How to Engage in Practices of Critique? From a Universal Conception of the Good Life to the Contestation of Universals
Annemarije Hagen

Abstract
Critical social theories examine social arrangements from the point of view of the obstacles that these structures pose to human flourishing, with the purpose of bringing about social change for the better. In this article, I contest the idea that these changes have to be guided by an idea of the good society. I argue that actual struggles are not guided by abstract ethical representations of the good life, but more negatively, by contestation of the limits of articulated universals by the ones who are excluded and marginalised.

Keywords
Social critique, Anti-authoritarianism, Universals, Contestation

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Introduction

This paper departs from a central methodological problem within critical theory. Critical social theories examine the ways in which social structures and arrangements prohibit human beings from flourishing with the aim to overcome the obstacles that these structures pose. Critical theorists working within the Habermasian tradition, of which Maeve Cooke is a notable example, have argued that a conception of the good society must inform aspired changes. A question that immediately needs to be addressed when taking such a conception as a point of reference, is how to engage in practices of social critique without taking an authoritarian stance. In this paper, I will argue against a metaphysical notion of the good as an object that transcends particular interpretations of the good life. Such a notion needs to be rejected precisely because, as Cooke herself acknowledges, a tension exists between this notion, which should hold for all individuals, and the anti-authoritarian aim of critical theory, which, as stated by Raymond Geuss (1981), claims that agents have to subscribe to the aspired changes by their own reasons.

Cooke tries to deal with this tension by arguing in favour of a conception of the good life that posits “an idea of ethical validity that is at once context-transcending and justification-dependent” (Cooke 2018, 768). She develops this position in her book Re-Presenting the Good Society (2006) in which she defends the idea of a good society, but acknowledges the gap, or “productive tension,” between an idea of the good and different competing articulations and representations of such an idea (2006, 189). Cooke develops her position through an engagement with thinkers working within the Frankfurt School tradition of critical theory – such as Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth – as well as by integrating insights from the neo-pragmatist thought of Richard Rorty, and by using the post-structuralist theories of Ernesto Laclau and Judith Butler. As Cooke works within the Habermasian tradition, she argues in favour of a utopian idea of the good society. It must be noted, however, that Cooke does acknowledge and deal with a number of critical remarks from the aforementioned perspectives as well. I will take her approach as an important and nuanced elaboration of the position which holds that the emancipatory efforts of critical theories should be guided by the image of a “good society”. At the same time, I argue that the way in which Cooke handles this methodological tension results in a position that takes distance from the actual critical enterprise of social critique. By providing an ethical theory, Cooke constructs her argument on an abstract level which leaves social critique aside. It is my argument that critical theory must go beyond the abstract reflections concerning the good society. To provide a critical approach that has both a solution for the methodological tension mentioned above and which also remains productively critical, I will argue in favour of a radical, bottom-up approach. I will base this approach on insights drawn from the work of James Ingram, Étienne Balibar and Judith Butler. In their works, struggles are not guided by a notion of the good life, but more negatively, by the contestation of the limits of articulated universals, practiced by those who are excluded and marginalized. This engagement within practices of critique then should not be understood as an instalment of a principle of universality, but rather as a process of universalization.
Conditions for Societal Transformation: Ethical Direction and Motivational Force

As stated by Raymond Geuss, critical social theories aim at the emancipation and enlightenment of individuals (Geuss 1981, 2). The strict meaning of the term “critical social theory” refers to several generations of social theorists known as “The Frankfurt School.” The most notable members of this school – all working within the tradition of Western Marxism – are Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, Theodor Adorno, Jürgen Habermas, and Axel Honneth. However, in most current debates, “critical social theory” is used in a more general sense: critical social theory is not limited to the “Frankfurt School” anymore, but, as formulated by Maeve Cooke, includes any philosophical approach “that looks critically at social arrangements from the point of view of the obstacles they pose for individual human flourishing” (Cooke 2006, 7).

Consequently, Cooke nuances the distinction between critical social theory in the strict and general sense. Besides, she points at the differences between the subsequent generations of the Frankfurt School theorists (Cooke 2006, 7). Furthermore, she argues that the interdisciplinary character of critical analysis and the inclusion of empirical findings is no longer unique to the tradition of the Frankfurt School, but can be found as well in other instances of social critique formulated outside this tradition, such as in the work of Michel Foucault (Cooke 2006, 7). As we can no longer clearly distinguish between the critical philosophy of the Frankfurt School and that of other approaches, there is no need to exclude critical thinkers stemming from traditions such as post-structuralism when referring to social critique. Cooke’s commitment to a more general understanding of critical social theory is reflected by her extensive engagement with contemporary thinkers from different traditions engaging in social critique. As pointed out by Amy Allen, Cooke’s position “represents a bold and important new path for critical theory, one that moves decisively beyond the sterile debates that cast Habermasian critical theory and post-structuralism as an either/or choice” (Allen 2008, 587).

In order to engage in social critique with the aim to work towards change for the better, critical theorists not only have to assume that human beings are formed by the structures and arrangements that construct the realities in which they live their lives, but also that these social structures and arrangements are “neither naturally necessary, nor historically inevitable” (Cooke 2006, 9). Only under these assumptions would it be possible to transform our social structures and arrangements into better ones. However, the social structures that hinder agents to fulfill their potentials might as well give rise to false conceptions of their interests and needs. To overcome given social arrangements therefore requires a change in the self-understanding of agents themselves. Cooke consequently argues that, to bring about emancipatory change, social critique needs to “address the question of transformation in a double respect: they do not only seek to identify possibilities for change in social arrangements, they also recognize that this may require changes in the existing perceptions of agent’s needs and interests” (Cooke 2006, 3).

In demanding a social and cognitive transformation, Cooke claims that social critique must be “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” (Cooke 2006, 9, my italics). She defends this utopian vision by arguing for a “more or less determinate guiding idea of the good society.” (Cooke 2006, 3). In her view, it is impossible to engage in – or even to conceive of – practices of social critique without such an idea, simply because in that case no ethical reference point would be given from which to criticize our current social arrangements, nor would agents have access to any motivational imagery to keep them engaged in the critical enterprise. In the following paragraphs, I will unpack this argument by providing a short overview of Cooke’s main line of reasoning.

Cooke stresses that any idea of a good society is connected to modes of “redemption” and “perfection” by arguing that “the idea of redemption evidently has a connotation of perfection, since redemption conjures a state of absolute sufficiency, which implies that deficiency would once and for all have been overcome” (Cooke 2004, 418). The idea of perfectionism needs to be invoked because an idea of the good society cannot simply be the expression of the fulfilment of our current needs – since our needs might as well be distorted themselves. Therefore, an idea of the
good society must evoke “an idea of best in the transcendent, absolute sense of ‘incapable of being bettered’” (Cooke 2006, 166). This transcendent conception of the good society then supplies the ethical standard from which we could then criticize the imperfect composition of our existing social arrangements.

This conception of the good—or best—society aims at being context-transcending, which implies that the good is not tied to a particular context. As Cooke puts it, these ideas “are not merely expressions of our deepest hopes and aspirations; they represent hopes and aspirations that everyone, everywhere should have if they are to be able to fulfil their potentials as human beings” (Cooke 2006, 15). Cooke contrasts this position with a so-called radical contextualist view which approaches ideas of the good as tied to a specific socio-cultural context. For Cooke, only a context-transcending view can be deployed in judgments that aim to be “cross-cultural” and “trans-historical” in their validity (Cooke 2006, 66) As such, a context-transcending idea of the good society can provide normative direction to social critique as well as an understanding of ethical progress which, in Cooke’s view, is necessary for emancipatory social thought.

Cooke acknowledges that the main problem with a context-transcending approach is that it takes an authoritarian position regarding progress and social change. The emancipatory aim of critical theory, however, requires an anti-authoritarian approach as ground for emancipatory critique: in order to enlighten and emancipate agents, it is of crucial importance that they pursue their very own ideas of the good, based on their own reasons and considerations. The authoritarian norm of a context-transcending idea of the good society thus stands at odds with the aims of critical theory. Indeed, it is of crucial importance for emancipation to assume that all human beings are capable of autonomous reasoning and moral judgments, and that these capacities need to be respected—as Cooke acknowledges as well (Cooke 2005, 383).

To account for this problem, Cooke reformulates the context-transcending validity of normative claims derived from conceptions of the good by specifying the tension between utopian thinking and anti-authoritarianism. To do so, she distinguishes two problematic aspects of utopianism: “bad utopianism” and “finalism”. The utopianisms that Cooke considers “bad” lack a meaningful connection with actual historical developments. Finalism in turn denies the contingency of human knowledge and presents the idea of the good society as a condition that is actually attainable, thereby violating the openness of history and historical development (Cooke 2006, 163). Cooke explains that to avoid these problems, some critical theorists have tried to get rid of images of the good by replacing them with empty images. She insists, however, that such “empty signifiers” are problematic themselves: not only is it hard to attribute any motivating power to an empty object, it would also be impossible to establish a connection between such motivation and its ethical value (2006, 163).

Instead of arguing for a purely negativistic approach, Cooke claims—and this is the driving force of her argument—that “we should conceive of the good society as represented 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” (Cooke 2006, 5, my italics). In other words, Cooke aims at finding ways to account for a context-transcending approach of social critique that does not lead to “epistemological and ethical authoritarianism” (Cooke 2006, 97). Her strategy to avoid the first form of authoritarianism is to accept and acknowledge that no standpoint exists independently from particular historical, cultural and social contexts. This means that every perspective—including that of the theorist (!)—is open to contestation. Regarding the second form of authoritarianism, finalism, Cooke suggests that the validity of ethical claims must be made “dependent on the reasoning of concrete human agents in historically specific socio-cultural contexts” (2005, 383).

A crucial step in avoiding both forms of authoritarianism is to regard different conceptions of the good life as “regulative ideas”. Amy Allen has pointed out that when conceptions of the good life are understood as regulative ideas, they remain fictitious ideals. Cooke’s key to avoid authoritarianism thus lies in the “awareness of our inability” to achieve these ideals as ends on their own (Allen 2008, 588). This means that, although our regulative ideas aim to grasp a transcendent utopian
conception of the good society, we analogously need to acknowledge that we are never really capable of reaching that transcendent ethical object (Allen 2008, 588). However, Cooke does insist that it is possible to narrow the gap between the transcendent ethical object of the good life its representation, precisely because the latter provides ethical orientation and motivating force (Cooke 2006, 148).

Thus, Cooke argues in favour of a “middle position” between anti-authoritarianism and a notion of the good society to create a so-called productive tension as a way of resolving the uneasy relationship between them. In what follows, I will nevertheless demonstrate that Cooke’s provides a rather abstract ethical theory, thereby moving away from the actual practise of social critique. Under reference to Amy Allen’s (2008) and Ruth Sonderegger’s (2008) critical engagement with Cooke’s work, I will argue that in order for critical theory to remain critical, it is of principal importance to reposition the concept of contestation within social critique.

The Praxis of Social Critique

Amy Allen argues that the question which immediately comes to mind after examining Cooke’s approach is “how we should choose between competing fictional representations of the good society in a non-arbitrary (that is, rational) way” (Allen 2008, 589). Cooke adopts a Habermasian perspective when she claims that the only way to assess the validity of these representations is through “public processes of argumentation” that are “open-ended, inclusive, and fair” (Cooke 2006, 130-131). It must however be noted that Cooke’s approach differs from Habermas’ because Cooke emphasizes “the situatedness of our commitment to situated rationality” (Allen 2008, 589). As Cooke puts it, “the connection between validity and open-ended, inclusive, fair, and public argumentation is not a feature of communication in general but has come about in certain socio-cultural contexts as a result of historically contingent factors” (Cooke 2006, 132). This “situated rationality” provides Cooke with an explanation how to rationally choose between different representations of the good society without falling prey to authoritarianism (Allen 2008, 589).

Allen points out that Cooke’s endorsement of “situated rationality” makes it difficult to see how her view differs from that of so-called “radical’ contextualists” (Allen 2008, 589). At the same time, Allen acknowledges that Cooke develops a position that relies on representations of the good life that are “context-transcending” rather than “context-transcendent” (Allen 2008, 588). Although Cooke does refer to a metaphysical object – an object which transcends the different particular articulations of the “good”, her theory of the representations of the good is not metaphysical. We must keep in mind that in Cooke’s proposal, the particular representations which aim to articulate the transcendent conception of the good society are always incapable to fully capture their metaphysical object. By acknowledging this incapacity, Cooke thus carves out a so-called middle position.

But do we need such a transcendent ethical object – “the good society” – in order to formulate particular representations which are constitutively incapable of capturing it? This question is raised by Sonderegger, who, on Wittgensteinian grounds, challenges the need for such a transcendent object to account for different articulations of the idea of the good society. She argues that “it was Wittgenstein who raised doubts as to whether the identity of a concept (which transcends all applications) presupposes an essential core, and who questioned the reification of such a core in terms of ‘objects’. All we need, he contended, is enough overlap between specific uses and interpretations of the concept in question” (Sonderegger 2008, 602). Not only is it questionable whether we need a conception of the good to produce different representations of said concept; the claim concerning the importance of a transcendent image of the good society itself also complicates the distinction between Cooke’s theory and an ethical theory.

Cooke’s proposal does not seem to provide a critical social theory as formulated by the early Frankfurt School. These early critical theorists, highly influenced by Marx, attempted to bring about social change, and aimed at a synthesis of philosophy and the social sciences in order to transform the material conditions of society. However, after hopes for a proletarian revolution faded, it became problematic for critical social theories to determine which social struggles should be theorized. Cooke’s solution for this problem is to start with an idea of the good society and...
to focus on representations of the good. To do so, it would be necessary to choose a representation of the good life which discloses the conception of the good more powerfully than its rival representations do. This representation, after a comparison with reality, then would bring about the struggles that need attention. At the same time, Sonderegger points out that “it is rather problematic that Cooke’s study cannot properly be called a piece of critical social theory if we apply her own criteria to it. For in the end, Cooke is not interested in developing and advocating a powerful representation of the good society in the light of which specific (new) social affairs might become visible as chains” (Sonderegger 2008, 605). According to Sonderegger, the fact that Cooke does not provide these representations herself, thus creates a “paradox” (Sonderegger 2008, 605). More precisely, Sonderegger argues that Cooke’s book, “taken in isolation, comes close to a continual self-contradiction” (Sonderegger 2008, 602). I would, instead of speaking of a paradox, rather speak of false priorities. Although Cooke values actual critical engagement by advocating powerful representations of the good society, she, like many critical theorists, focuses almost exclusively on the methodological aspects of social critique.

Due to her emphasis on the dilemma between utopian thinking and anti-authoritarianism, Cooke seems to lose the appreciation of the real critical social enterprise: her theory becomes mainly ethical and abstract and does not take concrete social and material aspects into account. At the same time, it must be noted that Cooke shows great awareness of the fact that a disproportionate focus on normative validity risks to lose sight of the praxis of social critique – of the intentional and rational activity that aims for emancipatory change (Cooke 2006, 190). Praxis, for Cooke, remains a “transformative social activity” whose content is not a priori given but should be the outcome of a process of deliberation, and depends on the specific constraints that are posed by particular social arrangements (Cooke 2006, 195).

Thus, representations of the good society point to a discrepancy between the good life and the status quo, thereby providing both normative guidance and ethical direction to social critique. At the same time, we have seen that it is fundamental to Cooke’s approach to conceive both the descriptions of deficiencies in our social arrangements as well as the normative ideas of the good society as “contestable claims” (Cooke 2006, 196). Both, she argues, “are subject to assessment in public processes of inclusive, open-ended, and fair argumentation in a suitably historicist, comparative, and concrete manner” (Cooke 2006, 196). More specifically, Cooke claims that regulative ideas need to self-consciously acknowledge their fictive character to avoid bringing closure to the historical process. It has been shown that for Cooke, these regulative ideas cannot be understood as “blueprints” from which we can immediately implement the transcendent object of the good society into our current social arrangements (Cooke 2006, 176). In other words, by conceptualizing representations of the good society as regulative ideas, Cooke precludes the possibility for any particular idea of the good society to be presented as “unquestionably valid” (Cooke 2006, 176).

For Cooke, the contestability of normative claims and representations means that these claims are subject to processes of deliberation. By focusing on deliberation as a public process of inclusive, open-ended, and fair argumentation, she takes a Habermasian position. This implies that Cooke seeks to combine a praxis of contestation of normative claims with a deliberative process aimed at consensus. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe have problematized the Habermasian focus on consensus. Cooke takes their criticism very seriously, by paying attention to Laclau’s suspicion concerning “the normative ideal of reconciliation” that informs Habermas’ concept of deliberative democracy (Cooke 2006, 176). For Laclau and Mouffe, the idea of deliberative democracy presupposes the “possibility of a final reconciliation, of [...] rational consensus, of a fully inclusive ‘we’” (Laclau & Mouffe 2001, xvii, as cited in Cooke 2006, 176). Laclau takes issue with the idealist assumptions of harmony and reconciliation that seem to guide Habermas’ conception of deliberative democracy (Cooke 2006, 177). Cooke in turn does not shy away from modifying and recasting certain Habermasian concepts to accommodate the force of Laclau’s objection. She finds a good illustration of the kind of revision that is needed to address the idealist assumptions within the projected practices of deliberation in Seyla Benhabib’s work Critique, Norm, and Utopia (1986). In this book, Benhabib argues for “a shift from consensus to conversation” (Cooke 2006, 179). Benhabib’s main concern is that in modern societies, which she conceives of as pluralist and
multicultural, agents are likely to hold different attitudes and perspectives that can create conflicting needs and demands that cannot easily be reconciled. Cooke points out that in Benhabib’s account the Habermasian idealized understanding of deliberation processes makes “consensus the arbiter of disputes in matters of moral validity” (Cooke 2006, 181). She argues that Benhabib’s account presents an alternative to the idealist assumptions of many Habermasians, since Benhabib “proposes an ‘interactive’ version which construes moral deliberations as conversations in which the willingness to reason from the other’s point of view is paramount” (Cooke 2006, 181).

Although Cooke finds Benhabib’s model of interactive universalism promising, she points out that this model remains “underdeveloped” (2006, 182). She therefore presents her own understanding of a “regulative idea” as a solution to the problem addressed by Benhabib. Regulative ideas of context-transcending values, she argues, allow for “a picture of a communicative utopia that is vibrant and dynamic, characterized not by harmony and reconciliation but [by] the ongoing contestation of validity claims” (Cooke 2006, 182). Adopting these regulative ideas enables us, according to Cooke, to re-think important concepts in Habermas’s theory of communicative action, such as his account of moral validity. However, this modification does not avoid the fact that Habermas’s communicative utopia remains “harmonistic and reconciliatory” (Cooke 2006, 185). In the following sections, I will therefore argue that the accusations levelled against Habermas — and against Cooke for that matter — by Laclau and other post-structuralist thinkers, demand a more substantive rethinking of the concept of contestation. Rather than focusing on the contestable nature of the validity of moral claims, I make the claim that contestation should be thought of as a political practice focused on the existing articulations of universals, precisely in the name of those universals.

**The Need for Universals in Today’s Interconnected World**

Cooke’s plea for an account of ethical progress has led her to stress that a radical contextualist approach is too limited to engage in social critique. Her aim is to provide a universalist account of the good life as the underlying principle for social critique. However, she prefers to use the term “context transcending” instead of “universalist” to describe her proposal. In her own terms, this formulation underscores “the importance of the dynamic interpretation of the universality” (Cooke 2006, 20). By interpreting universality as dynamic in the sense that there is “no unmediated and no privileged access to reality or to ethical validity available” (Cooke 2006, 21), Cooke intends to work with the productive tension between the construction of a universalist ground and the commitment to anti-authoritarianism.

In shunning the term universality, Cooke shows great concern for the fact that formulating a conception of the good life — which in its context-transcendent form is a universal one — entails an authoritarian and contra-emancipatory danger. I share this concern, but would rather argue that it is important not to shy away from concepts with universal aspirations. Indeed, as pointed out by James Ingram in his book *Radical Cosmopolitics* (2013), morality is simply universal, meaning that “all human beings everywhere should count morally” (Ingram 2013, 70). This implies that, when scrutinizing the social structures and arrangements that prevent human beings from flourishing, critical social theory is committed to the egalitarian idea that social change should not just be beneficial to a selected societal group but should include all agents. Ingram addresses Cooke’s concern with universal concepts, arguing that it is possible to criticize the functioning of a universal “on the basis that it violates the values or way of life of a particular individual, group or community” (Ingram 2013, 149). However, a mere commitment to pluralism, according to him, does not take into consideration the degree of the general interconnectedness of the world we find ourselves in (Ingram 2013, 149).

Ingram’s concern with the factual interconnectedness of today’s world is in line with Etienne Balibar’s work on universalism as presented in his article “Ambiguous Universality” (2002), and more recently, in his essay-collection *Des Universels* (2016). According to Ingram, Balibar conceives universalism primarily as “a fact about the modern world that has grown up over the last few centuries” (Ingram 2013, 150). Ingram summarizes Balibar’s conception vis-à-vis universalism as not
How to Engage in Practices of Critique? From a Universal Conception of the Good Life to the Contestation of Universals
Annemarije Hagen

being limited to “moral commitment” nor as a simple “formal logic of generalization” (Ingram 2013, 150). His concept of real universality, then, refers to an actual interdependency between the various ‘units’ which, together, build what we call the world” (2002, 147). This real universality, however, has not always existed. Balibar argues that the world became conceivable as an entity through the actual interdependency of “humankind” as a single web of interrelationships” (Balibar 2002, 149). He emphasizes, however, that this web of interrelations “far from representing a situation of mutual recognition, [...] actually coincides with a generalized pattern of conflicts, hierarchies and exclusions” (Balibar 2002, 154-155).

This factual interconnectedness poses a problem for pluralism. In Ingram’s words: “Radical pluralism would amount in practice to generalized laissez-faire—a capitulation to the structures and processes that underlie the grossly unjust relations that now exist, and a way for the powerful and privileged to externalize the costs of their actions while the less powerful bear those costs without recourse or voice” (Ingram 2013, 150). To contest this status quo demands a universalist aim. As I have discussed, these universal aspirations cannot be addressed effectively with reference to a conception of the good life, not even, I would argue, if these positive depictions are fictitious and even, I would argue, if these positive aspirations to the structures and processes that underlie the grossly unjust relations that now exist, and a way for the powerful and privileged to externalize the costs of their actions while the less powerful bear those costs without recourse or voice” (Ingram 2013, 150). To contest this status quo demands a universalist aim. As I have discussed, these universal aspirations cannot be addressed effectively with reference to a conception of the good life, not even, I would argue, if these positive depictions are fictitious, because of the authoritarian danger of such universals. Therefore, I want to suggest an alternative route by which I aim to set Cook’s false priorities aright. Rather than prioritizing abstract ethical reflections over actual critical engagement, I maintain that already articulated universals provide a starting point for actual critical practices as the struggle against their flaws and limitations.

In Des universels, Balibar (2016) points at the fact that the enunciation of the universal is not so much a factor of unification of human beings as a conflict between them and with themselves. Balibar does not only problematize the notion of the universal, he also shows that we can challenge universalisms in the name of their own principles. Judith Butler has brought something similar to the fore, namely the idea that the universal can be salvaged through the contestation of its existing articulations. We must, according to Butler, resist the idea that it is possible to completely grasp a universal through an articulation of a set of norms or standards. At the same time, Butler does argue that we need universal claims precisely to contest the limits of the existing articulations of universals. She states that “the universal begins to become articulated precisely through challenges to its existing formulation, and the excluded, thereby, constitutes the contingent limit of universalization” (Butler 1996, 48). In other words, the process of universalization entails a critical practice of unmasking the articulated universal as a “false” universal by contesting its limits in the name of the universal. Excluded or marginalized groups could for example deploy the concept of equality to address the exclusionary functioning of the state’s articulation of equality. Such contestations of the limits of the existing articulation in the name of equality render the renewed concept of equality more universal.

Butler’s approach shows the critical potential of contextualism, as she insists that every universal claim is made in a specific context. Within these particular contexts, existing articulations of universals need to be challenged by those who are excluded by these universals—in order to render the articulated universal more universal. The practice of contesting these articulated universals is not based in an abstract representation of the good society that motivates everyone everywhere. As the logic of contestation is bound to particular contexts, the practice of social critique rather requires a bottom-up approach. It must be understood “as a process of universalization rather than as the application of the principle of universality” (Hagen 2014, 49).

Contestation as the Process of Universalizing Universals

The practice of social critique as a process of universalization rejects a universal conception of the good life but holds on to the aspiration of emancipatory change. Processes of universalization subscribe to the possibility of change for the better, not by grounding this emancipatory change in a substantive notion of the universal (the idea of the good society), but by contesting the necessarily partial character of given articulations of universals— with the aim to make them “more” universal. This negativistic approach thus rejects a substantive notion of the universal, as Butler has shown. Instead, a negativistic approach works towards its emancipatory
How to Engage in Practices of Critique? From a Universal Conception of the Good Life to the Contestation of Universals
Annemarije Hagen

aims by challenging *existing* understandings of a universal. Cooke engages extensively with both Butler’s negativistic approach to universals and her anti-authoritarian position. She writes that “for Butler the normative and optimistic aspect of critical social thinking consists in the possibilities for expanding the key terms of liberalism, rendering them more inclusive, more dynamic and more concrete” (Cooke 2006, 83). In dealing with Butler’s concerns, Cooke thus comes to argue that Butler does not reject universals straightaway:

In consequence, although any particular articulation of a concept posits an identity that is exclusionary, its exclusions can be revealed by way of practices of critical interrogation that may spark off a creative rearticulation and restaging of the concept. For this reason, Butler does not reject universal concepts such as democracy, freedom, truth or, indeed, the concept of universality itself. What she rejects is the closure of such concepts: static conceptions that refuse to acknowledge their own dependency on particular cultural values, fail to respond to their own constitutive exclusions, and block attempts to rearticulate them in more inclusive and emancipatory ways. Against such static conceptions, she advocates ideas of universality, democracy, freedom, and so on, that are “futural,” “unconstrained by teleology,” and not “commensurate with any of [their] ‘realizations.’” Her concern is to preserve the ideality of such ideals by highlighting the distance between their ideality and the givenness of any of their modes of instantiation. (Cooke 2006, 78)

Without making it explicit, Cooke points to an important formal similarity between her own and Butler’s thought, which seems to mitigate the difference between their negativistic and “more or less determinate” notions of universality. What Cooke herself refers to as the productive tension between the conception of the good and its representations – which, she emphasizes, are constitutively inadequate to grasp their object – could be read in a similar fashion as Butler’s attempt to preserve the gap between the universal and its particular articulations. As Cooke points out, “[i]t is this gap in principle between the ideality of the ideal and its historical actualization that provides a space for the critical transcendence of the given. For Butler, we might say, norms and concepts carry the possibilities for their own transcendence within themselves” (Cooke 2006, 79). These formal similarities notwithstanding, Cooke argues that from her engagement with the question of the representations of the good society, “the question is not just whether there are possibilities for transcendence inherent within the norm or concept; it is whether these possibilities are the basis for the kinds of cognitive and social transformation for which validity in a context-transcending sense can be claimed” (2006, 79–80). By reformulating Butler’s concern into her own terminology, Cooke nevertheless risks to overlook the fact that Butler does account, albeit in a different way, for the validity of social transformations in a context-transcending, that is to say, universalist, manner.

More concretely, Cooke accuses Butler of normative arbitrariness, stating that “[i]n order to speak of progressive, emancipatory revisions, Butler has to allow for a critical perspective that is not confined to any specific frame of intelligibility, but extends across historical epochs and sociocultural contexts. Otherwise, she would be obliged to regard changes in foundational rules as normatively arbitrary” (2006, 80). Simply put, critical theorists, when aiming to bring about change for the better, need to justify “better” within a universal, or context-transcending, perspective. Cooke, like many prominent contemporary critical theorists associated with the Frankfurt School, normatively grounds critical theory’s emancipatory aim, its focus on the betterment of the future, in ideas of historical progress, development, social evolution, and sociocultural learning practices. This idea of historical progress, however, has recently been brought under critical scrutiny by Amy Allen in her book *The End of Progress* (2016). From a post- and decolonial perspective, Allen rejects a progressive reading of history for being “Eurocentric, imperialist and authoritarian” (Allen 2016, 12). Without subscribing to the idea of historical progress, the social transformations that Butler is referring to do not fall prey to normative arbitrariness. In fact, Cooke’s critique of Butler regarding normative arbitrariness does seem to overlook, or lacks appreciation of, the specific way in which Butler does endorse universals: the social transformations that Butler is referring to are the practices of contestation that render the articulated universals more universal. In other words, the flaws and limitations of the articulated universals can be
countered exactly in the name of these universals.

Furthermore, it has been shown that Cooke herself struggles with avoiding the accusation of normative arbitrariness regarding the choice between different representations of the good life. Since Cooke does not intend to develop a regulative idea of the good society that represents its transcendent object, Sonderegger rightfully points out that it remains unclear “which metaphors, stories and pictures” are needed for such a representation (Sonderegger 2008, 605). As Sonderegger argues, “Cooke demands visual disclosures and almost poetic ways of thinking that enable social agents to reconsider as coercion what so far they have experienced as freedom; and yet she refrains from practicing such thinking” (Sonderegger 2008, 605).

As we have seen, Butler does not dismiss universal concepts, but emphasizes the danger of historical closure when the partiality of existing universals is not recognized. According to Cooke, however, Butler connects the problem of closure to “proceduralist as well as substantive accounts of universality” (Cooke 2006, 81). Cooke herself holds that a “more of less substantive” understanding of universals is necessary to account for the ethical direction and motivational force of social critique. She argues that representations of a transcendent object (“the good society”) make ethical orientation possible, and that their power to disclose this transcendent object is needed to motivate critical agents. In order to convincingly claim that Butler’s negativistic approach provides an alternative to Cooke’s substantial understanding of universals, we therefore need to examine whether Butler’s negativistic approach can account for motivational force and ethical direction as well. However, before doing so, the nature of the partiality of the expressed universals needs to be explained, as, according to Butler, critical engagement entails precisely the exposure of this partiality. What accounts for the permanent failure to grasp a universal and how does this shape the actual practice of critique as struggle and contestation?

Cooke argues that for Butler, to universalize universals implies “an open-ended practice of cultural translation” (Cooke 2006, 81). In Butler’s account, “false universals” are the result of cultural difference, meaning that so-called universal norms are in fact always culturally specific. As articulated universals are necessarily encoded in ways that are culturally particular, the universalization of universals implies some kind of “cultural translation” – explained by Ingram as “an endless effort to expose and tentatively bridge the gaps between different cultural idioms in order to prevent the harms that result when one is imposed upon another” (Ingram 2013, 166-167). Instead of going into the difficult question of translation, Ingram criticizes Butler’s framing of the problem of false universals in terms of culture, which according to him is “unnecessary and unhelpful” to the emancipatory project (Ingram 2013, 167). Not only are cultures hard to conceptualise – Butler characterizes them as dynamic and anti-essentialist –, Ingram is right to note that a focus on culture leads to a misidentification of the harmful character of false universalisms (Ingram 2013, 169). Ingram illustrates this by pointing to an odd implication of Butler’s approach, namely that “colonialism harms cultures” (Ingram 2013, 169). He responds: “[S]urely the first objection to the imposition of false universals is not that they do not correspond to some group’s culture but rather, more simply, that they are imposed and, by virtue of this fact alone, violate people’s equal freedom and dignity. It is not the misinterpretation that is normatively relevant, but domination” (Ingram 2013, 169).

What does partiality then consist in? Ingram proposes an alternative to a cultural or interpretive interpretation, namely a relational and egalitarian perspective (Ingram 2013, 174). For Butler, this alternative cannot be pursued, since she sees equality as a universal term that is therefore bound to a forever “not yet”. The fact that we cannot successfully articulate the concept of equality leads her to conclude that emancipation consist of nothing more than to keep the concept open to indeterminate interpretations. Ingram does agree that a claim to equality can arise from unforeseeable directions and underscores that it is important to remain open to these possibilities (Ingram 2013, 170). We can, however, pose the question of equality without substantializing its corresponding concept – if we focus on actual inequalities. To this end, Ingram heavily relies on the work of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1998, 1991), whose descriptions of social arrangements are given in terms of domination and powers that prevent equal access to forms of capital. Bourdieu provides Ingram “by simple inversion, with equality as an evaluative
I would argue that Ingram’s relational or egalitarian perspective is particularly interesting as an alternative to Cooke’s representations of the good life, as it accounts for both the importance of ethical direction and that of motivational force. Cooke rightly considers these two dimensions to be crucial for the practice of social critique. For Cooke, however, “a more or less determinate guiding idea of the good society” provides both an “ethical reference point” for social critique, as well as a motivational force for agents to engage in this critical enterprise (Cooke 2015, 380). I would argue that the critical social enterprise is conceivable without an idea of the good as well, since the perversions of universals, that is to say, their flaws and limitations, can be countered exactly in the name of these universals. This enables us to engage in immanent critique, crucial for critical social theories, by pointing at the discrepancy between what a concept stands for, and what it produces in actual terms. In an immanent critical practice, universals themselves thus provide ethical direction. To deploy universal concepts within the process of universalization grants these concepts a disruptive and critical character as they can be challenged by anyone who feels excluded by them.

As for the motivational force needed to engage in practices of critique, I would find it hard to believe that abstractly formulated ethical theories have more ethical force than actually felt practices of exclusion. However, exclusions or injustices are not always felt. This is an important consideration for critical social theory in general, and specifically for the practice of universalizing universals, as this practice relies on those who are excluded by the existing articulation of the universal. Indeed, Butler and Balibar help us see cosmopolitanism as a “process of universalization” (Butler 1996, 48) which comes about through contestation, or more precisely, through the struggle and contestation of those who are excluded by universals. In Butler’s terms: “The universal begins to become articulated precisely through challenges to its existing formulation, and this challenge emerges from those who are not covered by it [...] but who nevertheless demand that the universal as such ought to be inclusive of them. The excluded, in this sense, constitutes the contingent limit of universalization” (Butler 1996, 48).

Although Butler argues that this process stresses the open-ended nature of the universal, the idea that articulated universals must be challenged by those who are discriminated against, marginalized, and excluded also presents a problem, for it seems to place the burden of social change on the weakest ones in society. Would it not be very idealist to assume that social change can be brought about by the weakest ones? Or, even worse, does a bottom-up understanding of universalizing universals assign a very strong hands-off attitude to the more powerful agents? Possibly, this position is even more idealist than the idea that we can indeed install universal values top-down. A genuine concern with authoritarian danger would in that case lead to an implicit acceptance of the status quo. I would argue, however, that a passive waiting for others to demand change is not the right interpretation of Butler’s forever “not yet”. To substantiate this claim, I will further elaborate on the actual practice of contestation in the final section, by asking not only how to engage in practices of social critique, but also who these critical actors are.

Anti-Authoritarian Practices of Critique: Who are the Emancipatory Agents?

The commitment to pursue social critique through a process of universalization does restrain us from speaking for others, or in the name of others. It has been emphasized that the limits of articulated universals can be overcome through actual struggles in which affected agents contest exclusion and hierarchization. However, this is not to say “we” can sit back and wait for social change to come about. First of all, it is hard to envisage to whom this “we” refers. Domination, marginalization, and inequality should not be seen as excesses that affect just a small minority in an otherwise good or just society. We have seen that Bourdieu’s description of social arrangements in terms of power and domination points into the same direction. Bourdieu’s perspective sits well with Balibar’s diagnosis of “real universality” that
How to Engage in Practices of Critique? From a Universal Conception of the Good Life to the Contestation of Universals
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depicts the web of interrelationships as characterized by conflicts, hierarchies, and exclusions (Balibar 2002, 154). However, it is important to see that these inequalities are often hidden, which poses a problem for actual engagements in practices of critique. Bourdieu speaks in this regard of symbolic violence, referring to the system of social arrangements and relations whose asymmetrical character is not recognized by the dominated nor by the dominant. It could be argued that this points exactly to the task of critical theory: to disclose the perceived necessity of social structures by unmasking their claims to naturality, objectivity, or neutrality. Many critical theorists, then, argue that agents must be made aware of the conditions and determinants underlying their position, showing that they would have never subscribed to these circumstances in a free and uncoercive situation (Geuss 1981, 65).

Thus, not only are agents often unaware of inequality, forms of (symbolic) domination might also cause them to shape and adapt their needs and preferences. In response, critical theorists have argued that “agents who suffer from ideologically false consciousness are deluded about their own true interests and needs” (Geuss 1981, 45). Critical social theory, therefore, is supposed to enlighten agents as to their true needs and interests. However, this universal as a particular kind of recognition, namely “recognition as a legitimate party of a conflict” (Celikates 2011a, 10). Thus, struggles over defining needs and over the acknowledgment of these needs cannot take place without perceiving agents “as a potential source of reasons and valid claims” that need to be taken into consideration (Celikates 2011a, 11). Furthermore, this specific kind of recognition should be distinguished from forms of recognition that consist of the “individual’s specific properties, needs, and achievements” (Celikates 2011a, 10). By acknowledging this distinction between two forms of recognition, no further substantial conception of the good life is needs to be invoked, since recognition as a legitimate party of conflict can both be understood in a rather formal and negativistic way, and as a critique of the structural restrictions of actors’ capacities to engage in normative conflicts (Celikates 2011b, 169).

To conclude, I have argued against the need for a metaphysical notion of the good life to guide and inspire our critical practices. Given critical theory’s commitment to anti-authoritarianism, such a concept of the good life could only exist as an abstract ethical reflection in the form of a representation which can never completely grasp the good life. This approach, which is proposed by Cooke, risks moving away from the actual practice of social critique. In contrast, I have argued that critical theory must move beyond abstract reflections concerning the good society and should develop a radical, bottom-up approach which focuses on actual social and political struggles. Although this approach rejects an abstract ethical conception of the good life, this does not mean that all concepts with universal aspirations should be dismissed. As has been pointed out through the work of Balibar, the general interconnectedness of the world demands universalist aims in social struggles. However, this universal aspiration cannot be addressed effectively by referring to a conception of the good life – not even if these positive depictions are fictitious – without falling prey to problems of authoritarianism. I have suggested an alternative route, arguing that articulated universals can provide a starting point for actual critical practices, namely as a struggle against their flaws and limitations. These struggles show that although universals cannot be captured by any set of norms or institutions, this does not preclude the possibility to make universal
claims. Rather, the unequal access to a universal can be contested through universal claims. Struggles against unequal access, and therefore by simple inversion, for equal inclusion, could be reformulated as the struggle for the possibility to take part in conflicts about needs. In order to work towards these forms of equal inclusion, the dominant discourse has to be rearticulated by revealing practices and social structures that exclude and block groups and individuals from being recognized as political agents. However, I hope to have shown that this requires an understanding of universal concepts as being open and contingent, so as not to foreclose the possibility for their contestation from unforeseeable directions. Indeed, the outcome of a struggle to universalize universals is always open-ended, precisely because the true needs and preferences of agents cannot be decided by critical theorists. Critical theory should therefore remain sensitive to the claims for inclusion and forms of contestation of those who are denied a political voice. In other words, a critical practice demands an endorsement of, and support for, marginalized agents who need recognition to be part of the conflict about their needs.

References


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Annemarije Hagen is a PhD fellow in the Institute of Philosophy at the University of Leuven. She also holds a teaching position at the PPLE (Politics, Psychology, Law and Economics) College of the University of Amsterdam.