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## Book Review

Arvi Särkelä. *Immanente Kritik und soziales Leben. Selbsttransformative Praxis nach Hegel und Dewey*. Klostermann, 2018, €59,00, ISBN 9783465043607, 428p.

Hannah Arendt famously claimed that the modern ‘rise of the social’ has resulted in a problematic marginalization of ‘the political’ and political philosophy. Interestingly, contemporary Critical Theorists often make the opposite claim that we need to rehabilitate *social* philosophy. They argue that social philosophy has had a marginal existence alongside the more clearly defined disciplines of moral philosophy (concerned with justice) and political philosophy (concerned with legitimacy) and that this is problematic because social philosophy can identify forms of suffering that cannot be captured by the notions of moral injustice or political illegitimacy (Honneth 2007; Laitinen/Särkelä 2019).

This desire to rehabilitate social philosophy has resulted in recent years in two interconnected debates: there has been a renewed discussion about the foundations of *immanent critique*, which is considered to be the preferred *method* of social philosophy (Celikates 2009; Stahl 2013; Jaeggi 2014); and there has emerged a debate about the diagnosis of *social pathologies*, which is considered to be the specific *task* of social philosophy (Honneth 2014a, 2014b; Zürn 2011; Neuhouser 2016).

In his book *Immanente Kritik und soziales Leben* Arvi Särkelä tries to contribute to these debates by rehabilitating an understanding of immanent critique as a *self-transformative practice* and an understanding of social pathology as a *stagnation of social life*, which he extracts from Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* and the later works of John Dewey. By presenting a systematic account of these understandings, Särkelä aims to show how they are superior to other conceptions of immanent critique and social pathology, and how they can provide the foundation for a revitalized social philosophy today.

Särkelä starts by explaining what is problematic about the dominant accounts of immanent critique today, and how the work of Hegel and Dewey contains a fruitful alternative. What connects most accounts of immanent critique, Särkelä argues, is that they understand ‘immanency’ as referring to the *quality of the standards* that the critic uses to evaluate social practices. One consequence of this understanding is that critique falls apart in two moments: a *meta-critical* moment where the critic tries to argue how the standard that is used is immanent to the social practice in question, which results in a ‘model’ of immanent critique; and then there is the *critical* moment where the actual critique takes place and the model is applied.

What distinguishes the approach of Hegel and Dewey, Särkelä says, is that they reject the distinction between a ‘meta-critical’ and a ‘critical’ moment, which they associate with the problematic, epistemological quest for *certainty*, and which they think will lead to a sterile critical practice. Instead, they defend an approach that makes two methodological commitments, which Särkelä calls ‘strong corrigibilism’ and ‘radical fallibilism’. ‘Strong corrigibilism’ means to give up the idea that before the actual critique begins, one should first ask about the conditions of the possibility of critique and develop some kind of model. Hegel and Dewey urge us instead to simply start with our critical analysis of society and in the course of the *experience of critique* evaluate and analyse the consequences of this critique. The preconditions of critique are thus not to be gotten *before* the critique, but in its *self-evaluation*. The advantage of trusting that experience can be a self-correcting process is that the critic can give experience a fair chance and be open to the *new*.

‘Radical fallibilism’ refers to the willingness of the critic towards self-transformation in the process of the self-correcting experience of critique. Not only should the results of critique be submitted to critical evaluation, but also what critique as such could mean. It is radical because it applies to the methodological implications of the critical practice itself. This means that there are no metaphysical guarantees that any methodological convictions are safe from the need for revision.

Together, these two commitments of ‘strong corrigibilism’ and ‘radical fallibilism’ result in a conception of immanent critique as a *self-transformative practice*: whereas other conceptions of immanent critique are merely transformative, in the sense that they try to transform the social practice that is being criticized, the approach of Hegel and Dewey is also *self-transformative*, because it transforms the situation and the self of the critic. ‘Immanency’ refers here no longer to the *quality of the standards* being used, but to the form of the *critical practice itself*. The sterile certainty that is provided by a model is replaced with the lively uncertainty of a self-transformative practice.

In a next step, Särkelä turns to the current debates about *social pathologies* and again tries to demonstrate how the understanding of social pathology in the work of Hegel and Dewey can provide a fruitful alternative. According to Särkelä one can distinguish between three conceptions of social pathology. The first understanding of social pathology is what Christopher Zurn has called a *second-order disorder*. Here, the pathology results from the inability of social actors to reflexively grasp the constitutive, normative content of social practices. Särkelä finds this understanding in Axel Honneth’s *Freedom’s Right*, in Jürgen Habermas’s *Erkenntniss und Interesse* and in Rahel Jaeggi’s *Kritik von Lebensformen*.

A second understanding of social pathology is as an *illness of the social organism*, whereby the analogy between society and the human body, and between institutions and organs, is central. In this account, things revolve around the issue of *social reproduction*: when institutions and practices fail to contribute to the reproduction of society, then they are considered to be ‘dead’, causing the social organism to become ‘ill’. Särkelä finds examples of this understanding in Plato and Comte, in Durkheim’s understanding of ‘anomie’, in Hegel’s account of ‘objective spirit’, and in Honneth’s recent article ‘The diseases of society’.

The third understanding of social pathology is as a *stagnation of social life*, which Särkelä finds in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* and Dewey’s later works. In this understanding, the static image of society as an individual organism is replaced with the dynamic image of society as a general *life-process*. Instead of focusing on problems related to society’s reflection on itself, or on illnesses of the social organism, in this third account of social pathology it is attempted to identify stagnations of the process of social life.

Särkelä argues that each of these three conceptions of social pathology is informed by a different ontology, namely a *relational*, a *substantial*, and a *processual* ontology, each giving primacy to a different aspect of social reality, either relations, substances, or processes. In order to demonstrate that the processual understanding of social pathology as a stagnation of social life is the most fruitful, Särkelä makes an interesting move by also asking which *metaphysical* positions inform the debate about social pathologies. This is unusual since it has become a commonly accepted idea in Critical Theory that we should operate within a ‘post-metaphysical’ framework. Särkelä rejects this by saying that when we talk about social pathologies we cannot avoid making metaphysical assumptions about the relation between nature and society, freedom and necessity, causality and normativity, life and death – that is, about reality as a whole.

Särkelä argues that most conceptions of social pathology today tacitly affirm a metaphysical position that posits a *structural similarity* between nature and society – or, differently put, it discerns an *analogy* between organic and social life. The notion of social pathology is therefore used as a *metaphor*. Hegel and Dewey, however, postulate a *continuity* between nature and society, and they discern a *homology* between organic and social life, which means that both spring from the same root but they are not identical. Moreover, Hegel and Dewey do not just postulate this continuity and homology, but they also tell the *history* of how life has moved through different stages from organic to social life. That is why Särkelä calls the metaphysical position of Hegel and Dewey *historical naturalism*. The historical naturalist believes that the process of growing complexity from organic to social life means an increase

in *freedom* and that it can be understood as a learning process that can take an emancipatory step forward or a pathological step backward.

From here, Särkelä sets himself the task of retracing the histories that Hegel and Dewey tell about the transition from organic to social life and of identifying the different pathologies that they describe along the way. This reconstruction leads to an important insight: as life evolves and becomes more complex the notion of pathology also evolves and changes. Whereas organic life is ‘healthy’ when it can *reproduce* itself and ‘pathological’ when it fails to do so, social life has become reflexive and can *transform* itself; it has the possibility to negotiate the purpose and meaning of its practices, while at the same time it still needs to organically reproduce itself. A ‘healthy’ social life is therefore a process in which the relation between *reproduction* and *transformation* is constantly negotiated; it is a form of life that can reproduce itself in a critical, transformative way, thus creating the possibility for realizing relations of meaningful cooperation.

Social life is ‘pathological’, however, when it *merely* reproduces itself without there being any room for critique and negotiation that could lead to a transformation of social practices and to meaningful cooperation. Or, differently put, *social* life becomes pathological when it degenerates into *organic* life. The ultimate example of this pathology, Särkelä argues, is Hegel’s account of master and slave, where the master sets the goal of reproduction and the slave is the means to realize it, without there being any critical negotiation between them. This one-sided cooperation is socially ‘dead’, because even though society reproduces itself organically, both parties suffer from a stagnation of social life. Särkelä finds similar examples of this pathology in the work of Dewey, such as his account of the traditional family, which reproduces itself without any negotiation between husband and wife; his account of industrial capitalism, which reproduces itself without any negotiation between capitalists and workers; and his account of democracy, which reproduces itself without any discussion in the public sphere.

The insight that Särkelä thus retrieves from the historical naturalism of Hegel and Dewey is that what is healthy in organic life can be pathological in social life, and vice versa. In organic life it is healthy to realize reproductive goals that are simply given, whereas in social life this is a sign of stagnation and pathology. This explains why Särkelä is critical of the other two conceptions of social pathology – as a ‘second-order disorder’ and as an ‘illness of the social organism’ – because in both cases the goals and purposes of social practices are taken to be given: in the former, what is at stake is merely the failure of social actors to reflexively

retrieve the *given* normative ideals underlying social practices, and in the latter, it is about the failure to realize the *given* reproductive goals of society.

At this point, Särkelä's account comes full circle and it becomes clear how the understanding of social pathology as a stagnation of social life relates to the understanding of immanent critique as a self-transformative practice. When the reproduction of society is not accompanied by critique and negotiation and when a society fails to mediate between reproduction and transformation – that is, when there is a stagnation of social life – then immanent critique has the task of providing a *critique of critique*, which aims to make critique effective once again. It tries to do so, not by developing norms or models of critique, but by learning from *experience* – that is, by articulating, reconstructing, comparing and mapping *experiences* of the social life-process. Together with the commitments to 'strong corrigibilism' and 'radical fallibilism' this can then result in a self-transformative critical practice that can try to overcome the stagnation of social life by revitalizing critique.

In this way, Särkelä presents a compelling account of a naturalistic social philosophy that makes an important contribution, not only to contemporary discussions in Critical Theory, but also to Hegel and Dewey scholarship. When it comes to Hegel, Särkelä rehabilitates the account of immanent critique that can be found in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and he refutes the dominant interpretations in the tradition of Critical Theory that reject this account as being dogmatic (Horkheimer) or monological (Habermas and Honneth). Furthermore, Särkelä shows the critical potential of presenting Hegel as a *naturalistic* philosopher who is concerned with 'experience' and 'life', and not – as it has been common in the recent Hegel-revival of Charles Taylor, Axel Honneth, and others – as a *normative* philosopher who is concerned with the preconditions of individual freedom. When it comes to Dewey, Särkelä presents the first systematic account of Dewey's understanding of immanent critique, and he demonstrates convincingly how the work of Dewey and Hegel can illuminate and reinforce each other, not by focusing on Dewey's early work where he explicitly engages with Hegel, but by exploring Dewey's later works where the connections are implicit.

However, like all ambitious books, Särkelä's account also raises many questions, some of which are addressed by Axel Honneth in the preface to the book. My own concern is related to the picture that is presented of the relation between social philosophy (concerned with social pathologies), moral philosophy (concerned with injustice) and political philosophy (concerned with illegitimacy). Although this picture is convenient for arguing why social philosophy is important and needs to be rehabilitated (i.e. because it can identify suffering that falls outside the scope of the other disciplines in practical philosophy) it also results in a somewhat

simplistic and artificial separation of ‘the moral’, ‘the political’ and ‘the social’, whereby it remains largely unclear how these domains relate to each other.

That this is problematic can be illustrated by looking at those critical philosophers, such as Claude Lefort, who study ‘the political’ but who are not so much concerned with the issue of political legitimacy, but rather – similar to Särkelä – with understanding the process of the *institution of the social*. Furthermore, these philosophers also reject the construction of normative models and focus instead on the *experience* of social and political life. However, their analyses start from different assumptions – such as permanent social division, the incommensurability of ideals, the symbolic dimension of power, the importance of representation, the unintended consequences of political action, etc. – that lead arguably to a more complex picture of the relation between ‘the political’ and ‘the social’ than the one that can be found in Hegel and Dewey. At the same time, these studies of ‘the political’ rarely address the issues of social reproduction and meaningful cooperation, which leads me to believe that a critical dialogue between the naturalistic social philosophy of Hegel and Dewey and studies of ‘the political’ could be beneficial for both sides, leading perhaps to a more nuanced understanding of the complex relation between ‘the political’ and ‘the social’ and to a more nuanced account of how to realize emancipation understood as a permanent process of critique and self-transformation.

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