

Critical Theory, Normativity and Positivism

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Abstract - The presented study deals with the definition of critical theory in relation to political philosophy and political science. In political philosophy, it defines itself in contrast to normativity, and in political science, it defines itself in contrast to positivism. Critical theory is originally associated with criticism of a given production method. Thus, the original critical theory was defined from the traditional theory. Today, however, one form of critical theory can be defined in contrast to the current state, while another maintains the status quo. In contemporary critical theory, history is no longer interpreted as a constant attempt to rip an individual out of conditions of necessity but as a struggle for recognition. All branches of criticism need to be reassessed and used to analyse new political-economic phenomena such as populism or the implementation of technological innovation within the industry (Industry 4.0).

Keywords - *Political philosophy, political science, political theory, positivism, naturalism, dialectics, automation, populism, Marxism, critical theory, normativity*

I. INTRODUCTION

Today, the concept of critical theory is assigned to all currents, theories and the humanities that somehow challenge the order of things and try to correct it – from cultural studies to feminism to liberal political philosophy and its appeal to justice. Unlike the first generation of critical theory, these new tendencies do not follow a philosophical analysis of essence and phenomenon. In many cases, the criticism focuses only on the phenomena themselves, thereby unconsciously adhering to the existing order of the production system under which these phenomena are subsumed: no change is sought after in the structure that constitutes the system of essences of these phenomena, only various descriptions of “how things should be”, while remaining within the discourse of the analysed phenomena. This ambivalence then allows the concept of critical theory to be manipulated inadequately because it offers only the idea of a reform instead of reforming the structure itself. Such methodological anchoring, which works more with normativity, is often classified within the camp of liberal political philosophy – it should be pointed out that even this branch is trying to criticise to some extent – but criticism is cultivated here rather as an appeal to the concept of justice rather than analyzing the systemic contradictions that produce inequality and unfairness.

II. POLITICAL SCIENCE, THEORY AND PHILOSOPHY

If we keep the aforementioned division of critical distinction between essences and phenomena, such division can be used to analyze selected forms of ideology. The analysis of ideology then assumes that we will examine a sum of phenomena that present themselves as a coherent reality. However, such an analysis cannot be based on quantitative methods but rather on the qualitative and conceptual construction of concepts. We must, therefore, define such an analysis in relation to political theory and, consequently, to positivism (or naturalism), which is the basis of political science. However, this requires us to describe how critical theory is related to political philosophy at all (it is sometimes classified under political philosophy).

The abstract concept of *political philosophy* can be well defined against other concepts such as political science and political theory. The essence of *political science* is primarily empiricism. Here we could also include naturalism, which is based on the fact that subjects of social sciences can be examined by the same methods used in natural sciences, i.e. by respecting descriptions via general laws (simple causalities). This is, as we shall see, problematic if we decide to examine something as abstract as the phenomenon of ideology.

If we summarize the abovementioned scheme, each branch can be generalised as follows:

A. Political Science

The essence of political science is empiricism, which is based especially on observation, experimentation and measurement. The main scientific practices are falsification and verification, i.e. empirical evidence through repetition. Here we could talk, for example, about empiricism (which sidelined political philosophy for a whole century) claiming objectivity.

B. Political Theory

The theory itself is seen as a set of ideas that explain phenomena. These are hypotheses waiting for a scientific review. It can thus be said that political theory is a subset of political science. Part of political theory is exploring the theory of doctrines that have played some role in the history of political thought [1].

C. Political Philosophy

However, *political philosophy* is a term that needs to be more subtly focused: sometimes it is considered to include

every abstract thought about politics, law or society. Here we can assign three contents to political philosophy: (1) criticism of political ideas and (2) clarification and definition of concepts that are part of political discourse and (3) creation of new concepts (inspiration in philosophy).

1) Critically evaluates political beliefs, opinions and paradigms, including criticism of political ideas. There are both deductive and inductive approaches: how a theory is applied to practice and vice versa – how a new theory arises from practice.

2) It clarifies concepts that appear in political discourse, which sometimes means that political philosophy aims to justify some of the standpoints [2]. Political philosophy seeks legitimizing frameworks of selected political regimes and institutions. However, we could also speak of an opposing branch of thought, which criticises such legitimization (the aforementioned critical theory and Marxism; theories that do not work with values but with historical-dialectic analysis). The problem with political philosophy is also the production of new concepts; instead of learning about social reality (describing an ideology, analysing essence and phenomenon), it gives new directions on how individuals and institutions should act. This assumes a reasonable individual that is not influenced by the distorted conditions of necessity, i.e. ideology (which on the contrary, both Marxism and critical theory assume as the basis of their analyses). For a better understanding, it is good to talk about two types of concepts:

a) Normative concepts: These include mostly values, i.e. moral principles that guide us to how something should be, how the world should look like. This category may include concepts such as justice, freedom, human rights, equality, tolerance – that is, concepts that we will encounter especially with liberalism and liberal political philosophy.

b) Descriptive concepts: These are mostly related to facts. The existence of facts is objective and verifiable (e.g. the existence of a constitution can be demonstrated empirically). This category includes concepts such as power, authority, order, law, i.e. concepts that are rather descriptive because facts can be proven to be either true or false. However, there is a problem here, because we can refer to two levels of reality in which the concepts exist: those with ontological status (analysis of the constitution) and those that depend on the theoretical-philosophical definition (e.g. the concept of society is a concept that does not have a tangible object of investigation, it is more of a theoretical construct) – this problem will further be touched upon in the distinction between naturalism and anti-naturalism.

3) As mentioned, political philosophy follows philosophy in that it attempts to create new concepts (this approach can be found in the philosophy of Deleuze and

Guattari [3] – this philosophy also influenced selected branches of political philosophy from different camps such as Marxism or pluralist theory of democracy).

III. NORMATIVITY AND RATIONALITY

Normativity, i.e. “as things should be”, in political philosophy, as John Rawls claims, is based on the expectation that social institutions are to be fair, and that is also the reason for their legitimization. Such a conception of political philosophy evolves from the realization that the government of institutions is not given by some immutable tradition but that it can be changed. This is a problem, however, because there is a need to ask how to change such an institution. This question was in ancient times connected with the demands for a good life, which is a surpassed teleologism in Rawls’ views – on the contrary, a neutral state stands in the forefront, which does not tell anyone what kind of ethics they should cultivate [4].

If the emphasis is on the development of institutions, one cannot forget what conditions these institutions reproduce, because not everything is the result of discussion and agreement. Modern society enters the space of a plurality of opinions, which is reflected in political philosophy itself. Here, the main goal is not to analyse how groups socialise or from which social class they come (which determines their values) but rather how these individuals and groups communicate. Then, political philosophy rather focuses on the area of attitudes, which leads a person to select opinions on select political issues (deliberation) [5].

It is, therefore, necessary in the subsequent analysis to return predominantly to a description. However, unlike positivism, this description must be critical, not objective. A mere description of facts, as we will see below, can often lead to a misunderstanding of societal development. So it is necessary, in the words of Fredric Jameson, to use the so-called meta-commentary [6], constantly realizing how the individual enters the analysis and influences the understanding of reality and how they define the concepts that refer to this reality. In this respect, the dialectical criticism, which has been gradually evolving from the times of Marxism through critical theory to the present reception of these traditions (e.g. the theory of Fredric Jameson), has proved its worth.

IV. ANALYSIS OF IDEOLOGY VS. POSITIVISTIC ANALYSIS OF FACTS

For this reason, we should focus on the limits of positivism and naturalism (which stems from positivism). The issue of these lines of thought leads to questions about the nature of the ontological status of the object of examination. The comparison of naturalism and anti-naturalism (hermeneutic approaches) shows that understanding the variability of the social structure presupposes a conceptual abstraction of a holistic character that captures what science’s methods cannot: totality, genesis, dialectical-historical development.

An example of anti-naturalism (and anti-positivism) is critical theory (especially the first generation of the Frankfurt School), which extends the description of society extensively through other disciplines (psychology, sociology, economics, political philosophy, etc.), making it the method of abstraction and interpretation (does not use simple causality of natural and social sciences). However, such a scientific opinion is criticised by “hard” science because it does not speak about specific ontological particulars.

It is a dialectical method that articulates specific concepts that can be used to describe specific relationships between abstract entities and social particulars. Dialectics then, in the context of critical theory, focuses predominantly on the articulation of new concepts that are implied by holism, that is, grasping society as a totality, which means that our reflection of “reality” is in constant motion. The constant movement is not caused as much by the fact that society is constantly evolving, as by the interaction between revealing the essence of social phenomenon in a confrontation with the imaginary totality of society: how the totality is viewed determines the definition of instrumental concepts and vice versa [7].

Thus, within social sciences, naturalism meets its limits. The object of social sciences research is not permanent, it is rather an analysis of structures and they are constantly evolving: in society, knowledge accumulates (the scientific nature of self-reflection in social consciousness), which evolves it and this development retroactively influences scientific knowledge (progress, innovation) [8]. Natural science tools cannot be used to analyse this transient social reality, only concepts that have a theoretical-philosophical foundation. Only then can we theorise this qualitative development.

However, it should be emphasised that there are also interpretations that view structures as something preceding the individual itself (the individual is situated in the networks of meanings). Such an example may be Althusser’s concept of ideology. Ideology mediates the relationship between an individual and a given social structure: in fact, from the beginning of being involved in the structure to a full development of one’s individuality, the individual is “taught” to reproduce the structure (school, family, ideological state apparatuses in general – whichever political ideology or political regime) [9]. If we view an individual in such a way, we already have some idea of the social structure (a priori). Similarly, this is how critical theory works – which assumes the (de)forming of an individual during the development of late capitalism, where the commodification of the originally autonomous regions leads to crossing the boundary between the private and public spheres.

However, Marx has created a sophisticated analysis tool. This is reflected in the analysis of this ideology: if we decode ideology, we understand the social relationships that constitute it; which is analogously identical to the very core of the critical theory, in which to understand social

phenomena (what we see), we must interpret the structures of relationships in which these phenomena occur. The analysis examines the so-called false consciousness: distorted images of how reproduction appears to the collective consciousness [10]. According to Marx and Engels, history is not only separate achievements of individual generations and the transmission of material goods but also the transmission of all reproductive resources of complete generations, which means that with the matter also knowledge and social forms themselves are transmitted [11]. Then what we need to explain is not just the phenomena we see, but also their historical genesis [12].

V. NORMATIVITY AND RATIONALITY

In order to understand the anti-positivist attitude of critical theory of the first generation of the Frankfurt School, it is necessary to focus on the reconstruction of their original programme. Thus, this is not an exhaustive description of critical theory, nor a description of its evolution in relation to the object of examination, where there are different turns (the nature of critical theory varies greatly in the first, second and third generation phases, but this is not the subject of this study). Rather, it aims to describe the moment in which this method consciously abandons the analysis of only positive facts. What matters to critical theory is how we analyze the subject matter of the research – we need to reflect on how this object of research is conceptualised.

Critical theory is also opposed to positivism in questions of causal interpretations of phenomena. Critical theory thus describes reality or its phenomena based on the nature of capitalist production. It is a description of how the individual (social phenomena) is provided by the general (dominant production mode). Efforts are being made to capture the logic of social production and reproduction (similarly to critical naturalism). To some extent, the relationship between the base and superstructure is redefined.

The original title of critical theory was “materialistic theory” [13], which better reflected the fact that the critical method was articulated for the purpose of awareness, which was to lead to the emancipation of man. This is also the reason why this method is often considered to be subversive (it stood against capitalism, fascism and communism; today it criticizes the negative effects of globalisation – it always clashes with the power structures that constitute the object of examination). The main objective of critical theory was to find relationships between the culmination of German classical philosophy (especially the social philosophy in Hegel’s work) and the development of science and industry (technology in general) [14]. This was to gradually lead to a materialistic theory that would establish a just social praxis using science and technology.

Marek Hrubec interprets critical theory on the model relationship of criticism (negation and meta-theory), description (description of positive) and normativity (description of desirable). This model (especially its first

level) points to the obvious anti-positivist character of critical theory. Criticism has the function of both negation and reflection of the predominant ideas and social relationships (again within the separation of phenomenon and essence). Ideas that are outside the context and history only fulfil the ideological agenda of the epoch. Criticism here refers to specific contradictions between ideas and praxis, i.e. the contradictions between ruling ideals and social reality. An example is the liberal value of freedom, which de facto does not support practical freedom (only formal). The description is thus linked to the materialistic foundations of the theory. The individual, through their actions, transforms the surroundings, and this praxis is historically conditioned. However, there is a certain collectivity where we cannot label an individual as a mere atom that is separated from society. Thus, the individual is semi-autonomous: they cannot change anything by themselves but at the same time, their actions are not entirely determined by society. Critical theory then intends to be part of this practice and seek the right moment of its process. Normativity is supposed to impose a demand for emancipation but this side is, according to Hrubec, completely unprocessed within the first generation of critical theory [15] It can be said that it is focused on the interpretation of reality (seeking the relationship between ideology and science) rather than describing the desirable reality, i.e. how things should be (normative articulation of alternatives). Normativity is then more elaborated in the authors of the second and third generation of critical theory (Habermas or Honneth).

VI. REASON AGAINST FALSE CONSCIOUSNESS

At present, however, a step back is being taken from the emancipatory nature of critical theory. In current critical theory, this emancipatory element is placed outside the analysis of ideology that implied class consciousness. Instead, a reasonable individual is assumed to lead a rational debate on laws that will take into account the issue of (un)recognition, which, according to current critical theory, is a major problem of a liberalized society [16]. The emphasis is not on analysing the difference between phenomenon and essence but on the development of liberal institutions that will act fairly under the weight of debate (which was also the original liberal program of John Rawls' theory). Thus, in critical theory, there is a trend towards political philosophy that has refrained from criticising political economy. Contemporary liberal philosophy stands in the position of legitimizing agreements that will be concluded in a liberal democracy because they need political interpretation for their legitimacy. It is not possible to talk about the rejection of liberalism as an epiphenomenon of the production method but rather its affirmation.

Rawls finds a truce between conflict and cooperation: rational beings agree under the veil of unconsciousness that no subject can anticipate market randomness. This description verifies the idea of a welfare state. It also challenges the tension between "what is" and "how it

should be"; the first is considered as overcoming the ideology analysis, and the second is condemned and considered as guilty of teleologism on reasonable beings. Habermas transmits Rawls' thought experiment from individual mind to public space and real conditions while rejecting both the neutral state and the procedural concept of democracy and republican teleology, and articulates the normative synthesis of democracy that, through deliberation, protects civil society not only from state requirements but also from fiscal requirements of the market. According to Habermas, it must first be discussed what the interests in society are, and only then can they be articulated and moved into the political system. This implies a deliberative model of democracy based on a logical discussion with clear rules in which "rationality" prevails. Only then can we produce social solidarity [17].

Honneth's continuity with the dispute between liberals and the so-called communitarians varies considerably from Habermas' turn to language and protection of public opinion but he still rejects the original project of critical theory. Honneth talks about the universal conditions in which teleologism and state neutrality are interconnected in such a way that the struggle for recognition within universal rules will allow individuals to promote personal teleologism. An individual is such a reasonable being that they choose rules that allow all individuals to follow their own image of a good life. Recognition here serves to develop social justice and solidarity. This articulates the fundamental difference between current and original critical theory: history is not interpreted as a constant attempt to rip an individual out of the conditions of necessity, but as a history of a struggle for recognition. Recognition is the moment of emancipation.

VII. CONCLUSION

The aforementioned issues and the division between different branches of political philosophy have been elaborated to enable us to critically look at the current selected political phenomena that are breeding and will continue to bear large social changes and unrest within public space and social networks. We could mention a current major topic, such as the migration crisis. The crisis simultaneously raises the issue of legitimising national states and national organizations: fear and populism intensify national sentiment and nationalism. This issue is accompanied by strong changes of moods, which, for example, within the Czech Republic, have led to populist movements gradually squeezing out the classical spectrum of political parties – right and left – in the representation (both local and state-wide). This phenomenon suggests that the current state of society cannot cope with major problems. How to proceed then, before the real changes that are to come with the advent of much-advised automation. It is production automation labelled under the term *Industry 4.0*. Without knowing precisely what this term means, it has become the starter of actions of the governments of national states in developing different strategies and action plans to be reflected in the budget and the executive.

The problem is that we do not know to what extent this term Industry 4.0 is merely an idea of neoliberalism (i.e. new concept) or real market praxis. If it is a real praxis, we come to a problem whether it is actually the fourth industrial revolution, accompanied by major social changes (unemployment vs. welfare growth) or merely a gradual development (i.e. evolution) of applying new technologies (artificial intelligence, additive production, new business models) in the organization of production, in which the main objective is to exclude man from the production system [18]. However, this would mean that the so-called financial injections to the market by the state would be seriously unfair in terms of political philosophy. So there are many questions concerning how the state should act in such a situation. Obviously, this is about a transformation of the entire social structure, which, before major decisions, calls for a critical-philosophical reflection, to which empirical research of specific problems in the totality of changes should follow. We need to critically analyse the current paradigm and new concepts (variations on the 4.0 concept) and then find out what to investigate further. However, without the critical reflection of social sciences – in our case, political theory, science and philosophy – this cannot be done.

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