



Re-Presenting the Good Society

Maeve Cooke

Re-Presenting the Good Society

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For Martin

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Re-Presenting the Good Society

Introduction

“Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains.”¹ Thus, Rousseau, writing at a time of immense intellectual and social change in Europe, sowed the seeds of a mode of ethically oriented, critical thinking that can be given the name of *critical social theory*. His seminal contribution was to suggest that certain kinds of social arrangements may prevent human beings from realizing their potentials as human beings. Underlying this suggestion was a view of human nature as malleable. In contrast to the ethical views that had prevailed up to then, Rousseau saw human nature not as essentially fixed and given but as open to the formative influences of the social arrangements in which human beings are involved in their everyday lives. Crucially, moreover, he maintained that these social arrangements were the result of human activity. Again in contrast to the hitherto dominant traditions, he rejected the view that certain kinds of social relations, structures, or institutions are naturally necessary, divinely ordained, or historically inevitable, holding that human beings themselves could establish alternative, more beneficial ones. Since Rousseau, critical social theory has been guided by this insight.²

Critical social theory has also focused on *individual* human flourishing. To be sure, this aspect, though central, should not be overinflated; critical social thinking is not individualist in the sense of asserting the priority of individual goals at the expense of communal and social values or in the sense of conceiving of human beings atomistically, as self-contained centers of ethical value. Indeed, critical social thinkers often appeal to an idea of social solidarity and understand ethical value in intersubjective terms.

Nonetheless, critical social theory is individualist in two important senses: first, in the sense that it prioritizes the individual’s well-being as opposed to

that of the collective; second, in the sense that it stresses the need for the individual herself to be able freely to accept a given conception of human flourishing as the best—most attractive and most rationally compelling—one. Its individualist dimension is often expressed in terms of an ethical idea of autonomous agency: according to this idea, the individual must be able to see her actions and projects as expressions of her freedom and reason, and be prepared to take responsibility for their ethical validity.

Rousseau's emphasis on *historically contingent*, *social* impediments to *individual* human flourishing marks him out as a child of modernity. Indeed, his critical social thinking, like that of his successors, relies on a cluster of normative assumptions that are constitutive, in particular, for Western, modern self-understanding.³ These include the assumptions that historical time is progressive as opposed to cyclical; that political authority is neither divinely ordained, nor naturally given, but a matter of cooperation among human beings for their mutual benefit; that there are no authoritative standards independent of history and sociocultural context that could adjudicate rival claims to validity, especially in the areas of science, law, politics, morality, and art; that human knowledge is contestable, in the sense of being open to revision on the basis of good reasons; and that human beings are essentially equal by virtue of a capacity such as reason, or freedom, or moral judgment, and are entitled to respect on grounds of that capacity.

These and related normative assumptions constitute key elements of the evaluative horizon of Western modernity in the sense that they now unavoidably shape the identities, institutions, proposals, and practices of its inhabitants. They reflect the intellectual shifts that took place in the Western world from around the fifteenth century onwards, giving rise to new ideas about history and nature, about authority and knowledge, and about human beings and their interrelationships. They share in common an antiauthoritarian impulse that, once again, can be expressed by the idea of autonomous agency: by the idea that human beings must have reasons for the validity of their perceptions, interpretations, and evaluations, and for subjecting themselves to laws and political regimes, that they are able to *call their own*.⁴ Ideas of this kind are constitutive in the sense that they are formative of individual and collective identities, both constraining and enabling thought and behavior. This is not to say that inhabitants of Western modernity must accept the validity of such formative ideas. Famously, Nietzsche rejected a conception of historical time as progressive as well as the idea that all human beings are equal.⁵ The point is that if such formative ideas are rejected, those who reject them must take

on the task of reorienting self-interpretations so that the normative assumptions in question no longer seem convincing. Nietzsche, of course, took on precisely this task.

A further central assumption underlying critical social theory is evident in Rousseau's writings—the thesis that the social arrangements preventing human beings from realizing their potentials may be accompanied by, or even themselves give rise to, faulty perceptions of needs and interests. As a result, social change for the better is not simply a matter of changing social arrangements to establish better modes of living together in a better organized and regulated society; it may also involve changing perceptions. From Rousseau onwards critical social theories have generally acknowledged that the human beings who suffer under certain kinds of social arrangements may not be aware of the harmful effects of those arrangements, and may even resist the social critic's attempts to bring them to their attention. Consequently, critical social theories address the question of transformation in a double respect: they seek to identify possibilities for changes in social arrangements, while recognizing that this may require changes in prevailing perceptions of needs and interests.

In calling for social and cognitive transformation, critical social theories are guided by an idea of the good society in which the identified social obstacles to human flourishing would once and for all have been overcome. This idea may be articulated more or less explicitly; indeed, frequently, it is presented negatively and must be extrapolated from the critical social theorist's descriptions of what is wrong with social arrangements in the society in question. Nonetheless, without some, more or less determinate, guiding idea of the good society, critical social thinking would be inconceivable: it would lack an ethical basis for its critical diagnoses and its endeavor to stimulate social and cognitive transformation would have no ethical point.

The possibility of faulty perceptions of needs and interests means that the validity of these guiding ideas of the good society must have some independence of the ideas of the good society that are dominant in the social order in question. Traditionally, this independence has been interpreted as a context-transcending one: the validity of a particular idea of the good society was held to extend beyond the assignments of meaning and value in a historically specific, sociocultural context—it was deemed valid for everyone, everywhere, irrespective of sociocultural context and historical epoch.

Today, the concept of context-transcending validity is not easy to defend. Whereas Rousseau could still appeal unselfconsciously to normative

assumptions about the nature of human beings, contemporary critical social theories have to address the question of how to justify the ideas of the good society that guide their critical analyses. Important shifts in the Western social imaginary over the past one hundred and fifty years have led to a serious problem of justification.⁶ The “linguistic turn” of Western philosophy means that there is now a widespread acceptance that ideas of knowledge and validity are always mediated linguistically, and that language is conditioned by history and context; the influence of Nietzsche means that, today, the subjectivity and partiality of ethical judgments seems incontrovertible; Foucault’s descriptions of epistemological and ethical orders as instruments of repressive power raises suspicion that claims to context-transcending validity, by obscuring their own origins in particular epistemological and ethical orders, collude in the dissemination and perpetuation of social repression.

As a consequence of these shifts, contemporary critical social theories have to confront the question of how to justify the claims to validity they make for the ideas of the good society guiding their critical diagnoses and emancipatory projections. On the one hand, they must endeavor to proceed in a nonauthoritarian manner by taking account of the historicity of knowledge and validity claims, recognizing the subjectivity and partiality of ethical judgments, and acknowledging the possibility that claims to context-transcending validity are perhaps yet one more means of exercising repressive social power. On the other hand, they must seek to uphold ideas of the good society that raise claims to validity that are not reducible to the contingent preferences of the inhabitants of historically specific, sociocultural contexts. We might say, the justificatory dilemma facing contemporary critical social theories is how to maintain an idea of context-transcending, ethical validity without violating their own antiauthoritarian impulses. A principal aim of the following discussion is to find a way of dealing with this dilemma. Since the tension between an anti-authoritarian impulse and a guiding idea of context-transcending validity is today an integral part of critical social theory, I argue that it should be negotiated rather than eliminated.

In chapter 1 I highlight the transformative dimension of critical social theory, using the difference in the respective views on the status of claims regarding change for the better to set up the debate between “radically contextualist” and “context-transcending” approaches to critical social theory. This debate structures much of the discussion in the book. In accordance with the antiauthoritarian impulses that can be expressed in the concept of situated rationality,

both approaches, as I present them, take the deep-seated, normative intuitions and expectations of the inhabitants of a particular social order as the normative reference point for their social criticism. They diverge, however, in their interpretations of the status of these deep-seated intuitions and expectations: radically contextualist approaches deny them any rationality or purpose beyond the social order in question; context-transcending approaches attribute to them presumptive universal validity and regard them as open in principle to interrogation on the basis of good reasons. Each approach has certain strengths and weaknesses. I conclude that critical social theories cannot do without the idea of context-transcending validity, but that the difficulties they face in attempting to maintain such an idea are serious.

In chapter 2, I discuss the radically contextualist position of Richard Rorty, contending that it not only leads to unacceptably restricted models of critical social thinking and democratic politics, it also proves impossible to sustain consistently.

In chapter 3, I examine the attempts of Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth to maintain a reference to context-transcending validity while avoiding epistemological and ethical authoritarianism. The foundationalist—authoritarian—residues I discern in their theories can be overcome, I suggest, by adopting an approach to context-transcending validity, and a corresponding model of practical rationality, along lines I propose in chapters 5 to 7.

Before turning to that approach to context-transcending validity, however, I look at the poststructuralist critical social thinking of Judith Butler and Ernesto Laclau. In chapter 4 I argue that their radical democratic concerns require them, too, to engage with the question of context-transcending validity, despite their antipathy to justificatory issues.

In chapter 5 I confront the question of how to conceive of ethical validity in a context-transcending sense. The challenge is find a nonauthoritarian way of construing the relation between the idea of the good society guiding a particular critical social theory and the good society itself. I show how Laclau's account of the universal as a transcendent ethical object that is incarnated in particular, constitutively inadequate, political representations, can help to find a way of meeting that challenge. With this, I arrive at my core thesis. My central claim is that we should conceive of the good society as *re-presented* in particular representations that are constitutively inadequate to it: such particular re-presentations seek to *present* the transcendent ethical object (“the good society”) powerfully; however, they always fail to capture it completely. I suggest that Habermas's idea of the ideal speech situation can be seen as a particular

re-presentation of this kind. In elaborating my conception I characterize particular re-presentations of the good society as regulative ideas that have an imaginary, fictive character; crucially, however, I equip these regulative ideas with claims to validity that are open to intersubjective interrogation in public processes of argumentation.

In chapter 6 I make the case for the connection between context-transcending validity and argumentation, drawing attention to the central importance of the ethical idea of autonomous agency. This leads me to outline a model of autonomy that would fit well with the aims of contemporary critical social theories, while taking on board the valid objections of poststructuralist, communitarian, and feminist critiques of autonomy. I then propose a nonauthoritarian model of practical rationality that would allow for a rationally backed evaluation of competing ideas of the good society.

In chapter 7 I elucidate the implications of my reflections on the idea of context-transcending validity for the utopian dimension of critical social theory, showing how the approach I advocate enables it to avoid the problems of “bad utopianism” and “finalism” that have plagued it traditionally. In critical engagement with Albrecht Wellmer, who argues for a context-transcending perspective on truth that dispenses with regulative ideas, I defend the need for *re-presentations* of the good society. I also show that Habermas’s model of moral deliberation projects the idea of a communicative utopia whose static, closed character is out of tune with the dynamic approach to validity that I have advocated, and I call upon him to bring it into line with his revised account of truth.

In chapter 8 I draw attention to the authoritarian implications of critical social theories that disconnect *theory* from *praxis*, and I make the case for maintaining a close connection between the two terms. I argue, however, that the relation between them requires rearticulation, for the traditional understanding leads to an authoritarian conception of praxis. Furthermore, using as illustration a recent debate between Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, I call for a reconsideration of the explanatory component of critical social thinking, proposing that contemporary critical social theories eschew grand theories that purport to explain the causes of the social evils they identify, and concentrate instead on investigating the multiple and multifaceted ways in which these social evils are disseminated and perpetuated.

Throughout the book I use the term “critical social theory” in a general sense. Although the name is often used to designate the particular tradition of critical

social thinking associated with Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, Theodor Adorno, and other members of the Frankfurt School, I use it to refer to any mode of ethically oriented reflection that looks critically at social arrangements from the point of view of the obstacles they pose for individual human flourishing, or that reflects on what it means to do so. If Rousseau is a seminal figure in the history of such thinking, the seeds he sows are multiple and various. In the nineteenth century they bear fruit above all in the philosophical writings of Hegel, Marx, and Nietzsche. From the turn of the twentieth century, critical social thinking receives an added impetus from the newly emerging discipline of sociology—Max Weber, Émile Durkheim, and Georg Simmel are the prominent figures here. It is also increasingly influenced by psychoanalysis, especially the work of Sigmund Freud. These strands are integrated in the interdisciplinary and empirically oriented approach advocated by the critical social thinkers of the Frankfurt School. Today, theorists such as Habermas and Honneth still affiliate themselves with this tradition but, increasingly, the distinctiveness of its line of thinking is becoming blurred. Although interdisciplinarity and empirical underpinning were once particular hallmarks of the Frankfurt School tradition, today they can be found in other approaches to social criticism, in particular, those inspired by the work of Michel Foucault. As a result it is no longer possible to draw a sharp distinction between the Frankfurt School approach and other approaches. Furthermore, it seems unnecessarily restrictive to exclude contemporary writers from the enterprise of critical social theory on grounds of their primarily philosophical interventions—thinkers such as Richard Rorty, Judith Butler, and Charles Taylor come to mind here. For these reasons, I have opted for a looser definition of critical social theory. On my understanding, it embraces all contemporary thinkers who engage in social criticism guided by an idea of the good society in which the salient obstacles to human flourishing would once and for all have been removed, or who reflect on what it means to engage in such criticism.

The term “ethical,” too, is used in a general sense to refer to modes of thinking and acting that are guided by a concern for the good. It may be noted, however, that I construe the concern for the good as a concern for a transcendent object that always exceeds its particular representations, thus giving the category of the ethical a context-transcending quality that it lacks, for example, in Habermas’s work. Habermas bases his distinction between ethical questions and moral questions on the allegedly context-specific character of the former and the allegedly context-transcending character of the latter.⁷ Evidently, in making the case for a conception of ethical validity that is inherently context

transcending, I reject Habermas's basis for this distinction. This does not mean that I reject the distinction between the domains of the ethical and the moral. In my view, a plausible basis for distinguishing the two domains would be the difference between the kinds of ideas of the transcendent object that orient ethical thinking and acting on the one hand, and moral thinking and acting on the other. I do not explore this question, however, since, for the most part, the distinction between ethical questions and moral questions has no bearing on my discussion.

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