Power and critique

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If the task of social philosophy is understood in terms of a critique of power, the question of a proper understanding of power becomes particularly pressing. This article recalls two well-known, different ways of conceptualising power from the philosophical tradition, roughly domination and constitution. It is argued that the very definition of what contemporary social philosophy or a critical social theory can, and should, do is dependent on the very notion of power employed. Social critique can accordingly be conceived of as either the detection of impediments to individual agency or a more general assessment of power relations. Though the former remains more prominent in social theory today, the latter is broader in scope and remains useful for the project of a critical analysis of the social.

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1.   Power and social philosophy

The term 'social philosophy' belongs to the less self-evident terms for a sub-class of philosophical questions and answers. Historically, this category emerged less as a separate category for a domain of practical philosophy than as a collective term for diverse attempts to confront a broad range of problems arising from the collision of social or political order and individual subjects. According to its subject matter, the theoretical domain of social philosophy is thus located in an intermediate space, or a space of interference, namely the space between, or at the intersection of, society and subjectivity. For this reason, however, as a discipline, it is located between more clearly defined positions that resolve the relationship between society and subjectivity in terms of the formation of political order, in the case of political philosophy, or in terms of the social conditions of individual life, in the case of sociology or social psychology. So understood, as Axel Honneth has forcefully argued in his reconstruction of the tradition of social philosophy, the commitment to an interdisciplinary perspective is thus not an ancillary or superfluous demand but an essential part of the approach to the question; a social-philosophical problem will only become apparent if the interaction of the social and the subjective levels has been comprehended (see Honneth 1996, 2008).

Against the background of this stipulation, it is clear that though the roots of social-philosophical problems are indeed as old as Western philosophy itself, this perspective only came into focus in the context of the self-reflection of modern societies. Plato's famous analogising of the constitution of the *polis* and the souls of its citizens, Aristotle's doctrine of the progressive structure of interlocking social units

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or the Augustinian doctrine of the relationship of divine and human order already represent investigations of the relationship between society and self; however, in each case, they remain tied to principles of order that are still located beyond the social itself. In this sense, it is only in the course of the early modern view of the fundamental self-createdness or fundamental constructivity of human society that the independent character of social-philosophical questions arises: because sociality has no basis outside itself, society itself becomes a project and a problem. The history of the philosophical *topos* of the 'social contract' and the hypothetical transition from 'nature' to the 'civil condition' from Hobbes to Rousseau is emblematic of this question concerning the reasons, motives and forces that lead the individuals to a collective form of life.

What is decisive, however, is the fact that the relationship between societal or political order and the individual is not modelled as a harmonic or organic transition but as a break and decision, as a process with costs for the individual. It is only in the context of modern individualism, that is, of the historically prevailing conviction that the right – and the freedom – to determine one's own life accrues to the individual that the question of the forms and consequences of socialisation acquires that explosive force to which the emergence of the new social-philosophical forms of reflection testifies.[1]

According to this account of the tradition, Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality* (1754) is a decisive primal scene of modern social philosophy, for it is here that the question of the price of the formation of society is posed for the first time (Honneth 1996, 2008, p. 1234 fn.). Kant in his lesser writings, the early Romantics with their critique of their age, but most clearly Hegel and Marx can then be regarded as the key figures in a theoretical process in which in the nineteenth century the problems of social philosophy moved from the periphery of philosophy to its centre. It can be said with only slight exaggeration that the central figures of the philosophy of the nineteenth century after Hegel deal in different ways with the single question of the cost of modern socialisation, which they either attempt to solve with ambitious projects of rational 'reconciliation' or merely diagnose as a tragic and irreconcilable tension: Tocqueville, Kierkegaard, Marx and Nietzsche, each in his own individual way, pose the question of the price of (modern) equality, of (modern) freedom and of (modern) sociality as such.

The fact that its basic mode is a form of cost accounting gives social philosophy a dimension of negativity that, since its beginning (between Hobbes and Rousseau), it has never lost. From the very start, its position has been one of the balancing of losses and costs that arise from the non-convergence of sociality and individuality – something only articulable on the basis of the modern self-conception. The social-philosophical form of reflection is dedicated precisely to this negativity or difference; it is, above all, here that it has a constitutive 'critical intention' (Honneth 2008, p. 1238), for it investigates existing social or political orders in terms of this incongruity, but in doing so, it problematises them as such. In this formal sense, which arises from the form of its question, social philosophy is indeed a critical mode of philosophical inquiry. And it is thus no accident that the formulation of a critical theory of society, as undertaken by the members of the early Frankfurt School, can be understood as the realisation and radicalisation of the programme of social philosophy (see Honneth 1993, 1994, Renault 2008).

These historical remarks are intended merely to draw attention to a context in which numerous contemporary theoretical projects (and not least Honneth's own theory of

recognition) can be situated in systematic terms. In the following discussion, I would like, for the purposes of supporting an understanding of social philosophy of this kind, to point to one essential conceptual component, the implications of which are also rich in consequences for the theoretical self-image of its advocates, for, since the beginning of social-philosophical inquiry, and a fortiori since its radicalisation in the philosophies of the nineteenth century, the moment of negativity or the incongruity of the individual and the social order has had an explicit name: 'power'. From the very beginning, the relationship between the social or the political order and the individual has been understood in various ways but always as a relationship of power. For this reason, the critical intention of social philosophy can be very simply reformulated: it is a critique of power. From the perspective of social philosophy, sociality is in itself a question of power and social philosophy is the form of reflection that poses this question.

I would like to discuss the conceptual, as well as a number of systematic, consequences of this understanding in three steps.

(1) To begin with, I will attempt to show that the question of what power is in general is not self-evident and that the tradition of social philosophy is confronted with a fundamental plurality of concepts of power.
(2) Following this, two fundamentally different understandings of the project of a social-philosophical critique of power will be outlined and illustrated by means of some reflections on the relationship of power and critique.
(3) Finally, a short plea for a renewal of the intrinsic critical intention of social philosophy will offer a reminder of the various forms that this project could assume today.

2. The double face of power

The theoretical prehistory of the modern concept of power can be found in the basic conceptual distinctions of the philosophical tradition. The Aristotelian concept of *dynamis* denotes the ability of an existing thing to 'change' another existing thing and remains decisive for a whole line of tradition that inquires into those forces or powers that are intrinsic to a person, a thing or even a divine being (Aristotle 1984, l.1019a12, Röttgers 1990, pp. 61–70). This ontological question is already given an action-related application by Aristotle in his practical philosophy: for the ethical judgement of actions, it is of decisive importance to be able to determine who was independently capable of what actions and who was subject to external influences. The later terminological differentiation of power (as a general capability) into concepts that also have clear political connotations, primarily in the opposition of *potentia* and *potestas*, supplemented by *auctoritas* and *violentia*, strengthens this connection between generally ontological and action-related questions of power: what needs to be explained philosophically is what authority, with what right, and with what means, can trigger actions or very general changes by exerting a cause or by determining, compelling or seducing the will or the mind. The philosophical question concerning power is in the first instance a question concerning the efficacy and in the second instance a question concerning the legitimacy of effective forces.

In the philosophy of early modernity, it is Hobbes who, in the context of his philosophy of the state, specifies and thus, at the same time, reduces the concept of power in relation to the previously broad uses of the term: the 'power of a man' consists for him solely in a purposeful employment of means 'to obtain some future

apparent Good' (Hobbes 1991, p. 62). The striving of men for that which they deem to be good also leads them to pursue 'a perpetual and restless desire of Power after power' (p. 70). His solution to the problem that arises for the individual from the practical insecurity in relation to the potentially dangerous power of other subjects consists in an institutionally anchored accumulation of power in the hands of a state authority and thus in a neutralising of the power of the individual. This creates a new power, namely the 'Greatest of humane Powers', which 'is compounded of the Powers of most men, united by consent, in one person, Naturall or Civil' (Hobbes 1991, p. 62). Because the power of individuals is threatened by the power of their fellow human beings, only a centralising of the power in the form of a legally supported monopoly of violence can guarantee the flourishing of individuals. However, because the power, when it is withdrawn from individuals, cannot be nowhere, it must be united and embodied in the person of the sovereign. The power of the sovereign is thus essentially a power of subjugation under a sovereign order, which in Hobbes is also already understood as a legal order. To be subject to power means to encounter limitations to one's own capacities and actions that have been deliberately set by another human being (or by an institutional authority).

This instrumentalist, individualist and action-theoretical discourse of power has – enriched or reformulated in one way or another – extensively determined the matrix of modern thinking on power. This is pinpointed in Max Weber's classic definition at the beginning of *Economy and Society*, in which power is understood as 'the probability that one actor in a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests' (Weber 1978, p. 53). This action-theoretical definition is self-consciously narrowly conceived and is meant only to relate to purposeful individual action. Even if, in the context of the epistemic interests of his founding of an 'interpretive sociology', Weber furthered the limitation of the phenomenon and subsequently preferred to speak of 'domination' as the more tangible object, the core of the modern idea of power as the realisation of the will remains clear: domination as 'the probability that a command with a given specific content will be obeyed by a given group of persons' (p. 53) is nothing other than power in a situation of extensive institutionalisation. Domination is a robust or consolidated form of power that manifests itself precisely in the fact that the repeated renegotiation of 'wanting to act' and 'being able to act' is no longer necessary: the superior (or the authority) in a hierarchy stands in precisely the sort of relationship to his subordinate in which this issue has already been decided. Here too, someone 'has' power to the extent to which the other does not have, and 'having power' thus means being able to determine actions and to determine others to act. As with Hobbes, there also emerges from the investigation of power in Weber a tendency to transform questions of power into questions of legitimation. Because power itself is paradigmatically understood as subjugation (under the will of another individual or under a political order) or domination, it has to be justified in terms of legitimacy.

This use of the concept of power has never been without alternatives, however. The ontological dimension of *dynamis* and *potentia* mentioned previously was to survive in the early modern period in the form of Spinoza's theory of power, which appeared only shortly after, and contained specific references to, Hobbes. In Spinoza's *Political Treatise* of 1677, the power of the individual is related as if self-evidently to the inherent 'power of natural things by means by which they exist and act' (Spinoza 2002b, p. 683). For Spinoza, the individual striving to persist in one's being is an onto-

logical principle. Preserving themselves is something that each person and each thing does by nature and the ability, the power, to do so corresponds, as Spinoza formulates it, in a peculiar appropriation of the early modern doctrines of natural law, to the right to do so: the 'right of nature' corresponds to the 'very power of Nature' (p. 683).[2]

This change comes, however, in the context of the use of the concept of power that, in contrast to the Hobbesean reduction, does not shun the older, metaphysical connotations. For Spinoza, *potentia* represents the ontological constitutive force from which all the specific capacities and capabilities of a person or a thing arise. For *potentia* 'is' in a certain sense that which makes a person or a thing what they are, namely their radius of possible effects and actions in relation to other persons and things. What a person or a thing is, arises from their 'powerfulness'; this makes them what they are, that is to say, constitutes them. Understood in this way, power is not an additional characteristic of persons that they have to the extent to which they have instruments of power at their disposal; it is part of their constitution. Not least for these reasons, Spinoza's theory of the state deviates from the Hobbesian construction in relation to power in one decisive respect: instead of irresolvable competition leading to the individual's necessary forgoing of power, Spinoza sees the possibility of a collective accumulation of the power and rights of individuals who experience a transformation and acquire a new, collective quality. The power of the state in Spinoza, which at first glance seems to resemble the power of the Hobbesean Sovereign, is precisely not a possession isolated at the summit of the political hierarchy. The power of the state remains the 'power of the multitude', the *multitudinis potentia*. The 'power of a people' thus always remains – in the final analysis – the basis of the political structure (Spinoza 2002b, p. 687).[3]

Understood in this way, power is not a characteristic or ability to act of individuals alone, it is rather a 'transindividual', relational entity (Balibar 2001, p. 132). The given power of a political order is subject to a dynamic of escalation and attenuation that arises in the confrontation and in the interaction of individual forces and powers. In this framework, power is not a scarce resource that must be shared out, but rather the flexible basis of all possible actions and interactions. Because of this, however – unlike in the action-theoretical framework – the constitutive role, the enabling function of power, is to the fore here. The political consequence of Spinoza's conceptual construction – particularly in contrast to Hobbes – is clear: because it belongs to the essence of political power to be unable to completely remove itself from its power basis in the citizens of the state (or in 'the multitude'), democracy is the 'most natural' form of the state, that is to say, it is the only form of the organisation of government that grants the possibility of participation to all of the people and is 'completely absolute' (Spinoza 2002a, p. 752). Rendered more emphatically, the alternatives between Spinoza's and Hobbes' theories of the state and power can be reduced to a simple opposition: on the one hand, there is an understanding of power as domination, whereas, on the other hand, there is a concept of power as constitution. The former is concerned with the realisation and subjugation of wills, whereas the latter with the unleashing and channelling of multifarious forces.[4]

These two logics of the discourse of power stand opposed to one another. The fact that, as claimed previously, the more individualistic action-theoretical concept of power has become the dominant one in modern social theory does not mean that it has gone unquestioned. Weber's canonical understanding of power and Hannah Arendt's heretical theory of power can be juxtaposed in an almost direct mirroring of the theoretical relationship between Hobbes and Spinoza. For, with her fundamental decision

to strictly isolate power and violence from each other terminologically, Arendt already opposes the premises of that tradition of thought which has to count the cost of a fateful tendency to 'reduce public affairs to the business of domination' (Arendt 1969, p. 44). Against this, Arendt counterposes another tradition and another vocabulary and, above all, a non-instrumental and non-individualist understanding of power that relates to the ability 'to act in concert' (p. 44).

Placing the capability to act collectively, of *acting in concert*, at the centre of the phenomenon of power is, however, only possible at the cost of redesignating all other phenomena of powerful instrumental action. In diametrical opposition to Weber, Arendt refers to these instrumental and agonistic forms of action as 'violence', which is thus not, as in Weber, domination – a sub-set and specification of 'power' – but its opposite. Like Spinoza against Hobbes, Arendt, against the tradition that follows Weber, raises the objection that a stable political order cannot last without a basis in an interactive consensus or intersubjective framework, and that the collective basis of the power of political representation is irreducible.

Also similar to the case of Spinoza, these reflections on the connection between political order and its social conditions are accompanied by fundamental anthropological assumptions on the relation between power and human nature that are formulated in explicitly ontological language. Without interaction and cooperation, there is no power, and without power, there is no common space of action: 'Power is what keeps the public realm, the potential space of appearance between acting and speaking men in existence. [...] power springs up between men when they act together and vanishes the moment they disperse' (Arendt 1958, p. 200). The precondition of power is thus human 'being together' (p. 201), although the power that then arises (or is realised) in turn affects the way in which action can take place.[5] These formulations clearly reveal the fundamental and constitution-theoretical trait that distinguishes Arendt's conception of power. From this perspective, power is not a feature of persons but of the constitutive space of interpersonal relations; power is the medium of the social.

This juxtaposition, exemplified in two pairs of authors, is intentionally schematic. But it can demonstrate a basic categorical difference. In the tradition of Western political thought, the concept of power has been handed down along two paths, having developed and differentiated itself in the conceptual history of *dynamis* and *potentia/potestas*. If in the – in many ways – dominant tendency, power as the actual realisation of the will (and thus implicitly as a relation of domination and subjugation) is to the fore, then the other tendency is concerned with power as capability and enabling and thus with a social-ontological argument in relation to the emergence of the elements and forms of the social. The fact that both logics of the discourse of power differ from each other does not mean that all phenomena of power are only describable in either one way or the other. Many modern social philosophers (from Marx and Nietzsche via Gramsci and Plessner to Althusser and Deleuze) have experimented with different models of power and have, in this way, repeatedly associated domination and subjugation with constitution and consensus. This initially only means that the various conceptualisations of power differ from each other. But what does this mean for the determination of the task of social philosophy as a critique of power?

3.   Two forms of the critique of power

The two diverging lines of the history of the concept of power present a considerable problem for further definition of the task of social philosophy, for, as has been

suggested here, if this is to be understood as the critique of power, the object of this critique must be tangible. Even if the concept of critique is marked by imprecision and ambiguity, a minimal basic use remains uncontroversial: in the act of critique, an existing order or practice is questioned and problematised (Honneth 2001).[6] If it is right, as has been suggested here, to tie the critical intention of modern social philosophy to the analysis of power, the specification of what constitutes power will have consequences for the way in which social philosophy fulfills its role. Thus, two theoretical options open up, which follow the trajectory of the two conceptions of power.

In the context of the more action-theoretical tradition, the critique of power will always ultimately constitute a critique of domination, albeit in a broad sense of this term, for if the understanding of power is focused paradigmatically on the case of the subdued will or the external determination of the performance of an action, then the problem with power necessarily leads back to precisely this moment of heteronomy or external influence. In this view, in which power is related to the 'control of behaviour' (Dahl 1968), the fact that the will does not determine itself in the performance of an action is already the first step towards critique. Within this framework of power, the space of possible social action is fundamentally divided between those acts that are subject to power and those that are not. One can speak here of a dualistically understood space of social interactions that is divided into free and unfree actions; the concept of power supplies the criterion for the separation of these spaces, if not yet for the critique in the narrower sense. The critique entails determining which forms of the guiding of actions, that is, of the operation of power, are legitimate and which are illegitimate. This, in turn, entails specifying what degrees, or which forms, of external influence – and in what respect – are considered to be acceptable or justified and what are not. However, the concept of power prefigures the specification of the latter criteria because only those actions that qualify as power (defined as direct external influence upon action) form the focus of examination. Within the grammar of this action-oriented theory, power will always ultimately be opposed to freedom and critique will always be carried out in the name of freedom. Thus, power will always have a normative counterpart.

This feature, which follows from the internal logic of a critical use of a specifically understood concept of power, is preserved even when the 'actions' on which and in which power operates are understood in an extremely complex way. One of the decisive achievements of the early social philosophy of the nineteenth century was the discovery of the systematic character of power. In the history of the theory of power, the writings of Tocqueville, Marx and Nietzsche are arguably the first attempts to comprehend how modern social power was perceived to be becoming more systemic as a social phenomenon in terms of the diagnosis of an age. For all their internal differences, Tocqueville's diagnosis of the power of 'public opinion'; Marx's critique of the coercive nexus of economic, political and social institutions and Nietzsche's denunciation of cultural and moral values are all analyses and critiques of social totalities, that is, of contexts of power that have assumed a life of their own. For all three thinkers – who, incidentally, drew completely different conclusions from their critiques – the systemic character is the real signature of modern power. It functions and operates largely independently of the specific actors in whose hands the means of power are gathered and becomes impersonal and less and less comprehensible. Despite this complication and depersonalisation of the notion of power, the basic premises of the tradition of the theory of domination

remain in place: power operates where action is determined externally; the only difference is that the subject of the external influence is now defined in a more complex way. Here too, the basic scenario remains individualistic at the methodological level: power operates on individuals as individuals, in the form of a 'bringing to action' or external determination.

This characteristic of even more complex theories of power within the paradigm of domination is also preserved in those cases in which attempts are made to mediate the action-theoretical level through a general sociological perspective on societal processes. Thus, to cite a prominent example of a contemporary theory of society, the highly complex theory of power of Jürgen Habermas, which attempted to accommodate the diagnostic insights of Luhmann's systems theory without losing the critical impetus, remains classically critical of domination in this sense. In the course of his methodological engagements with psychoanalysis and hermeneutics, Habermas was able to reformulate the classical critique of ideology inherited by the Frankfurt School from the Marxist tradition as an investigation into the 'conditions of systematically distorted communication' (Habermas 1984, 1990). This project was carried out in the form of a comprehensive theory of communicative action, formulated in terms of both the philosophy of language and the philosophy of social theory, in which the concept of ideology (and the Marxist concept of class domination) no longer plays any explanatory role. His intention to overcome the methodological difficulties of the critique of ideology faced by the older critical theory motivated him to replace them with a theory of the crises and pathologies of the 'life-word'. 'Pathological' in this sense refers to those initially understanding-oriented forms of communication that are reshaped by strategic interactions (and relations to self). Power then clearly belongs to the second sphere of the 'system' or emerges in the space of the 'life-world' only as an effect of this.

The criticism that this notion is dualistic in numerous respects (and, above all, suppresses the underlying economic characteristics of the 'life-world') is apt.[7] More decisive, however, is the fact that, despite the shifting of the overall framework (and despite certain concessions to the systems theory), the picture of the social process did not change substantially; this is because the classical schema of the critique of domination, and thus implicitly also the concept of power in which power is thought of as the absence of freedom, were retained. The critique of power in this model remains conceptualised in terms of a defence against incursion, repression and subjugation, and its general principle remains coercion.

The alternatives to this understanding of power and critique, which is compatible with theories of domination that form the main stream of social theory, can also be historically dated back to the nineteenth century. In the work of Nietzsche, that is, alongside the features of a modified critique of culture mentioned previously, there can also be found traces of an ontological understanding of power of the kind that was a matter of course in the philosophical tradition from Aristotle to Spinoza. In the hyperbolic fashion peculiar to him, Nietzsche appropriates and simultaneously radicalises this point of view. His project of a theory of the 'will(s) to power', which he pursued with rigour and passion, updates the idea that power is an ontological principle that may be suitable for the description not only of a specific type of inter-subjective process but also of all expressions of life as such and – Nietzsche at least plays with this idea – of all processes in general.

The notion that a dynamic of the 'will to power' could be the principle of every social and even biological process is, in its very generality, a barely serviceable social-

philosophical abstraction (Nietzsche 1998, p. 51).[8] It was left to the post-war interpretation of Nietzsche to systematically reformulate a number of elements of this project and to fit them into new theoretical frameworks. It was, in particular, Gilles Deleuze, in his commentaries on Nietzsche, who laid the foundations for an anti-metaphysical reading, with the aid of which social and political phenomena could be analysed through concepts of forces and becoming (Deleuze 1983, Deleuze and Guattari 1987, Patton 2000). The systematic relevance of a contemporary Nietzscheanism to the basic questions of social philosophy was demonstrated by Michel Foucault, who, in his writings from the early 1970s onwards – less as a direct programme than as a byproduct of his investigations into the history of Western knowledge and society – traced the general outlines of an alternative theory of modernity. For these reasons, it is also possible to read his writings as fundamental contributions to a critical social philosophy that represents an alternative to the traditional positions (Honneth and Saar 2008).

The fundamental conceptual innovation consists in the updating of a 'productive' constitutive understanding of power, for the articulation of which Foucault depends heavily on Nietzsche. Like Deleuze, he takes note of the promising suggestion here that power be understood as a general constitutive principle. The political-diagnostic narrowing of the focus to repression and domination blurs the fact that the operation of power takes place in many different ways and that the direct prohibition or prevention of actions constitutes only one of its states. Foucault's famous definition of a quasi-generalised concept of power is not intended as a direct resolution of previous conceptual problems; rather, it constitutes a new positioning of the concept: 'power must be understood … as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organisation; as the processes which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them; … thus forming a chain or system' (Foucault 1978, p. 92). Understood in this way, 'power', as the structural and dynamic elements of every social relationship, is not, in fact, a term for the strength of a powerful individual but rather 'the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society' (p. 93).

This sociological generality of the concept of power has its price: we can no longer describe any 'situation' as being completely free of power, and no social interaction can be understood as fundamentally lying outside the concept of power. This flattening of the concept of power, however, changes the conceptual criteria available to us for the purposes of social critique. For now, the question of whether or not individual actions, individual structures and individual forms of socialisation involve a case of power does not fully determine whether or not they should become an object of critique. The 'normative confusion' (Fraser 1989), which one might impute to Foucault's theory of power, affects (only) precisely this point: that, for Foucault, power as such does not automatically represent actual or potential domination.[9]

But what does a critique of power look like in this framework? Foucault's historical writings provide us with a small number of clues for this, albeit in performative rather than argumentative terms. The critique of power must trace the concrete, exact and lengthy history of specific relations of power, of their emergence and of their transformation, for it is only an analysis of this kind that can reveal the establishment and maintenance of social institutions and norms that, now furnished with an appearance of naturalness, confront the individual as posited and valid. The (theoretical) critique of power is at first nothing other than the liquification and subversion of struc-

tures and relations of power by means of analysis. Under the concept of power there then fall the countless relations of force, effective forces and dynamics that have contributed to the emergence and realisation of identities, orders and norms. The diagnostic value of this position, which knows no 'absolute outside' of power (Foucault 1978, p. 95), is clear precisely in relation to its counter-concept, freedom. It is only with the help of an understanding of power that does not understand this relation as dichotomous that the question concerning the power of freedom, or of government through freedom, can be meaningfully posed. This is because freedom is not absolutely opposed to power. And it is only in this way that it becomes conceivable that it is precisely since the emergence of political modernity that there have been forms of the exercise of power for which the granting of (a certain) freedom to individuals is indeed constitutive and that freedom itself is thus located 'within the mutations and transformations of technologies of power' and 'within the field of governmental practice' (Foucault 2007, pp. 48, 353).[10] It is not only in Foucault's ambitious 'history of governmentality', which comprehends liberalism as a historical-political matrix of modernity, that this political employment of freedom has been recognised and analysed. It has long become generally accepted in social theory that the process of 'making free', the process of 'making autonomous' and the multiple forms of the individual attribution of responsibility can, according to a 'dialectic of freedom', themselves turn into domination, even, indeed, into a form of social domination, and the value of a position that attempts to provide an acute diagnosis of the present can be calculated not least according to whether it has the conceptual means to describe processes of this kind in a manner that is at once sober and trenchant (Honneth and Hartmann 2006, Meyer 2008).

The function (or realisation) of power in this model is thus constitution, and the social itself appears as a space of emergence, or in Foucault's slightly more technical turn of phrase, as a space for the 'production' of bodies, entities, subjectivities and all other elements of social ontology. In this model, the critique of power can be nothing other than the tracing and documentation of processes of constitution of social ontology, which, once made known, extends our understanding of the existing spaces of possible action and the constitution of social life, thus creating the conditions of possibility for new ways of acting and 'being in the world'.

4. The practice of critique

But how does social philosophy, in the two forms proposed here, exercise the critique of power that has become its central task? The critical dimension of the first version, based on the theory of domination, can be easily understood. A philosophy of the social of this kind explains and assesses the blockades and obstacles that stand in the way of the development of personal freedom and investigates the diverse, often subterranean, forms of the employment of power, subjugation and manipulation with which modern socialised individuals find themselves confronted – if they have not already been prevented by power itself from recognising these conditions. In the second position, based on the constitutive theory of power, the critical effects are initially less evident, for 'power' here is no longer merely the name given to the conditions for the prevention of individual freedom but also to the conditions of possibility for individuality. This does not, however, determine anything in respect of the relationship between prevention and enablement. Indeed, the rejection of a particular social order could ultimately turn out to be even more decisive if what we assess is

not only what it has prevented but also what it has enabled and brought to life. With this, however, the practice of this critique becomes more complex than it might seem, for it can no longer be guaranteed that the reason that forms the basis on which the practitioner of critique acts, with her own free judgement, does not itself equally fall under the scope of critique. Worse still, the very thing she criticises is that order to which she owes her life and her own critical power. This form of critique is thus also directed against the practitioner's own ontological basis (Butler 2002, p. 219).

This complexity or complicity of power and critique is also only apparently eliminated in the first model, for in the critique of domination too, the freedom and capability of action of the free or resisting subject must be understood as power, precisely in the second sense of enabling, if it is to become intelligible how the resisting subject has the *capacity*, or the power, to oppose power as domination. Thus, for both forms of power-critical social philosophy (just as for normative political philosophy), the question of power is its 'first question' (Forst, forthcoming) – in both descriptive and normative terms, for it is only through a complex series of empirical analyses of relations of power that power-critical social philosophy can achieve philosophical reflection on the multiple forms of power and political critique of the specific effects of power. Maybe too often, it has been assumed that in the critique of domination, the theorisation of power could be skipped over, as power seems an easily comprehensible, obvious phenomenon, which, clearly contrasts with its alleged opposite, the freedom and the ability to act. However, the subtleties of the Foucauldian accounts of the construction of the social subject through power render such assumptions facile.

In the second model, in a certain sense a 'monistic' model (Honneth 1993, ch. 5), the decision as to whether a particular case of social order subjugates or empowers is shifted to the empirical or diagnostic level. This point of view appears all the more appropriate the more that social reality is populated by neither fully autonomous nor fully heteronomous social forms and identities. Today, freedom and power coexist and coincide in the very mentalities brought about by social relations and it is for this reason that an easy answer has to be rejected. Rethinking power as domination and constitution at the same time requires complex and non-reductive models of social analysis. It is only in a description along these lines that it is possible to problematise phenomena such as the coexistence of formal freedom and new deprivations of rights, the almost imperceptible complicity of subjects with evaluative and pejorative identification and the self-stabilising character of the processes of normalisation.[11] From this second form of the critique of power, there arises an understanding of social philosophy that cannot forego contact with the real conflicts and desires of an age. This critique will always remain a diagnosis of its time. In the midst of the fragmented world of the social, it constitutes a mode of thinking about its own temporal sociality.

Notes

1. This specifically modern self-understanding is captured in Hegel's notion of the 'right of subjectivity' in his *Philosophy of Right*. See Hegel (1991, p. 125) and Menke (2008).
2. For more on Spinoza on power, see Saar (forthcoming).
3. The recent discussion of this *topos* is documented in Hindrichs (2007).
4. This now commonplace differentiation between the two lines of tradition can, for instance, be found in Wartenberg (1990). On the social-philosophical implications of these two usages of the term, see Fink-Eitel (1992), Saar (2007, pp. 234–246) and, most comprehensively, Strecker (forthcoming, ch. 1).

5. For alternative interpretations, which tend more in the direction of action theory or in the direction of social ontology, see the classic article of Habermas (1986) and Marchart (2005, pp. 127–164), respectively.
6. For the current state of the debate on the concept of critique in German philosophy and social theory, see Demirović (2008) and Jaeggi and Wesche (2009).
7. See Allen (2008, pp. 96–122, esp. p. 112) and, similarly, Honneth (1993, ch. 8). For recent discussions of Habermas's theory of power, see Iser (2008) and Strecker (forthcoming, ch. 5).
8. For a systematic discussion of the 'will to power' doctrine in Nietzsche, see Owen (1995, pp. 41–47, 2007) and Saar (2007, pp. 107–130).
9. For a systematic response to this critique, see Lemke (2003).
10. For more on this type of analysis, see Rose (1999).
11. For examples of such analyses, see Lorey (2008), Saar (2008), Kerner (2009) and Hark (2009).

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