following: Titus Stahl, *Immanente Kritik. Elemente einer Theorie sozialer Praktiken*, loc. cit., pp. 380–387.
- ²⁶ Among many others: Talcott Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action*, New York: The Free Press 1968, Vol. I, Part II, Ch. X. Another version of this thesis is offered by John McDowell's understanding of "second nature": John McDowell, *Mind and World*, Cambridge/Mass. 1994; cp. Axel Honneth, "Between hermeneutics and Hegelianism: John McDowell and the challenge of moral realism", in: Nicholas H. Smith (ed.), *Reading McDowell. On Mind and World*, London/New York 2002, pp. 246–265.
- ²⁷ Examples offer the famous studies by Charles Tilly or James C. Scott: Charles Tilly, *Identities, Boundaries and Social Ties*, London 2006; James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, New Haven/ CT 1992.
- ²⁸ For the slave revolts compare the interesting remarks by Joshua Cohen: "The Arc of the Moral Universe", in: idem, *The Arc of the Moral Universe and Other Essays*, Cambridge/Mass. 2010, pp. 15–72, esp. p. 43 et sqq.
- ²⁹ Compare for such reservations: Robin Celikates, "Slow Learners? On Moral Progress, Social Struggle, and Whig History", Ms. 2016.
- ³⁰ Westphal, Kenneth R. *The Blackwell Guide to Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009, pp. 37–53. G.W.F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, Werke in zwanzig Bänden, Vol. 3, Frankfurt/M. 1970, pp. 145–155.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

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