Materialist Discourse Analysis as Social Critique: Combining Critical Theory with Discourse Studies[1]

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In the Marxist tradition, materialism is a theory of materiality or matter as well as the relation between the material and symbolic worlds. Materialism in the Marxist tradition is fundamentally anchored in historical and dialectical thinking. An awareness of the embeddedness of the work of the intellectual and historical social worlds leads intellectual enquiry to take a conscious stance towards social change. Historical and dialectical materialism is therefore engrained in the concept of *social critique*, which is understood as a practice of fundamental social change. However, narrow deterministic perceptions of materialism, doubts concerning the normative scope of social critique, and the struggle regarding the definition of matter, especially since the linguistic turn in the social sciences and humanities in the 1970s, present serious objections to classic Marxist materialism. In particular, the last critique requires a close examination of Discourse Studies because it also

developed from a critique of traditional Marxism that originated from the Marxist tradition itself.

In this chapter, I combine materialism and empirical research to develop a general critique of the processes of social reproduction. Here, discourse theory and discourse analysis come into play. Considering the "discursive production of realities", it seems reasonable to suppose that discourse analysis can be used to understand the processes of social reproduction. Although discourse analysts often conceive of their work as critical, there is little theoretical discussion regarding the possibility of a normative critique in the scientific community of discourse analysis. Rarely are the normative grounds and normative scope of such a critique clear. Often, one's own critical perspective is nothing more than an external positing.

The main aim of this chapter is to show how materialism can be used to develop a normative social critique and how discourse analysis can provide useful tools for that predominantly practical task. This approach can help critical theory to overcome its sociological deficit and can provide discourse analysis with specific research questions and a coherent normative foundation for its own position.

To achieve this objective, I first develop the notion of a theoretically informed and normative foundation for a critique in empirical discourse analysis by presenting the logic of immanent critique as found in the tradition of left Hegelianism, especially Marxism and the traditions of the Frankfurt School. These theories agree on the need to empirically ground the normative perspective in pre-scientific practices (a practice-based immanent critique). Thus far, however, all the theories show an empirical deficit that impedes a coherent social analysis.

In a second step, I explain how discourse analysis, as a broad, interdisciplinary field, can be used to combine the analysis of diverse elements to develop a social critique. Discourse analysis can help to extract the normativity that is inherent in language, practices and

structured material dispositions, which can be analysed as meaningful, normative elements. Discourse analysis can be used as a social critique by considering the implicit normative claims of diverse practices against the social reality of discursive social reproduction.

Finally, I present the methodological procedure for a discourse analysis as social critique. In eight steps, a procedure is developed between sociological discourse analysis and macro-sociological theory. A comprehensive practical example on the topic of meritocracy will help to clarify the procedure and the relevance of the approach.

The Normative Foundations of Materialist Social Critique

As is well known, Marx develops his notion of materialism based on a critique of Feuerbach (Marx 1970) and outlines the nexus between materialism and critique. For Marx, material reality must be the starting point for critique (first thesis on Feuerbach). Marx does not refer to a stable, given or objective materiality but to a process towards a "sensuous human activity, practice". For Marx, material reality must prove critique to be true (second thesis), which also refers to the normative "truth". The question of truth is, for Marx, "a practical question". Thinking must be embedded in the real world. Finally, critique must effectively change material reality (eleventh thesis).

Here, we obtain a first look at the dialectical character of materialism. Materiality refers not only to a substance-based idea but also, fundamentally, to processes and practices. To understand this approach to processes instead of fixed matter, it is useful to recall some of the points that David Harvey (2016) makes to explain dialectics. I present five aspects. First, as already indicated, "dialectical thinking prioritizes the understanding of processes, flows, fluxes and relations over the analysis of elements, things, structures and organized systems. The latter do not exist outside of the processes that support, give rise to or create them" (ibid., 196). Second, for dialectics, parts and wholes are mutually constitutive of one another. Every

part consists of other elements, and their relations and elements can be combined. Third, the subjects and objects of analysis can be interchanged. Subjects can be treated as the objects of analysis, and objects can act as subjects (e.g., a structure can cause the process of structuring). Fourth, change is fundamental to all systems. All systems are the result of change, and if they are to persist in the future, they will undergo processes of change. Finally, "dialectical enquiry is not itself outside of its own form of argumentation but subject to it" (ibid., 199). Our "observation" intervenes in the world. As observers or critics, we are the object of a process of formation by the social world, but we are also subjects who shape the social world as an "object".

The processes and practices in which Marx was most interested were the complex processes of social reproduction and, mainly, the practice of work. Marxist materialism attempts to develop a fundamental critique of the processes of social reproduction. Based on a broad notion of the social division of labour, materialism aims to theoretically understand the praxis of society, economy, politics, and culture in its relations. Society and every social phenomenon are viewed as the specific historical results of constitutive human practices.

The Marxian *mode* of critique is often called immanent critique or immanent transcendence (Browne 2008, Herzog 2016a, Romero 2013, Stahl 2013a). The idea of *immanence* and the notion of *critique* or *transcendence* can be divided into the two aspects of norms and methods. Norms originate from the normative potential of existing society (i.e., immanence) but point simultaneously towards a future society (i.e., transcendence and critique). As a method, the results should be developed completely from the empirical material (i.e., immanence) and should simultaneously indicate a practical path or otherwise be a powerful tool to change society (i.e., transcendence and critique).

Currently, the theoretical problem for immanent social critique is the source of this normative potential of societies. In classic Marxist analysis, work was viewed as the specific moral experience that enables the working class to effectively (i.e., practically) criticize and overcome a given society. However, confidence in the emancipatory capacity of this class has diminished significantly in the first half of the last century. In the 1980s, Jürgen Habermas believed that he found in language and its use the moral experience that aims for understanding and emancipation (1984). Through the very fact that people use language, they implicitly accept normative claims of understanding and emancipation. However, since Foucault's critique of the power in language and the multiple mechanisms of exclusion in its use (see, e.g., Foucault 1981), the public sphere can no longer be imagined as a space of free deliberation. Instead, the public sphere must be viewed as a space filled with mechanisms of exclusion, marginalization, and conscious and unconscious rules of participation—that is, *invisibilization and silencing*.

Axel Honneth, a disciple of Habermas, uses Foucault's critique but maintains Habermas's communicative approach. Although Honneth's theory is internationally known as Recognition Theory, for Honneth, the practices that are used to ground a normative critique are those of misrecognition or disrespect (Honneth 1995). Misrecognition produces a social form of suffering. Every individual, not only individuals with certain social capital, can suffer from disrespect. Because we can empathically understand the suffering of others, we can speak here of a form of silent communicative action. For Honneth, this suffering can be used as a normative starting point for social critique. For our approach to materialism and social critique, we take our normative standpoint from the social suffering of individuals because this suffering ultimately points towards a social order in which suffering is abolished.

When discussing social suffering here, I am referring to a second-order phenomenon (i.e., a form of evaluation of a first-order phenomenon). It is a suffering that stems from the fact that certain socially accepted norms are not fulfilled in practice or that they have a normative surplus that is not yet realized. Suffering is thus an affective reaction due to the difference between (socially accepted) normative claims and reality. It becomes immediately clear that social suffering does not refer to suffering from natural phenomena but only to suffering that is made or changeable by human beings. Only this suffering can contradict the normative expectations of the participants.

It is important to understand that we are not just adopting another external standpoint; in this case, we are not just taking the avoidance of social suffering as new external perspective from which we criticize society, instead of taking competing norms like freedom or equality. When we accept that people can suffer when normative claims are not realized, we can say that although this capacity is universal, it does not point to a universal norm. In different social situations, there are different normative expectations. A boxer who receives hard punches as part of his work does not claim that he should not be punched. In other words, although he is suffering, it is not a social suffering in the Honnethian sense of suffering due to disrespect. The situation would be different in the case of someone forced to fight in the ring for the amusement of others. In this case, the boxer would suffer from the disrespect received. His normative claim that he should not be forced against his will to fight in the ring would then collide with the reality of disrespect.

At the same time, this approach shows the limits of critique: at the very moment at which people no longer suffer under their conditions, immanent critique is no longer possible. Taking hunger as another example, we can see that it has accompanied humanity throughout its history. Historically, suffering from famine has not been social suffering. This has changed

only in the last centuries, in which humanity has theoretically had the means of production to abolish malnutrition. From that point on, hunger is *social* suffering. Thus, at the moment the approximately 800 million undernourished people and the rest of humanity understand hunger as natural or divine and not socially created, which pushes us to action (i.e. in a world of "total delusion"), critique is no longer possible.

This "practice-based" type of immanent critique is identified by Stahl (2013b) as belonging to the Marxist tradition that was developed in the tradition of the Frankfurt School. Thus, the critic "must not only draw on the cultural meaning or the rules accepted in a given community but also on his or her knowledge about the community's *objective practices and institutions*" (ibid., 535). This type of immanent critique always presupposes the existence of normative elements in social practices that are beyond the conscious understanding of the participants and upon which immanent critique can draw.

For an empirical analysis, this theoretical framework requires specific attention to the norms that are contained in practices and in affective reactions to misrecognition. Although practices are always discursively created, shaped and interpreted by social actors, the primary focus of the analysis that is required for this type of critique must be practices, not more or less conscious language use. However, this type of materialist analysis must simultaneously consider the role of these norms in the reproduction of society and the systemic obstacles to overcoming the existing form of social reproduction. As I argue in the next section, in the toolbox of sociological discourse analysis, we can find all the necessary elements for this materialist social critique.

Discourse Analysis as Social Critique

For empirical social research, the idea of immanent critique means that social researchers must analyse and reconstruct the normative basis of society. As long as this reconstruction

refers to the official and explicit normative points of reference, it seems not to be too complicated for discourse analysis. Nonetheless, if we accept the important thesis that socially accepted normativity is immanent in *social practices*, the analysis becomes more difficult. In addition, when analysing the normative content of practices (or the institutionalized, material social order), the critical approach requires *simultaneous* research on the development potential, obstacles and systemic or structural limitations that impede the unfolding of these normative claims. We can differentiate real, transcending immanent critique from mere corrective critique only through this second element.

However, we face at least three major problems. First, how should such an analysis proceed? How can we analyse the silent elements of the practices of and affective reactions to misrecognition or the "silenced discourses" that are the result of silent or silenced suffering? When discourses do not appear, when they are reduced to silence before they are even articulated, how can the social researcher access the normative content of this silence? A second issue involves the possibility that the expression of social suffering is pre-structured and that suffering itself is not an immediate experience. Suffering is always already mediated. We can imagine how a white supremacist suffers from having to share public transport with other racial groups. In the same way that Honneth discusses the ideology of recognition (Honneth 2004), we can understand this example as ideological misrecognition or ideological suffering. Therefore, when we accept that the normative content of affective reactions, practices, and institutional orders, for example, can be ideological, then the second problem becomes clearer. How can we differentiate ideologically normative content from the content that the critic wants to use as a foundation for an immanent critique? The problem is how to determine the normative status of a practice or an affective reaction. Finally, there is a third problem, which references the previously discussed relation between immanence and

transcendence in a double sense and involves the question of how to effectively transcend society with actual immanent norms. The norms must identify other (better) social relations, and the analysis of these norms must contribute to effective social change.

All of these problems refer to the "sociological deficit" of immanent critique. Presenting the possibility of immanent norms in social phenomena requires an epistemic and methodological approach to these norms. This approach can be found in what I call "sociological discourse analysis". In the last decade, several promising and sociological approaches towards discourses have emerged (e.g., Bührmann and Schneider 2007, Keller 2005) and have broadened the vision of discourse analysis with respect to the analysis of practices, material realities, power relations, social structures and even affective reactions to disrespect (Guitiérrez-Rodríguez 2007). Although these aspects also inhere in the more linguistic forms of discourse analysis, they have now achieved the status of an independent field of systematic analysis.

Following a more sociological discourse analysis, we can understand the (implicit) interpretations that social actors elaborate in specific situations. Discourse analysis can perform controlled interpretation, can use reflexive methods, and can analyse the socio-historic context of these interpretations. For Foucault, individuals are permanently involved in social struggles (i.e., in discursive struggles) that are primarily struggles for truth or resources, and they often have normative effects. These struggles (or the participation in discursive practices) are often unconscious. Therefore, when individuals engage in practices, whether practices of discourse production (e.g., speaking) or practices that are produced by discourses (e.g., taking up cycling because of a discourse on health and well-being), they are frequently unaware of the normative implications of their practices.

The more sociological approaches *simultaneously* focus on texts and the non-textual aspects of social life, such as practices or materialities. With these approaches, we can make explicit the normative pretensions of the individuals who engage in all types of interaction. Concurrently, we can reveal the normative implications of their (often unconscious) struggles. Therefore, we can differentiate justified normative claims from unjustified, ideological normative claims. Unjustified and therefore ideological normative claims are claims that contravene their own implicit normative ground. In this sense, the analysis of discursive and extra-discursive realities cannot offer normative criteria for immanent critique but can reveal the social effects of possible criteria. Consequently, discourse analysis offers the possibility of adopting a reflexive and informed position regarding different normative claims and their respective discursive and extra-discursive expressions.

The broader sociological discourse-analytical approach can help us to better understand the normative content of discursive and non-discursive practices and struggles. More sociologically based approaches help us not only to perform internal critiques on discourses but also to use immanent critique to better understand discourses and material realities. These approaches help us to analyse the differences between (implicit) normative claims and realities. Although we can evaluate the consequences of these differences, it does not necessarily follow that discourse analysis is the empirical research method for materialist critique. To combine both strands, it is important to note three aspects that are frequently omitted in contemporary immanent critique and discourse studies.

1. Contrary to the notion that immanent critique means revealing the contradiction between socially accepted claims and reality, in the materialist tradition, these contradictions have always been *necessary* (Browne 2008). "Necessary" refers to the contradictions that inevitably arise from the social order. Thus, immanent critique is not a matter of holding a

mirror to criticized individuals and showing them their own contradictions so that they can deliberately change their behaviour. This type of critique would surely have a transformative effect, but its transcending character would be limited. Materialist critique is interested in structural and/or systemic conditions that impede the resolution of the mentioned contradictions. Therefore, discourse analysis that seeks to follow the insights of Critical Theory must not only compare claims with (symbolic and material) reality but also reveal the (symbolic and material) obstacles that prevent these claims from becoming reality. As it extends towards the analysis of material resources, sociological discourse analysis has prepared the ground for the merging of immanent critique, as found in Critical Theory, with discourse analysis. Immanent critique can find practical tools for analysis in the discourse analytical toolbox. For discourse analysts, in contrast, this merging yields clear research questions, such as what the differences are between claims and reality and whether these differences are necessary (i.e., structural or systemic) contradictions.

When we are not referring to contradictions that can be directly influenced by individual, collective or institutional acts of will, *immanent critique is always social critique.* Immanent critique is never limited to criticizing single social actors and always refers to systemic inadequacies.

2. Regarding the dialectics of the idea of immanent critique, we can clarify the problem of the transcending normative viewpoint. Foucault seems to take his critical stance from the outside by referring to the "art of not being governed like that" (Foucault 2007). However, Critical Theory seems to insist that the immanence of institutions is so overwhelming that a transcending position is no longer visible. Nonetheless, as Zamora affirms, dialectical immanent critique also means that the "the total immanence of the system – even through mediation – ultimately is external and forceful to the individual" (Zamora 2011). This

clarification suggests that there can be spaces of exteriority even in a totally administered world. According to diverse representatives of Critical Theory (Adorno 1970, Honneth 1995), these spaces can be understood as suffering. Thus, individual and collective human-made suffering is the engine for normative progress. That humans can suffer from social relations indicates the existence of this ultimate normative point of reference.

By merging immanent critique and discourse analysis, we can hypothesize that it is exactly this individual suffering that leads Foucault to his attitude of refusal. The reason Foucault refuses "to be governed like that" is the social suffering that is described in Critical Theory, such as experiences of disrespect as described by Honneth (1995). Foucault experienced this disrespect himself to a degree and was partially able to empathically understand other people who suffered disrespect. Therefore, the capacity to suffer as proof of the existence of a normative perspective that is alien to the system may represent the socially immanent anchor that refers transcendently to this position outside a given society.

Thus, theoretically informed discourse analysis must uncover social suffering and reveal the degree to which this suffering is human-made. Individuals do not necessarily verbally express their suffering. Their affective reactions are frequently silent or expressed non-verbally. Here, the methodological toolbox of sociological discourse analysis can be helpful due to its capacity to analyse not only text and talk but also non-verbal practices and affects (see also Renout 2012, Gutiérrez-Rodríguez 2007). In addition, merging Critical Theory and discourse analysis offers a methodological approach for researchers interested in immanent critique and provides theoretically informed research questions for discourse analysts.

3. When performing immanent critique, we must be aware of yet another aspect that is alien to poststructuralist discourse analysis or of which poststructuralists are often highly suspicious. As clarified by Gregor Sauerwald's (2008) description of immanent critique as

"context-bound universalism", the notion of normative transcendence refers to a type of universal norm. However, the idea of universal norms is sharply criticized by Foucault and other poststructuralists. For example, Foucault demonstrates that apparently universal norms are historically contingent and extremely particular and "rare" constellations (e.g., Foucault 1981). Here, too, discourse analysis can help to reveal the particularity of apparently universal norms.

My hypothesis is that, ultimately, there is only one universal social norm: (human-made) suffering should be avoided. This norm can be used as a superlative norm by which to measure all other norms. By considering the norm of the avoidance of suffering superior to all other norms, we may solve the conundrum of ideological norms: if a norm (e.g., the specific recognition of white identities) is not reconcilable with the superlative norm of avoiding human-made suffering, it must be rejected. Similarly, we can demonstrate that implicit or explicit norms of liberty, equality, solidarity and autonomy are principally compatible with the superlative norm. However, as we have seen above, avoiding second order suffering is not *one* norm but refers to a *multiplicity* of *historically changing* norms and to the suffering produced when these norms are not realized.

Again, this merging means a methodologization for materialism and the possibility of theoretically informed research questions for discourse analysis. Researchers may then ask which norms are immanent in a society and the extent to which these norms are reconcilable with the (superior, universal) norm of the avoidance of suffering.

Eight Steps for Discourse Analysis as Social Critique in the Materialist Tradition

At the beginning of the approach described here, there is a decision to attempt to develop a critique that points towards the core of social reproduction. This decision is usually based on the hypothesis that there is something pathological in our society that is not a surface

phenomenon; instead, social pathologies have underlying structural or systematic reasons. Researchers should be acutely aware of these assumptions along with their other prejudices or biases. Awareness of this individual starting point should allow one to eventually distance oneself from the ideas that are being defended. Under no circumstances should the starting point determine the results of the research.

Seriously considering the materialist approach to immanent critique means that it should not be the investigator's norms that lead to social critique but rather the norms of the criticized society itself. Thus, it is the researcher's task to uncover these socially accepted norms and bring them to light by unfolding them and showing a (perhaps systemic) difference between socially accepted normative claims and reality. In general, we can distinguish eight steps for elaborating such a discourse analytical approach.

1. Finding appropriate research objects and research questions

At the beginning of our research, we must find an object of research that seems to fulfil two conditions. First, it must be related to human suffering. In this sense, discourse analysis as social critique is always problem-oriented and never merely contemplative research that attempts to "simply" broaden our knowledge. We must be aware that human suffering can occur silently and can sometimes be "read" empathically. Second, our object must enable us to see "the rupture of the world" (Adorno) through it; that is, it must allow the reasonable hypothesis that there is a structure that causes suffering and that this structure is indispensable to social reproduction.

Research questions must be asked regarding the relation of human suffering to the structure of social reproduction. Furthermore, questions must be asked about the norms that are at stake and whether these norms can emerge or unfold completely within a given society. A

fundamental part of this first step is to review the literature on the possible objects of research.

Example: The ideology of merit

The example that I propose is the valuation of our merits in the labour market and in the educational system. This example seems to fulfill the two basic conditions. First, it points towards social suffering. In the labour market and in the educational system, we can find many people who suffer under a current evaluation. The frustration seems often to be related to the form or the results of the evaluation. Second, social valuation that is based on the merit principle seems fundamentally related to our way of distributing material and immaterial goods. Certainly, this hypothesis concerning the embeddedness of the merit principle in our society is the result of prior research in the literature regarding the "myth" or "ideology" of merit.

The research questions here could be as follows. What relations exist between suffering and the fact that we value certain social characteristics and capacities? Is there a conflict (or a contradiction) of norms? What are these norms? Does it seem possible to overcome the tensions that are produced by these norms?

2. Exploring the object

In this exploratory phase, we must gather the most relevant information regarding our object of analysis. Which discourses seem to exist around the object? Who is involved in the (hegemonic) discourse production, and who is excluded? How does the discourse seem to be expressed? Are there popular discourses, media discourses, and expert discourses, and what

seems to be the relation among them? At this stage, we are not yet engaged in a discourse analysis, but we should have a sense of the discourses and dynamics that are involved.

Furthermore, we should gather information concerning the non-discursive realities that surround social suffering. Is there economic need or a lack of access to basic goods? Are there power inequalities, denigrating identities or some type of exclusion that is legal, material or ideal? Can we name practices that at first seem inappropriate or exclusive? At this stage, we must also ask for the significant silences. Who does not speak? Which affects or "psychological gaps" seem to have been produced?

For our example of merit, we must now explore how the idea of merit is produced socially. Are there specific discourses on merit? Which social actors stand out in these discourses, and which social actors are not heard in the public sphere? Are there relevant non-verbal practices? In this step, we may see that there are important discourses regarding individual merit in the public sphere, labour relations and the field of education. There are even legal norms that obligate an evaluation by merit. Furthermore, we see that the most important social actors are the actors with relatively high social status—actors who have been benefiting from the evaluation system. Actors who have rarely been evaluated positively have little access to these discourses.

Moreover, there is a considerable amount of non-verbal social valuations. A smile or open ignoring can be acts of positive or negative valuation to which actors can react non-verbally, such as by smiling back or displaying a suffering face.

3. Elaborating a corpus and a method

Next, we must create a provisional corpus and define our research methods. Because we do not yet know the results of the concrete analysis, we must be open to the possibility of broadening or changing our initial corpus or to adapting our procedure during research. What material do we need to collect? Do we want to analyse institutional or private documents and conduct interviews with experts or with the people who are suffering the most? These techniques of data gathering are very similar to traditional Discourse Studies. It is also possible to use empathic communication for discourse analysis. Are there practices, pictures, spatial arrangements, emotions, or body language to read and analyse? These aspects can also form part of the corpus. Furthermore, we must ask questions concerning the relation that we believe may exist between discursive and non-discursive realities. While collecting the material, we must elaborate an initial approach to analyse this material. For this purpose, there is considerable literature on how to perform discourse analysis or even an analysis of non-discursive material.

The corpus for our research on merit could consist of highly influential texts, such as legal norms or political and social debates. We could also consider conducting interviews with experts and with the 'losers' in the system of evaluation. In all of these cases, we are still pointing towards classical discourse analysis, but we can also include in our corpus practices of subtle valuations or corporal reactions that are collected through observation.

4. Descriptive analysis

The analysis can be logically divided into two parts, a descriptive and an interpretative analysis, although in research practice, both parts are often executed in parallel. During the descriptive analysis, we work closely with the material. It is important to show outsiders at

every point of the analysis the relation between what we do and the empirical material that is included in the corpus. Working closely with the empirical material is important not only for transparency and comprehensibility for outsiders but also to guarantee the intersubjective validity of our analysis. It is also important to control our own biases. All too often, researchers are too eager to confirm their hypothesis or prejudices.

For this type of analysis, we can use the entire range of research techniques in the Social Sciences and Humanities. Quantitative data analysis can bring us a step closer. However, at some point, qualitative analysis seems indispensable. Most of the literature on qualitative analysis uses categorizations, codings or heuristic questions to become acquainted with the material. Researchers usually go a step further to reduce the complexity of the material by synthesizing or grouping the information through metacategories, metacodes or the like. It is important to emphasize that although we use the toolbox of sociological discourse analysis in most cases, it is possible that our material will result from observation, aesthetic material or material documents. In these cases, we can proceed logically in a similar way by using coding, categorization or heuristic questions that are equally adapted to the empirical material.

5. Interpretative analysis

Regardless of whether we started with quantitative or qualitative data analysis or a mixture of the two, at this stage, we must begin to interpret the data. This means that discourse analysis as social critique ultimately follows a critical interpretative paradigm, although quantitative analysis can play an auxiliary part in this type of research. Initially, the interpretative task must be closely connected to the descriptive analysis to conduct a step-by-step reconstruction, in the sense of a second-order hermeneutics, of the social sense or

signification that is enclosed in the data. Typical questions involve the relation of the categories. Are there logical connections, oppositions or contradictions? Can we find regularities or patterns? Is there a difference in the interpretation of the norms regarding different social actors or different empirical material? Is it possible to sum the findings in general schemes such as narrative structures or plots (Viehöver 2001), interpretative schemes or frames (Oevermann 2001, Lüders and Meuser 1997) or phenomenal structures (Keller 2005)?

The aim of this step is to reconstruct the symbolic order and to find the implicitly or explicitly accepted norms, implications, relations and degree of accomplishment in society's practices and material organization. Considering that we may have worked with non-linguistic data, we must be prepared to broaden our notion of symbolic order towards an order of meaning that is contained in material dispositions, iconography, practices or silent affective reactions.

In the case of the analysis of merit, the fourth and fifth steps mean starting with the descriptive analysis to uncover step by step the symbolic order. Here, we probably find a general acceptance concerning the principle of merit but discover differences regarding what should count as merit, how merit should be measured, and in which social fields other principles should substitute for or accompany the merit principle. We will likely find a hegemonic discourse and several alternative discourses.

6. Reflection on a social macro analysis

We must then elaborate general statements regarding fundamental social structures. Here, we can draw on our literature review from the first step. Realistically, this step will involve

theoretical research in which we combine the reflections from social and political philosophy with the findings of macro sociological analysis. The ideal is to develop our own theoretically sound macro analysis of social structure. In the practice of conducting research with limited resources, however, we must usually rely on other researchers' findings.

This more theoretical analysis must focus on three classical sociological questions concerning statics, dynamics and praxis. The question of statics is perhaps the most fundamental. This is the question of how society reproduces its fundamental structure. We must elaborate the theoretical elements of social order, integration or social reproduction. However, the question of practice is also highly relevant to develop *social critique.* How can humans collectively intervene in the processes of social reproduction and social change to transform social development into a deliberate and intentional process?

7. The relation of norms and social structure

In this step, we must relate the results of the sociological discourse analysis in the broad sense, including the analysis of silent and silenced suffering, practices, and material dispositions, to general insights regarding societal reproduction. What is the role of norms in guaranteeing social integration and stability? Is there a potential development of the norms— that is, are they already completely unfolded, or are they realized incompletely in our society? What exactly is the relation among the norms, the material organization of society, and the suffering that was detected in the first step of the proceeding?

It is time to test our initial hypothesis and decide whether our discourse analysis truly leads to social critique, which is understood as a critique of the fundamental social structure. We must now ask about the degree to which differences between normative claims and the social realization of norms are necessary contradictions and the degree to which they are mere

surface phenomena. Which logical and material obstacles are encountered by the unfolding of norms, and would overcoming these obstacles require a fundamental social change or only a slight adjustment? Finally, how have the norms themselves changed in the process of analysis and unfolding, and how must they change in the future?

In the sixth and seventh steps, we go a step further than classical discourse analysis to prepare the social critique. With research from the literature, we can, for example, understand that the merit principle is a fundamental justification of our way of social reproduction, for legitimating the distribution of material and immaterial goods and for maintaining inequalities over generations. However, we can also see that a significant amount of goods is not distributed by the merit principle but through inheritances. We can even go a step further and understand that inequality is reproduced socially not only through the inheritance of material wealth but also through the transmission of social or cultural capital. Thus, there is an important systemic gap between the claim of individual merit and the reality of the social distribution of wealth by principles other than merit.

To fulfill the claim and to develop the "normative surplus" (Honneth) of the merit principle, the possibility that every single individual receives her fair share through the merit principle and not through other means would ultimately mean a rupture with capitalism as we know it as a form of accumulating capital (material, social and cultural) and to use it accordingly.

8. Contribution to social change

Depending on the reader's academic tradition, the final step may seem outside the scope of academic research. As Marx says, however, the point is not to merely interpret the world; "the point is to change it". Here, all of the important authors who have been used to develop

the described approach, including Marx, Adorno and Horkheimer, Habermas and Honneth for Critical Theory, along with Foucault (as well as Butler, van Dijk, etc.) and the rest of the critical discourse analysts, agree that social research is about making a practical difference. Social critique must therefore give its research results back to society, and the social critic must become a public intellectual. The critic must engage in debates and social struggles, and, most importantly, her interventions must contribute to the empowerment of the people who suffer under the current social conditions. The enormous advantage of the critical approach that is presented here is that the critic can rely on norms that are already shared by the vast majority of people. Therefore, in the worst case (i.e., in the case in which norms are only implicitly shared), the critic must show that the participants in a social interaction share some basic, normative assumptions. She needs not convince anyone of the validity of a particular norm that is not shared by other people.

Finally, the critic must explain to those who are suffering how their suffering is socially produced and related to a specific social order. By showing the relation among suffering, the incomplete unfolding of accepted social norms and a particular social order, the critic shows that the suffering is an objective moral wrong that must be abolished. Once suffering is understood as structural disrespect, indignation can occur as a first step towards social change. In the words of Pierre Bourdieu, "As sceptical as one may be about the social efficacy of the sociological message, one has to acknowledge the effect it can have in allowing those who suffer to find out that their suffering can be imputed to social causes and thus to feel exonerated; and in making generally known the social origin, collectively hidden, of unhappiness in all its forms, including the most intimate, the most secret" (Bourdieu 2000, 629).

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