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# Practice Theory as a Tool for Critical Social Theory

**Abstract:** What is the best method for undertaking critical social theory, and what are its ontological and normative commitments? Andreas Reckwitz has developed compelling answers to these questions drawing on practice theory. As a practice theorist myself, I am very sympathetic to his approach. This paper sketches a social theory that extends the reach of practice theory to include non-human animals and allows us to discriminate between importantly different kinds of social formations. In doing so, I argue that a strongly normative basis for differentiating social phenomena is compatible with the methods of social theory and critical social theorists need not shy away from first-order moral commitments.

**Keywords:** Reckwitz, practice theory, critical theory, social theory, feminist epistemology

## 1 Introduction

Social theory is a broad interdisciplinary project. Within the interdisciplinary debates, critical theory is considered one kind of social theory and practice theory another.[1] I do both critical theory and practice theory. Andreas Reckwitz is also a practice theorist but favors what he calls 'critical analytics' over critical theory (Reckwitz and Rosa 2023). Reckwitz's work on methodology and social ontology is important and compelling. In this paper, I will aim to illuminate our agreements on social practice by sketching my own approach to theorizing and my account of practice. At the same time, however, I'll point to some differences in our

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**1** Reckwitz carefully distinguishes social theory, social philosophy, a theory of society, and such. I'm going to ignore some of these distinctions. Although it is helpful to distinguish the different questions being asked in different projects, I'm not going to quibble about his proposal for the regimentation of language.

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methodological commitments by defending the idea that a critical theory can legitimately be, and should be, normative. Although I don't object to the project of critical analytics, I'm not convinced it is well-motivated as an alternative to critical theory by the considerations Reckwitz provides.

The term 'critical theory' is used in a variety of different ways. Historically, the project of critical theory emerged in the 1920s–30s at the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt am Main through the work of Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Walter Benjamin, and others; it continues to this day. The project of critical theory, broadly construed, however, has also been undertaken by feminist theorists, critical race theorists, queer theorists, disability theorists, and others, especially in the late 20th century United States. In speaking of 'critical theory' (lower case), I will mean it in this broader sense, unless otherwise indicated. I will also aim to show, however, that the normative approach I favor is compatible with at least some work of the early Frankfurt School Critical Theorists.

In the next section of this paper I will briefly describe what is sometimes called an 'erotetic' approach to theory according to which theories are answers to questions. I will also offer a characterization of 'the social' that provides one way to circumscribe the domain of social theory and sketch my account of practices. In the third section, I provide an interpretation of critical theory and highlight how a social ontology of practices can provide a fruitful way of thinking both about ideology and critique. I will then, in the fourth section, discuss the issue of critical theory's normativity and argue, contrary to Reckwitz, that critical theory can and should be strongly normative. I'll then wrap things up in a conclusion.

# 2 Social Theory

## 2.1 Theories and Theorizing[2]

Theories, as I understand them, come in different forms, e.g., some are sets of propositions, others are models, possibly including computational algorithms. The activity of theorizing, however, isn't just a matter of collecting truths. A random list of truths doesn't count as a theory. Theories organize our beliefs in response to

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**2** Parts of this section draw on my previous work. See, e.g., Haslanger 2016.

a question.[3] I will not take on the task of defending this broad approach, but it may be useful to highlight some of its assumptions (see, e.g., Anderson 1995; Longino 1990; Garfinkel 1981; Risjord 2000).

(1) Theories are answers to questions, but not all questions yield good theories.

– There can be better or worse questions. For example, some questions have false presuppositions. If I ask a local meteorologist why it rained yesterday, and it didn't rain yesterday, the question should simply be rejected, not answered. So part of theorizing involves evaluating the question at issue, e.g., what are its presuppositions? Are the terms used to ask the question meaningful or apt for the subject matter?

– Questions are motivated and there are good and bad reasons for asking questions. The reasons for asking the question, the intended use of the answer, the context for asking it, should all be explored and evaluated. For example, research seeking to justify and uphold racism is morally suspect; it is also epistemically suspect insofar as the project presupposes the false claim that race is a morally relevant feature of individuals.

(2) A theory is not just a jumble of propositions, but a collection of propositions that bear on the question. We might say that a theory is a contender as an answer to a question to the extent that it takes a stand on (all and only?) what is relevant to answering the question at issue for the purposes at hand.[3] Sometimes the purposes are demanding and there is a lot at stake, sometimes not.

– An answer to a question can be inadequate, even if it is true and one is justified in believing it. The answer may be irrelevant, misleading, partial, trivial, etc. In courts we ask for 'the whole truth and nothing but the truth' because sometimes

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**3** Note that not all answers to questions are theories, even if all theories are answers to questions. For example, if I ask you if you'd like to have coffee, and you say 'yes, I'd love to,' your answer is not a theory. Van Fraassen (1980), Garfinkel (1981), and Risjord (2000) have defended erotetic accounts of explanation. Sometimes this is captured by saying that theories are answers to 'why'-questions. But I want to include a broader range of theoretical questions, including additional 'wh'-questions ('which?', 'what?', 'when?', 'whether?') and also 'how'-questions. Is an erotetic approach to explanation the same as an erotetic approach to theory? I assume that all explanations are theories, but are all theories explanations? Maybe, if you take a broad approach to explanation. (Consider, e.g., Aristotle, Physics II.). On my reading of Horkheimer, he seems to accept something like this, e.g., "Whether and how new definitions are purposefully drawn up depends in fact not only on the simplicity and consistency of the system but also, among other things, on the directions and goals of research. These last, however, are not self-explanatory, nor are they, in the last analysis, a matter of insight. As the influence of the subject matter on the theory, so also the application of the theory to the subject matter is not only an intrascientific process but a social one as well." (1968/2002, 195–6) See also Hartmut Rosa, social theory "offers interpretations that should not be perceived as established knowledge but rather as sound suggestions for ways in which society should be (self-)interpreted in light of a given set of specific problems" (2023, 105).

an incomplete or biased selection of truths can be as bad as a falsehood, because it does not do justice to the phenomenon for the purposes of the inquiry (Anderson 1995).

– Oftentimes, but not always, theories provide explanations. There are different kinds of explanatory questions, e.g., not all 'why'-questions are alike, and other 'wh-' and 'how'-questions are also requests for explanation. I don't have an answer to the question: how do we distinguish questions that call for theories and those that don't? I can't tell you precisely when an answer to a question is a theory and when it isn't. But I don't think that's essential for our current purposes. I'm inclined to keep it simple. For example, if you ask me where the car keys are, and I answer that they are in the pocket of my coat, then I'd say that, in the sense intended, I am offering a theory about where they are. But some responses to the question are not theories, e.g., if I say in response to your query, 'I have no idea,' or 'I'm in a meeting!' or 'I can't hear you!', I haven't offered a theory.

– Reckwitz argues that we should understand theories to be 'tools' rather than 'systems,' and practice theory, in particular, is a tool. He says,

> Regardless of whether we are dealing with social theory or the theory of society, theories at this level of abstraction are interpretive toolkits; they provide tools for empirical research, for the human sciences, and for the non-academic public. (2023, 23)
> I should note that the appeal of practice theory to me also lies in the fact that it is unequivocally a social-theoretical *tool* and not a theoretical system. (2023, 27, also ch. 2.3)

I think this is compatible with the approach to theorizing that I'm sketching here. Theories provide us tools for answering questions, and when our questions bear on what to do or how to do it, then they are tools for action.[4] But, as I will elaborate below, a theory will usually come with a manual about how and in what situations to use its tools and in what order they should be employed. (Try to put together Ikea furniture without the diagrams!) In other words, treating theories as tools is compatible with a systematic approach. This is not to say that a theorist always has to follow the manual! We can be bricoleurs: tools intended for one purpose are often valuable for other purposes as well (Balkin 1998; Sewell 2005).

(3) Theorizing is a practice that, itself, has goals or purposes, over and above the goals and purposes of the inquirer. What counts as a reason within the inquiry depends on the rules and norms of the practice. The practice itself—its ends and the inferential and observational norms—is also open to critique.

To say that we should consider the purpose(s) of the question, we often aren't talking about the purposes the individual inquirer has in asking it. For example, a scientist

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**4** Although I have said that theories are propositions and Reckwitz seems to include concepts among the tools, I could include a proposition in the relevant theory that articulates the concept.

may ask a particular question in order to impress someone or because it is what a potential funder is interested in. These are not the purposes that should guide efforts to answer the question. The adequacy of a theory—and the significance of the propositions that constitute it—will depend on the goals and purposes of practice of which it is a part. For example, medical research is different from biological science because its purpose is to promote health; as a result, concepts like *Pathogen* are apt, even if the set of pathogens is not, in itself, biologically interesting. Lawyers and detectives undertake different kinds of inquiry. Detectives are charged with figuring out what happened when a crime was committed. Lawyers may offer a theory in court that is known to be false; however, the lawyer's account of the crime might plausibly offer a good theory of what might have happened in order to evaluate whether the evidence provided by the prosecution is sufficient to judge the defendant guilty beyond reasonable doubt. The contextual values of embedded in the practice matter for determining what questions are apt and what facts (empirical, modal, normative, etc.) are relevant (Longino 1990).

(4) An important feature of good theories is that the vocabulary and classifications they rely on are apt, i.e., they capture the important features of the phenomenon that enable us to answer the question guiding the inquiry.

This may require introducing new terms/concepts. For much of our theorizing, tracking traditional 'joint cutting' natural kinds is not necessary. For example, if I ask what the appropriate attire is for a particular party, the answer will not pick out a natural kind.

(5) Putting this together in a way that provides placeholders for various desiderata which call for further elaboration: A theory will be a good contender for acceptance to the extent that it selects among the evidentially justified propositions or other tools, those that are apt for the purpose of the inquiry and will organize them to do justice to the issue, posed in a legitimate question as suited to the context.

## 2.2  'The Social'

Given the approach to theory just sketched, what counts as social theory, and how it is to be distinguished from other sorts of theories, depends on what questions you are asking and why you are asking them. In the social ontology literature, there is a tradition that circumscribes the 'social' as the domain of collective intentionality and joint agency (Bratman 1992; Gilbert 1989; Searle 1995). The discussion takes up, among other things, questions about the use of the first-person plural pronoun 'we' and examples of group agency, e.g., the actions of committees and friends, occasionally institutions, sometimes whole societies or particular language speakers. For example, what makes it the case that we paint a house, or that we

hire a new faculty member, or we mean $H_2O$ by 'water'? In this literature there is a tendency to assume that language and sophisticated interpretation of others' minds and actions and are required for joint action, and that few, if any, non-humans, very young humans, and certain kinds of cognitively disabled humans are capable of it.

However, two other literatures take up the question of sociality from a different starting point: one on animal minds, another on the evolution of human cooperation. Both of these literatures are interested in how communication and cooperation can happen without sophisticated mindreading and language. Rather than taking as paradigm an activity that is possible for (and perhaps only possible for) cognitively sophisticated humans, this other line of inquiry is invested in our continuity with non-human animals and early humans ('early' both in the evolutionary sense and the developmental sense).

Social animals typically need to coordinate across varying and variable circumstances; as a result, they cannot wholly rely on "preinstalled, competence-specific information" (Sterelny 2012, xi).[5] Some animals are hard-wired to eat things of a certain appearance found in their environment or to mate with others who emit a particular call. Humans, however, evolved to be social foragers in a broad variety of ecological contexts. This required social learning, reliable cross-generational transmission, and the material and technological resources for building on what came before (Sterelny 2012, esp. chs. 2–3). Perhaps unsurprisingly, other animals who depend on flexible and resilient coordination develop ways of communicating, dividing labor, and passing on skills, and do so without metacognition or complex language.

I situate myself in the latter inquiry into the social. I take the basis of sociality to be the capacity for social learning, especially learning tools for communication and coordination and others that spin off from these.[6] So not only humans, but

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[5] There is considerable controversy over the extent to which human social cognition is managed by 'innate modules' and the extent to which innate capacities for social learning are responsive to and enable us to acquire locally specific information and skills. Nevertheless, it is clear that both innate capacities and social learning are required. Sterelny (2012) discusses this at length, and although I am convinced by his arguments in favor of extensive social learning, the subject matter of my project is sufficiently high-level social coordination, that I can remain somewhat neutral on the detailed explanation of the basics of human social cognition. We are hard-wired to acquire information and skills specific to our environment and social context, and this learning shapes—not entirely, but in important ways—how we engage with the world and other animals (human and non-human) both practically and epistemically.

[6] This is not intended as an analysis or definition of the social. I'm not convinced that one is possible or needed. Note that coordination and communication are instrumental reasons to engage in sociality, humans also find it intrinsically rewarding (Zawidzki 2013, 41; Balkin 1998, ch. 2).

also a wide range of animals, including apes, chimps, whales, wolves, birds, dogs, potentially fish and even insects, could be counted as social (Andrews 2020). What, then, are the central questions of social theory? Reckwitz suggests:

> Both social theory and the theory of society provide the general and fundamental vocabulary for answering two elementary questions. Social theory asks: "What is the social?" and "Under what aspects can it be analyzed?" The theory of society asks: "What are the structural features of society and particularly of modern societies?" and "What are the concepts with which these societies can be investigated?" To answer its questions, social theory has developed basic concepts such as action and communication, norms and roles, power and institutions, the order of knowledge, practice and discourse … The theory of society, in contrast, formulates basic assumptions about overall societal structures, phenomena, and mechanisms as they have unfolded in the course of history. It is interested above all in the structures of modernity, which it examines via theories of capitalism, functional differentiation, individualization, or aestheticization (for example). (2023, 12)

However, Reckwitz is clearer elsewhere that the main difference lies in their generality:

> Social theory is concerned with sociality and the nature of society in itself. That is, it is concerned with the structure of human practice unbound by time and space. The theory of society, in contrast, is concerned with specific societies and how they exist at specific times and in specific places. In short, it makes general statements about particular societies. (2023, 16)

I am not sure how helpful this distinction is, for surely the two projects evolve hand in hand. We develop the general concepts we need in order to answer specific questions about a society, and we test the adequacy of the concepts (and assumptions) by the work they do for us in answering those specific questions. At the same time, what specific questions we can intelligibly ask are guided by the general concepts we have available. There aren't two separate projects, though perhaps one can distinguish them analytically.

More importantly, there are some concepts and claims that are neither fully general, nor historically particular. There are different kinds of societies that require general, but not fully general, theoretical tools, e.g., agrarian societies, religious societies, racist societies, authoritarian societies. Social theory should give us tools to understand these as kinds—notably sometimes moral kinds—not just as particulars. Given this, I'll speak of social theory as a project that provides theoretical tools for understanding the different kinds of societies we encounter historically, as well as societies generally.

## 2.3 Practice Theory

As I understand it, practice theory doesn't simply provide an account of social practices to be collected together in a toolbox with independent accounts of other concepts such as *Action, Norm, Institution*. Practice theory prioritizes practices as the central social phenomenon: the account of practices is the organizing principle of its social theory as a whole. To get a sense of this, let me first briefly sketch an account of practice I have developed elsewhere (Haslanger 2018; see also Sewell 1992).

Very generally, on my account, social practices are patterns of learned behavior. They need not be guided by rules or performed intentionally; they also allow for improvisation. ("In positive terms, there is in practice theory a constitutive openness to the surprises and deviances that any given micro-situation might have to offer." (Reckwitz and Rosa 2023, 25)) However, they are not mere regularities in behavior, either, for they are the product of social learning and evolve through responsiveness both to each other's performances and the parts of the world we have an interest in collectively managing.[7] Our responsiveness is mediated by social meanings and signaling mechanisms—I call this a *cultural technē*—that enable members of the group to communicate, coordinate, and manage the things taken to have value.[8] This will create loops: culture provides tools to interpret some part of the world as valuable (or not), i.e., as a resource, and offers guidance for how to properly interact with it. In turn, our interaction with a resource affects it: we grow it, shape it, manage it, distribute it, dispose of it, etc. And how it responds to our actions affects our ongoing interactions with it. In cases where a practice takes hold, we shape ourselves and the resource in order to facilitate the ongoing practice. This, I take, is what Reckwitz has in mind in saying that

> [b]oth materiality and culture are conceived in praxeological terms from the outset: neither materiality nor a system of ideas is assumed to *precede* practice. Rather, materiality is thought to exist only in its practical materialization (in the practical act of 'doing matter'), and culture is thought to exist only in the practical act of 'doing culture.' (2023, 30)

A paradigm example of this is food production. We interpret some, but not all, edible things as food. Edible things come to have different social meanings (around here we don't consider grasshoppers to be food, but elsewhere they are a special treat). Agricultural practices produce, distribute, and dispose of what our culture recognizes as food (and food waste). These items are easy to get in the market,

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**7** On the sensitivity of social practices to material conditions, see also Kukla and Lance (2014).
**8** Reckwitz speaks of a practice as a 'cultural technique,' which, on my view, would be action shaped and structured by a cultural technē (2023, 29).

we know how to cook them, and our palates adjust to them. And this reinforces how cultures divide edible things into food and non-food and, in turn, the material reality of agriculture. An unjust social practice, or structure, might fail to provide us the semiotic tools to interpret and value things aptly, or it might organize us around what's valuable (or not) in unjust ways, e.g., by distributing it unfairly. But because social practices don't just represent reality, but also act on it and shape it to conform to our practices, the fit between practice and world can appear natural and good. This is a mistake. Self-sustaining complex systems can be terribly unjust. Industrial animal agriculture is an example (as, of course, are other forms of systemic oppression).

On this account, practices regularize our behavior in response to each other and the world so that we can effectively communicate and coordinate. Such practices establish relations between people who occupy positions in the practice. Some of these relations are formal: they are constituted within institutions and come with relatively precise job descriptions for those positioned in the structure. But social relations formed in practices are not all institutional. Moreover, what position one occupies is not necessarily a matter of choice, for the social meanings available in a culture may mark and assign individuals with a body like yours, or parents like yours, or skills like yours, to particular position in the practice(s), like it or not (O'Connor 2019), and individuals are shaped to take up these practices willingly and find them valuable (Haslanger 2019a, 2019b). Any society will involve multiple kinds of practices, and the social relations will grow into networks or structures. We cannot assume, however, that the networks are neatly ordered and coherent. Any society structured by a variety of such networks of relations will exhibit dynamic complexity—it will become self-organizing without a central authority—as well as some degree of fragmentation and dysfunction. Reckwitz, too, points to dynamic complexity's incompatibility with methodological individualism:

> … subjects and sociality are co-originate, so to speak. As repetitive and spatially distributed activities, practices designate a genuine and emergent level of the social that cannot be reduced to the characteristics of individuals or their actions. (2023, 29)

How does this account organize our understanding of the social domain around practices? To become a social subject is to become fluent in the local practices. As Reckwitz articulates it,

> One is not born a subject but rather becomes one by appropriating the orders of knowledge and competencies of practices. Subjects are formed, in other words, by the continuous activity of people 'becoming subjects.' In the process of subjectivation, the subject submits to certain criteria of 'normal,' appropriate, and competent subjecthood and, by submitting to these things and appropriating them, can become an ostensibly autonomous and reflective being who pursues interests with his or her own 'subjective perspective.' (2023, 34)

Fluency in the local practices is a skill in reading and being disposed to act on the signs and signals that evolve for coordinating around the division of labor and the identification and distribution of resources. These signs and signals are, broadly speaking, culture. The cultural know how—including dispositions for affective, evaluative, and agential responses—makes one intelligible both to oneself and to others. In other terms, by being disciplined into a local habitus that enables one to participate in social practices, we are integrated into a society. So according to practice theory, we explain how individuals become social subjects, sets of people become communities, and relationships become structures, by reference to practices.[9] Practices are both the site and consequence of social learning in interacting with the material world that produce the social domain.

# 3  Critical Theory

Critical theory is a social theory, but from its very start, it has been conceived as a special kind of social theory that goes beyond merely describing the world. As Raymond Geuss argues, critical theories aspire to be "inherently emancipatory, i.e. they free agents from a kind of coercion which is at least partly self-imposed, from self-frustration of conscious human action." (Geuss and Raymond 1981, 2; also Horkheimer 1968/2002, 246).

   To understand the project, it is important to begin with a theory of ideology. According to one common view, the ideology of a community is just a set of widely shared beliefs that aim to justify the status quo. Ideology critique, in turn, relies on ordinary inquiry and science to determine which of the beliefs are false and seeks to undermine their justificatory value (Shelby 2003). However, if we situate an account of ideology in practice theory things look different.

   A broad question in social philosophy is to understand how members of society develop practical orientations—not just beliefs, but also dispositions to act in

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**9** Reckwitz claims that "Societies, from a praxeological point of view, denote the network of *all* interconnected (complexes of) practices. Within such a society—today: the global society—it is obviously not the case that *all* practices are networked with one another in the *same* manner and intensity. Rather, there will be specific (sometimes closer, sometimes looser) interconnections between particular (complexes of) practices in a society. Entirely different social entities—those entities, from bureaucracy to subcultures, which have been the traditional objects of investigation in the social sciences—can thus be described praxeologically in a new way, namely as ensembles of specific social practices" (2023, 34f.). This is a somewhat bolder claim than I would currently endorse (is there just one 'global society'? Aren't there sub-systems of practices that have some degree of autonomy?), but I am sympathetic to the idea that we should take a 'practice first' approach as our starting point for understanding social phenomena more broadly.

accordance with social norms—that enable them to coordinate their behavior. For those in the critical tradition, the core issue is not the general one about how we develop coordinated practical orientations, but more specifically how and why, without being coerced, we come to enact *oppressive* social structures. Surely, most of us are not knowingly and intentionally dominating others or allowing ourselves to be dominated. Yet this happens, nonetheless. A rather straightforward example is the division of labor in the household. Even those who are conscientiously egalitarian in their politics live in ways that burden women with housework, childcare, eldercare, care of the sick and disabled, to an extent that far exceeds their fair share. More generally, we might ask: why do we become agents of the injustices we abhor? And not just a few of us, and not just now and then, but pretty much all of us all the time?

In answering this question, many critical theorists propose that a key function of ideology is to create subjects who identify with their role in the oppressive relations of production and who internalize the relevant expectations and norms, so that coercion to perform the role is not needed.[10] Although he steps back from the terminology of 'ideology,' Michel Foucault develops this idea extensively in his book *Discipline and Punish*, where he meticulously chronicles the ways in which modern power is exercised less by coercion, and more by discipline—the crafting of subjects who monitor and manage themselves, their bodies, to conform to the demands of social position. As he says, "Thus discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, docile bodies." (1979, 137–8) On this approach, ideological oppression is a *particular form of oppression* that enlists our agency in our own subordination and/or domination of others so that "the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary" (1979, 201).[11] It is important to keep in mind that, at least in principle, not all subjectivation is oppressive, and so not all subjectivation is ideological.

Institutionally "unbounded" discipline occurs through social norms, and so is often masked and difficult to identify as ideological. As Sandra Bartky points out, this is characteristic of gender: "The absence of a formal institutional structure and of authorities invested with the power to carry out institutional directives creates the impression that the production of femininity is either entirely voluntary or natural" (Bartky 1990, 75). Women's bodies are constrained by norms specifying shape, size, motility, and appearance. This process of constraint is not usually

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**10** Note that I adopt a pejorative use of the term 'ideology' in keeping with the Critical Theory tradition.
**11** There are other forms of oppression that are directly coercive rather than ideological, for example, systematic violence (Young 1990). See also Althusser on repressive state apparatuses.

achieved directly by coercion. Under surveillance, we do it to ourselves, voluntarily. Over time, femininity becomes us (pun intended).

> … insofar as the disciplinary practices of femininity produce a 'subjected and practiced' and inferiorized, body, they must be understood as aspects of a far larger discipline, an oppressive and inegalitarian system of sexual subordination. This system aims at turning women into the docile and compliant companions of men just as surely as the army aims to turn its raw recruits into soldiers (Bartky 1990, 73).

Althusser, for example, is very clear that subjectivation occurs through participation in practices: "Ideology always exists in an apparatus and its practice or practices. Its existence is material" (Althusser 1971/2014, 259). We are 'hailed' into practices in a variety of ways, e.g., we are hailed into speaking English by having English spoken to us; we are hailed into the role of student by being sent to school and finding ourselves responding to the teacher as an authority (nudged by coercion); we are hailed into adulthood by having to pay the rent (with threat of coercion in the background). We then develop ways of being and thinking so that we are (more or less) fluent English speakers, fluent students, fluent rent-paying adults. Ideology is not a set of beliefs, though it may produce belief. However, on my view, there are both explicit and implicit modes of engaging in a practice. Sometimes we are skilled and do it 'intuitively' but learners and those who perform under duress may rely on explicit rules. This is important to my account because I want to allow resistant practices to emerge through reflection and creative co-design, and these may be far from routine or habitual.[12] In fact, it may be hard to perform them due to the pressure—both internal and external—to conform.

My account of practices meshes fruitfully with this understanding of ideology and offers insight into the possibility of ideology critique. Social fluency is a matter of knowing how to act intelligibly in response to others and the material world. We rely on cultural tools (the local cultural technē)—social meanings, signs, signals, narratives, default assumptions, and such—and develop an ability to enact the 'right' responses. (Note that learning a language is also a matter of learning semantic and pragmatic norms.) Norms, signals, and background assumptions guide us in any particular social setting, but they do not *determine* how we act. Those who are familiar with the local cultural technē will, as Sewell, Jr. (2005) claims, "… be capable of using the 'grammar' of the semiotic system to make understandable utterances"

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[12] My sense is that it is crucial to Reckwitz's account that practices are "routinized types of behavior" (2002, 249). Does this mean that if one lacks fluency in the practice then one is not performing it? Could some practices—perhaps due to their complexity—always involve deliberative reflection on rules in order to enact them? One way to avoid this is to emphasize that a practice is a type of routinized behavior but not all practitioners perform it routinely.

(49). Just as knowing the lexicon and grammar of a language doesn't determine what one will say, but instead constrains and enables our communication, the cultural technē does the same for social action more broadly.

If we locate ideology as the cultural technē of unjust practices (and structures), then ideology critique is not simply a matter of criticizing commonly accepted beliefs. Instead, it challenges our practical orientation towards the world and other agents in our social milieu. This has two potentially significant implications. First, effective critique highlights the fact that our practical orientation is shaped in order to sustain existing social practices, more specifically, existing oppressive practices. Our fluent responses are not necessarily inevitable, natural, or good. Second, by exposing our practices as available for critical reflection, it disrupts our social fluency and introduces the possibility of resistance and change. For example, Bartky describes the ideology embedded in gendered cosmetic practices: "A woman's skin must be soft, supple, hairless, and smooth; ideally, it should betray no sign of wear, experience, age, or deep thought." (Bartky 1990, 69) By calling attention to how girls' bodies are sexualized, and aging women's bodies are disparaged, she calls on us to consider our own participation in cosmetic practices and make choices about how to go on (or not). We may be socially positioned so that we are not truly free to ignore the social mandates, but we become more autonomous agents in making choices about what to do in the face of such pressure.

On my view, however, critique cannot be done from an armchair. It is not merely an investigation into and reflection on social relations. Critique happens while engaged in practice as it becomes clear that the social know how we are relying on to organize us is harmful or wrong—perhaps we begin to find the practices wasteful, infinitely boring, morally intolerable, or in other ways problematic.[13] In reasonably good circumstances, the task then is to find ways of collectively reorienting ourselves to each other and the world. This happens by collective trial and error. As Horkheimer says, the critical theorist's "profession is the struggle of which his own thinking is a part and not something self-sufficient and separable from the struggle" (1968/2002, 216).

So in what sense is ideology critique 'emancipatory'? Of course, critique, by itself, does not change the material structures and social norms that constrain us. But it does provide resources for critical reflection that enhances our individual autonomy and in doing so, opens space for organizing collective resistance; it also calls attention to spaces within practices to act differently, to initiate incremental disruptions, to create of counter-publics. Note, for example, that on Horkheimer's

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**13** Interestingly Horkheimer seems to suggest that resistance to injustice will reliably emerge (eventually): "But if [Critical Theory's] concepts, which sprang from social movements, today seen empty because no one stands behind them but its pursuing persecutors, yet the truth of them will

view, the activist and theorist are a 'dynamic unity,' and they work together not just to think, but to act.

> If, however, the theoretician and his specific object are seen as forming a dynamic unity with the oppressed class, so that his presentation of societal contradictions is not merely an expression of the concrete historical situation but also a force within it to stimulate change, then his real function emerges. (Horkheimer 1968/2002, 215)

If critique gains broad endorsement, then it is a resource for mobilization which can, in turn, bring about more substantive social change.

# 4 Normativity

I have just characterized one way in which key elements of critical theory—ideology and ideology critique—might be understood within broader a practice theory approach, and how this might easily fall under a broader erotetic approach to theorizing. We considered several questions, including: Why do social agents so often participate in oppressive practices (both as dominant and subordinate) rather than actively resist them, even when they would seem to object to oppression and even when it is contrary to their interests to do so? How can theoretical projects—critical theory in particular—be emancipatory? Both the questions posed, and the answers provided were normatively laden. The concepts of *Oppression, Interests, Ideology, Critique, Autonomy* are all, to some degree, normative.

Reckwitz argues that social theory and the theory of society should engage in what he calls 'critical analytics' rather than 'critical theory' because the critical theory is 'strongly normative.' What exactly is the problem?

> Critical analytics is primarily an analytics of the social, and therefore at its core it is not normatively oriented, which means that it does not operate in the mode of evaluation. In this respect, of course, it contains a slight degree of normativism in its preference for opening up contingency in society. This distinguishes it from the strong normativity of critical theory anchored in social philosophy, which aims to measure society according to certain normative claims and therefore already incorporates, into its social theory and theory of society, normatively connoted concepts as measures of success. Understood in this way, critical theory always runs the risk of squeezing any analysis of society into the straitjacket of its

out. For the thrust towards a rational society, which admittedly seems to exist today only in the realms of fantasy, is really innate in every man." (1968/2002, 251) Jane Mansbridge asserts something similar: there is "a gut refusal to be subordinated rooted somewhere in every human being [yet] to form an effective basis for collective action, gut refusals need cognitive and emotional organizing" (2001, 4).

own normative presumptions and thereby unnecessarily limiting the sociological perspective; indeed, its research practices often involve sifting through the social world in an effort to find phenomena that suit (or contradict) its own standards. (2023, 81)

Without a doubt, some critical theorists (myself included) do take the project to rest on strong normative assumptions, e.g., that we live under oppressive conditions, that some individuals are positionally vulnerable, that their subordination is wrong, that freedom and equality are worth fighting for, and that the world would be better if we could collectively work towards emancipation. I could not be more convinced of the well-established facts that women are systematically subordinated globally, that structural racism is a problem, that global capitalism continues to exploit those who were colonial subjects. And I am convinced because these are the results of social scientific inquiry. And I also believe that we should not stand back and allow the misrepresentation of ways of life as natural or good that are, in fact, unjust. In fact, it seems to me that to refuse to ask why *oppression* is so durable and social *justice* so difficult to achieve—and to refuse to *theorize* about this using normative terms—is a moral failing.[14] To put it another way, to fail to take these moral facts into account in theorizing the social world is itself to take a moral stand. There is no neutral option.

Reckwitz, in the quote above, suggests that critical analytics "does not operate in the mode of evaluation," except, perhaps, in "opening up contingency." Is this to say that critical analytics does not consider data concerning oppression, subordination, harm, as relevant to social inquiry? More specifically, does critical analytics take such data into account but not draw any conclusions? Or does look away from such data entirely? Consider research that demonstrates racial disparities in housing, employment, health care, incarceration; what about research on sex trafficking, domestic violence, violence against the LGBTQ community, the elderly, and the disabled, gender pay gaps, disproportionate care responsibilities? Such research does not avoid 'evaluation.' It is guided by strongly normative questions about how systemic injustice works and who it affects. The terms employed in asking and answering the questions, the hypotheses, and the methodology are normatively laden on purpose. The conclusions are calls for action.

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**14** In this I am sympathetic to Horkheimer: "But when situations which really depend on man alone, the relationships of men in their work, and the course of man's own history are also accounted part of 'nature,' the resultant extrinsicality is not only not a suprahistorical eternal category (even pure nature in the sense described is not that), but it is a sign of contemptible weakness. To surrender to such weakness is nonhuman and irrational." (210)

One of the main lessons of feminist epistemology over the past several decades has been that inquiry guided by values enhances objectivity.[15] According to traditional methods of empirical inquiry, the job of the theorist is just to note 'the facts' or the empirical patterns available to neutral observers. Feminist critique has challenged this in multiple ways (Anderson 1995, 2020; Longino 1990). First, and most simply, who is doing the observation and what are they in a position to observe? We ask questions about things that matter to us and what we can observe depends on what parts of the world we have access to (Hrdy 1986). If women's lives are considered unimportant, then research on women is impoverished. If women's subordination is not taken as a starting point, an explanandum, then how will our inquiry find the causes that explain it? If those who inquire into women's subordination don't have access to information because they are not trusted—because they don't share values with those they consult—then how will the truth be found?

Second, empirical patterns in the social world should not be taken at face value, for they are already the embodiment of social values. We create the social world according to our values, and to pretend otherwise is risk naturalizing subordination. Women do most of the care work in the world. We care for infants and children, the elderly, the sick, injured, and disabled; we maintain kinship networks and foster community. There is plenty of data on this. But what are we to make of these empirical regularities 'without evaluation'? Shouldn't we ask why women do this work? Is it just a natural fact? Do women 'freely' choose it? Are our societies structured to impose this work on women? Are women in these roles because they are only valued as wives and mothers? What are the broader social implications of the fact that mainly women do this work? The key questions even about how the system works invoke concepts such as freedom, equality, value, and exploitation. Questioning the empirical pattern is part of good scientific inquiry but also involves evaluative judgments about whether the pattern should just be accepted as 'given.'

Let's consider Reckwitz's criticism of inquiry that is strongly normative. In the quote above, he claims that "critical theory always runs the risk of squeezing any analysis of society into the straitjacket of its own normative presumptions and thereby unnecessarily limiting the sociological perspective; indeed, its research practices often involve sifting through the social world in an effort to find phenomena that suit (or contradict) its own standards." No doubt, the argument is only

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**15** I speak specifically of feminist epistemology but philosophy of science over the past several decades has been preoccupied with the issue of objectivity and the role of values in science, and it is it is broadly (though not unanimously) acknowledged that values have a legitimate role to play, even in simply doing induction (Douglas 2000). The literature on this is really too vast to reference, but Anderson (2020) is a good place to start.

briefly sketched, but the background threat seems to be that strongly normative theorizing pre-determines its results and fails to satisfy core epistemic standards. Why should we think this?

Elizabeth Anderson offers one hypothesis about what might be behind such anxieties. She suggests that on the model of inquiry in the background facts and values "necessarily compete for control of inquiry." The critic seems to suppose that

> [e]ither theory choice is guided by the facts, by observation and evidence, or it is guided by moral values and social influences, construed as wishes, desires, or social-political demands. To the extent that moral values and social influences shape theory choice, they displace attention to evidence and valid reasoning and hence interfere with the discovery of truth. [However,] this model depends upon a particular conception of the goals of theoretical inquiry and the nature of the considerations that can justify theory choice. The basic idea is to limit the goals of theory to the articulation of truths. And then to argue that value judgments have no evidential bearing on whether any claim is true. (1995, 34)

As Anderson points out, there are two main problems with this view. First, it seems to assume that values, normativity, and other social influence *aren't* themselves grounded in fact.[16] Values are just things we like or wish for, so moral knowledge is impossible. However, moral realists and constructivists allow that there are moral facts—about freedom, equality, and justice—and that we can know them. Admittedly, moral skeptics and extreme moral emotivists disagree, but these are not obvious or, in many forms, even plausible positions. The claim that, for example, women, at least along some dimensions and in some contexts, are oppressed is something that must be defended based on the facts. It isn't a dogmatic assertion and has been defended in the face of critical scrutiny. Those who deny it are the ones who fail to face the facts.

Anderson goes on to show that facts and values don't compete in inquiry. For example, what would medical research amount to if it didn't take human health to be a guiding concern?

> Contextual values set the standards of significance and completeness (impartiality, lack of bias) for a theory, and evidence determines whether the theory meets the standards. Contextual values help define what counts as a meaningful classification and the empirical criteria for identifying things falling under it, and evidence determines what, if anything meets these criteria. Contextual values help determine what methods are needed to answer a question,

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**16** Horkheimer represents those opposed to the normativity of critical theory in a similar way. For the scientist, "Thought relinquishes its claim to exercise criticism or to set tasks. Its purely recording and calculatory functions become detached from its spontaneity. Decision and praxis are held to be something opposed to thought—they are 'value judgments,' private caprices, and uncontrollable feelings. The intellect is declared to be connected only externally, if at all, with the conscious interest and the course it may follow." (Horkheimer 1968/2002, 178)

and evidence gathered in accordance with those methods help answer it. In each case, evidential and normative considerations cooperate; neither usurps the role of the other. (1993, 54)

Some medical research is permissibly biased towards humans, but not towards men or towards White people. Medicine's concern with health warrants using the value-laden classification *Pathogen*. And informed consent is a legitimate moral constraint on data collection. Although medical research does rely on value laden methods and measures of success, this does not prevent it from yielding knowledge. In fact, as many have argued, contextual values can be crucial in enabling us to notice phenomena that would otherwise be occluded (Anderson 1995; Hrdy 1986; Mills 1988, 2007; Wright 2010). So, to my mind, limiting inquiry to what one can see from a 'weakly normative' standpoint poses the much greater risk that social theory will be of little use to those concerned with social justice (Haslanger 2020, 2021).

# 5 Conclusion

Reckwitz's work on social theory generally, and practice theory specifically, is tremendously valuable. I agree with much of his background ontology and method-ology. In this essay I have attempted to point out some of the areas where our views overlap. We disagree, I think, on feasibility of a substantively normative critical theory. It is interesting to note that the skepticism about taking a substantive moral stand (and about the helpfulness of normative intervention) is shared by many of the contemporary theorists in the Frankfurt School tradition, so Reckwitz's critique of 'Critical Theory' doesn't seem to touch many of them. However, critical theories developed in the United States, e.g., critical race theory, feminist theory, queer the-ory, critical disability theory do not shy away from normative commitments (and in this way, I take them to be closer to Horkheimer). I can only speculate here, but I wonder about the influence of the Kantian, and Liberal, emphasis on auton-omy as the ultimate moral value. The moral harm of racism (and other oppressive systems) is not that it deprives non-White individuals of autonomy, or choice, or liberty. Racism deprives individuals of food, jobs, health care, education, and basic inclusion in civic life. It is a mistake, I think, to see these only as necessary precon-ditions of autonomy, assumed to be the highest good. We are currently living under conditions of extreme inequality along multiple dimensions, inequality that causes tremendous suffering. If I may quote Horkheimer again:

Professional scholars, eager to conform, may reject every connection of their disciplines with so- called value judgments and firmly pursue the separation of thought and political attitude.

> But the real wielders of power in their nihilism take such rejections of illusion with brutal seriousness. Value judgments, they say, belong either in the nation's poetry or in the people's courts but certainly not in the tribunals of thought. The critical theory, on the contrary, having the happiness of all individuals as its goal, does not compromise with continued misery, as do the scientific servants of authoritarian States. (Horkheimer 1968/2002, 248)

*In no way* do I mean to suggest that Reckwitz and other Critical Theorist are 'scientific servants of authoritarian states.' But I do believe that those who are touched by the devastating harm of racism, sexism, heteronormativity, nationalism, and such, are motivated to take a moral stand and to engage in inquiry that is committed to substantive change.

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