

# The Miserable is Political

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## *A Critical Theory of Anger and Depression*

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### **Abstract**

This thesis explores the role played by negative emotions—specifically, anger and depression—in motivating social critique and political resistance. Critical theorists, especially in the Frankfurt School tradition, have had wide-ranging debates about the nature and grounds of critique, and how it arises from experiences of alienation or misrecognition. However, these debates have so far largely ignored the epistemological and motivational role of emotions. On the other hand, feminist and anti-racist philosophers have written much about the role of feelings in emancipatory political movements. This thesis therefore brings together debates in Critical Theory with this work to develop a systematic account of how anger and depression lead to emancipatory knowledge and action.

The result of my engagement with these different literatures is a materialist understanding of critique as rooted in subjects' embodied emotional experiences of the world. I will argue that we should conceptualize anger, depression, and other negative emotions, as subjective experiences of social contradictions. On a subjective level, these contradictions are concretely experienced as various forms of frustrated agency which interrupt our seamless engagement with the world and force us to reflect on our relationship to it. While these experiences, by revealing fissures in the reproduction of the social order, always harbour the possibility for progressive social change, they do not automatically lead to emancipatory consciousness. The resulting negative feelings can be turned inward in self-blame, as in depression, or misdirected towards innocent scapegoats. But in the best case, when similar frustrations are shared among groups of people, these emotional experiences can be collectivized, analysed, and provide the basis for political consciousness and emancipatory struggles. Critique should be thought of as the cognitive moment in these practical struggles to transform the world, and its normativity ultimately derives from negative emotions as the lived experiences of social contradiction.

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## Introduction

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# Why a Critical Theory of Anger and Depression?

*Woe speaks: 'Go'.*

—Theodor Adorno / Friedrich Nietzsche<sup>1</sup>

The idea for writing this thesis crystallized in the Summer of 2020. It was the first year of the coronavirus pandemic and the political climate was characterized by a peculiar mixture of exhaustion and explosiveness. People were tired, isolated, anxious, depressed. But people were also fed up, mad, and indignant. Under conditions that were obviously less than ideal for political organizing, huge swathes of people nevertheless took to the streets that summer to express their rage about the murder of George Floyd and other Black people shot or killed by police officers that year.<sup>2</sup>

For a while, I had been thinking, separately, about the politics of mental health and about the political role of anger. Suddenly, in this moment where levels of both depression and rage seemed to reach new heights, these questions no longer looked so separate. As many pointed out, the overt violence against Black and other people of colour was not separate from the slower forms of violence perpetuated through the medical neglect of

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<sup>1</sup> Adorno quotes this line, without attribution, from a poem by Nietzsche. Here, I deliberately quote from E. B. Ashton's English translation of *Negative Dialectics*, rather than from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*—see the final paragraph of this introduction for a brief discussion. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 203. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 184.

<sup>2</sup> Including, also, the murders of Breonna Taylor in March 2020 and Dolal Idd in December 2020 as well as the non-fatal shooting of Jacob Blake in August of that year. For discussions of the anger expressed in these protests, see Whitney, 'Anger and Uptake'; Cherry, 'Anger Can Build a Better World'.

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Black, Indigenous and poor communities during the pandemic.<sup>3</sup> But while some were enraged and took to the streets, others were left ill, isolated, depressed, and hopeless making collective political action seem unachievable. As writer Johanna Hedva once asked: ‘How do you throw a brick through the window of a bank if you can’t get out of bed?’<sup>4</sup> What is more, anger itself, in this context, sometimes came to be seen as a question of mental wellbeing with British universities, for example, offering mental health support to students involved in protests.<sup>5</sup> In this context, a number of questions formed which it is the task of this thesis to answer. What is the role of negative emotions, like anger and depression, in motivating critique and resistance? How do people come to conceive of their emotional reactions to everyday problems as ‘political’? How do they become channelled into emancipatory action rather than self-blame or reactionary politics? And what role should these feelings<sup>6</sup> play in academic critique and political theory?

The relevance of these feelings to our times—dubbed both an ‘age of anger’ and an ‘age of depression’<sup>7</sup>—is hard to deny, and the mood of frustration and dejection has hardly abated since I first began this project. Yet, not all consider these questions to be the proper subject matter of political theory. Our discipline, for some, is about identifying the correct principles of justice or the best institutional designs, not about people’s feelings. Sure, it makes sense to be angry about injustice, but what should concern the political theorist is whether society really *is* unjust, not how people happen to *feel* about that.<sup>8</sup>

There are two (overlapping) philosophical traditions, however, which have long challenged such a strict division between normative judgments and lived experience, and which therefore seem particularly well-suited to help me answer the questions raised

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<sup>3</sup> Geronimus, ‘Weathering the Pandemic’; Wong-Padoongpatt and Barrita, ‘The Fast and Slow Violence of the COVID-19 Pandemic’.

<sup>4</sup> Hedva, ‘Sick Woman Theory’.

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, an online ‘teaching toolkit’ by UCL from July 2020 on ‘Supporting BAME students in challenging times’ which includes information on wellbeing resources for those affected by COVID and Black Lives Matter protests: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/teaching-learning/publications/2020/jul/supporting-bame-students-challenging-times>.

<sup>6</sup> I use ‘feelings’ and ‘emotions’ interchangeably here. I will explain the relations between the terms ‘emotion’, ‘feeling’, ‘mood’, and ‘affect’ in section 4.

<sup>7</sup> Mishra, *Age of Anger*; Horwitz, ‘How an Age of Anxiety Became an Age of Depression’.

<sup>8</sup> Cohen, ‘How to Do Political Philosophy’; Cohen, *Rescuing Justice and Equality*, chap. 6. Note that unlike the popular slogan ‘Facts don’t care about your feelings’, normative political philosophers often dismiss feelings because they consider them *mere* empirical facts, rather than moral knowledge.

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above: Critical Theory and feminist philosophy. Both of these schools of thought share a concern with how lived experiences of oppression can inform critique as well as political resistance—and a key task of this thesis is to combine insights from both in ways that will advance our understanding of how experiences of suffering relate to normative political thought.

While feminists have written much important work explicitly about emotions, critical theorists, despite their interest in experiences of suffering, have so far largely been silent on this topic. Though the questions I am asking in this thesis emerged out of reflection on ongoing political problems, it is also my aim to show that engaging with emotions will advance the theoretical project of Critical Theory. Here, feminist work on ‘political emotions’ has much to offer to how critical theorists think about the relation between critique and negative social experiences. Vice versa, the way critical theorists in the Frankfurt School tradition have thought about social critique also enriches and complicates the way philosophers have so far understood the political role of emotions.

The contribution my thesis aims to make, then, is threefold: First, I want to use the theoretical tools of Critical Theory and philosophy of emotions to shed light on the role anger and depression—and, by extension, negative emotions in general—play in driving social critique and political resistance. Second, through this reflection, my thesis will contribute to debates in Critical Theory about how critique is rooted in social experience. Finally, I also intervene in the existing literature on the philosophy of emotions arguing for a more social-theoretical understanding of feelings.

The result of my engagement with these different literatures will be a materialist understanding of critique as rooted in subjects’ embodied emotional experiences. I will argue that we should conceptualize anger, depression, and other negative emotions, as the subjective experiences of social contradictions. On a subjective level, these contradictions are concretely experienced as various forms of frustrated agency which interrupt our seamless engagement with the world and force us to reflect on our relationship to it. In the best case, when similar frustrations are shared among groups of people, these emotional experiences can be collectivized, analysed, and provide the basis for political consciousness and emancipatory struggles.

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Before getting into this substantive engagement, though, this introductory chapter will explain in more detail the theoretical motivations for the thesis and the approach I am taking. The following section begins by explaining why I think critical theorists need to engage with emotions. I then go on to situate my approach in relation to existing literature on ‘moral feelings’ and ‘political emotions’, explaining why I think a more social-theoretical approach is needed. The third and fourth sections explain some of the more specific theoretical and conceptual choices I have made in the thesis: why, of all the possible emotions, do I focus on anger and depression,<sup>9</sup> and why do I employ the concept of ‘emotion’ rather than ‘affect’, ‘mood’, or ‘feeling’? Finally, I defend my project against one particular objection: that focussing on negative emotions is just a gloomy kind of suffer-mongering. If we care about a world without suffering, we cannot afford to ignore the affective realities of the world we live in. Anger and depression structure so many people’s experience of the world that no theory interested in emancipatory social change can afford to look away.

### 1. Critical Theory and emotions

It is helpful to begin by explaining what I take to be the mission and current state of Critical Theory in order to show why emotions constitute a key problem space that critical theorists ought to engage with. My claim is that thinking about the role of emotions can give us a more concrete handle on some of contemporary Critical Theory’s rather abstract concerns with how to ground critique. In particular, it helps counteract the increasingly depoliticized and idealist nature of recent Critical Theory, I will argue, by connecting those concerns to (1) the everyday epistemic efforts of social actors to make sense of their dissatisfaction with the social world; and (2) a materialist theory of social reproduction.

#### 1.1 *Suffering and the grounds of critique*

Critical theory is sometimes understood in a narrow sense as referring to the tradition of the Frankfurt School, and sometimes in a broader sense that includes the Frankfurt School as well as much other Marxist, feminist, anti-racist, decolonial thought etc. (Whenever

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<sup>9</sup> For those who wonder whether depression should be characterized as an emotion: I will address this question too in section 4 (and in more detail in chapter 4).

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disambiguation is important, I shall capitalize ‘Critical Theory’ when referring to the Frankfurt School tradition specifically.<sup>10</sup> I take critical theory in the broader sense to be characterized by an opposition to the kind of abstract and free-standing normative theorizing that characterizes most mainstream liberal political philosophy. For most contemporary analytic philosophers, political theory proceeds by abstractly identifying the correct normative principles that should guide political action (ideal theory) in order to then, in a second step, apply these principles to solve political problems (non-ideal theory).<sup>11</sup> Critical theorists object to this methodology. The idea that the philosopher can transcend their own involvement in the social world and occupy a ‘view from nowhere’<sup>12</sup> (or from behind a veil of ignorance) from which they identify the correct principles to govern the just society is at best naïve and at worst ideological.<sup>13</sup> Rather than dreaming up abstract theories of justice, critical theorists think about politics in a way that is politically engaged, guided by a practical emancipatory interest, and grounded in concrete analysis of existing relations of power.

The essential elements of this approach can be traced back to Marx. For him, the task of philosophers was not to devise ‘the best possible plan for the best possible state of society’ in order then to convince ‘society at large’ to implement it.<sup>14</sup> Rather, the Marxist approach is to notice, in the concrete conditions of oppression, ‘the revolutionary, subversive side, which will overthrow the old society’.<sup>15</sup> The agency for overturning oppressive structures lies not with the powerful but with those who have an interest in casting off their chains—hence, political philosophy needs to address itself, in a partisan way, to those struggling against oppression. To my mind, Marx’s injunction not to seek answers purely ‘in [our]

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<sup>10</sup> This capitalization is by no means meant to be honorific. It does not imply that the Frankfurt School is the ‘proper’ kind of critical theory but is merely a convenient way of distinguishing between the narrow and the broad conception of critical theory without having to constantly repeat awkwardly long labels like ‘Frankfurt School Critical Theory’.

<sup>11</sup> Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 216; Simmons, ‘Ideal and Nonideal Theory’; Stemplowska and Swift, ‘Ideal and Nonideal Theory’.

<sup>12</sup> Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*.

<sup>13</sup> Mills, “‘Ideal Theory’ as Ideology”; Friedrich, ‘Ideal Theory as Fetishism’; Horkheimer, *Critical Theory*, 188–243.

<sup>14</sup> Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 47–48.

<sup>15</sup> Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, 115.

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minds' but to 'take note of what is happening before [our] eyes and to become its mouthpiece' remains an excellent characterization of the basic mission of critical theory.<sup>16</sup>

For many critical theorists in the narrower Frankfurt School sense, this means specifically that we need to ground critique in concrete negative social experiences and the need to abolish the social conditions of this misery: 'Normative reflection arises from hearing a cry of suffering or distress, or feeling distress oneself.'<sup>17</sup> Adorno famously claimed that 'the need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth'.<sup>18</sup> While the second generation of the Frankfurt School (read: Habermas) turned away from the concern with social suffering towards a discourse-oriented approach, contemporary theorists, like Axel Honneth and Rahel Jaeggi, have returned to those Adornian concerns and tried to ground critique in experiences of misrecognition or alienation, respectively.<sup>19</sup>

However, in the contemporary Frankfurt School this return to a concern with social experience has been filtered through a recognizably Habermasian preoccupation with metanormative theorizing. Habermas, of course, rejected the idea of critical claims as giving voice to particular experience in favour of a Kantian approach that grounds critique in universal validity claims.<sup>21</sup> Honneth's and Jaeggi's work, then, are attempts to show that normative claims based on experiences of suffering are not merely arbitrary and particularistic. To do so, they have developed highly sophisticated theories of recognition and alienation grounding critique in so-called 'formal anthropologies' of the preconditions for human flourishing.<sup>22</sup> From this perspective, experiences of suffering give rise to valid critiques if, and only if, they reveal that society falls short of furnishing the conditions for healthy subjectivity and intersubjectivity.

In chapter 1, I will specifically criticize these approaches for their inability to deal adequately with the contemporary politics of emotion. But, for now, the point is that they seem to have turned away from the kind of politically engaged analysis and critique that characterized the first generation of the Frankfurt School in favour of an approach that

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<sup>16</sup> Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, 114–15.

<sup>17</sup> Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 5.

<sup>18</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 17.

<sup>19</sup> Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*; Jaeggi, *Alienation*.

<sup>21</sup> See Habermas' critique of Adorno and Horkheimer in Habermas, *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, chap. 5.

<sup>22</sup> Honneth, *Disrespect*, chap. 1; Jaeggi, *Alienation*, 33–34; Zurn, 'Anthropology and Normativity'.

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has been criticized for increasingly approximating the idealism and political aloofness for which critical theorists blame analytic philosophy.<sup>23</sup>

For some, the way to avoid this increasing idealist tendency is simply to abandon the metanormative question of what justifies critique and instead to get on with the work of actually critiquing something. Nancy Fraser, for example, argues that rather than grounding critique in ‘prepolitical suffering’, we should simply look to the claims of injustice already articulated publicly by social movements and other actors.<sup>25</sup> If Critical Theory is to be the ‘self-clarification of the struggles and wishes of the age’,<sup>26</sup> then why not start from the claims that arise from the struggle? Instead of the metanormative status of these claims, Critical Theory could then concern itself with theorizing the social-structural conditions for overcoming injustice and the connections between seemingly disparate social movements.

I am largely sympathetic to such claims: Critical Theory would be much more politically relevant if more of its exponents focused on doing critique rather than asking themselves whether and how critique is possible. Yet, we should not throw out the baby with the bathwater. What Fraser’s perspective misses is that the question of how critique arises from pre-political experiences of suffering is not merely an abstract philosophical question.<sup>27</sup> In fact, trying to turn private experiences of discontent into social critique and collective resistance is one of the main tasks of social movements and political organizers. There is a long tradition of especially feminist thought and organizing that deals with how to turn personal experiences of anger and frustration into critiques of patriarchy and other forms of oppression—the practice of feminist consciousness-raising being a key example.<sup>28</sup> This thesis therefore shares with much recent work in Critical Theory the fact that it is not primarily a piece of critique, but a work *about* critique. Unlike most of that work, however, I attempt to directly connect questions about the nature and possibility of critique to the

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<sup>23</sup> Thompson, *The Domestication of Critical Theory*; McNay, *The Gender of Critical Theory*; Marasco, ‘Review of *A Precarious Happiness*’.

<sup>25</sup> Fraser and Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition?*, 218.

<sup>26</sup> Karl Marx, in a letter to Arnold Ruge, cited in Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism*, 25.

<sup>27</sup> By ‘pre-political’ I here mean only ‘not (yet) experienced/interpreted as political’. One of the points I make throughout the thesis is that emotions are always already shaped by political forces, including when they are experienced as merely personal problems.

<sup>28</sup> Sarachild, ‘A Program for Feminist “Consciousness Raising”’; Hanisch, ‘The Personal Is Political’.

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way activists and social movements, in practice, channel negative social experiences into political claims.

It is surprising (or perhaps telling?) that contemporary Frankfurt School theorists have not engaged with this feminist tradition despite obvious similarities in their concerns. Compare, for example, Audre Lorde's claim that women's 'anger is loaded with *information* and *energy*' with Honneth's idea that negative emotions provide 'opportunity for moral insight [...] as their cognitive content' and 'the motivational impetus for social resistance and conflict'.<sup>29</sup> By engaging with this feminist tradition of thought about anger and other emotions, Critical Theory's concern with 'moral experience' can be retained but made more concrete and politically engaged.

Now, it is important to acknowledge that there are certain tensions in the way that I seek to connect the concern with the nature of critique to the thought of feminist and anti-racist activists, like Audre Lorde, Martin Luther King, Jr., or others who will figure in the chapters to come. As mentioned above, this thesis is largely driven by theoretical concerns about critique, and these were not necessarily concerns shared by all of the thinkers I engage with. As activists and organizers, many of them were concerned with questions about what to do here and now, about effective ways of organizing resistance and of caring for each other; questions which are related, but certainly not identical, to the ones I ask in this thesis. Therefore, engaging with those thinkers will sometimes involve taking their profound insights and translating them into a different theoretical vocabulary, which they would not themselves have used. This naturally carries certain risks of misrepresenting or appropriating the work of others, but I hope to have navigated such risks by presenting these thinkers' ideas in their own vocabulary before showing how they bear on my own concerns. To be clear, I do not see this in any way as a way of 'improving' or 'clarifying' their work. I do not think that political activists need a theory of critique in order to do activism; but I *do* think that theorists of critique need to pay attention to how critique happens in practical contexts to develop a plausible theory of critique. In other words, if critical theory is 'nothing but a methodologically disciplined extension of epistemic efforts

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<sup>29</sup> Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 121. Emphasis mine; Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, 132, 138.

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undertaken by oppressed groups in their daily struggles',<sup>31</sup> then critical theorists need to engage with the shape that these epistemic aspects of social struggles take.

My contention is that emotions are a key aspect of how we, in ordinary life, come to the realization that *something is wrong*. The process of making sense of one's own oppression is spurred on by negative emotional experiences and continues as an effort to interpret and articulate one's emotional reactions to unjust circumstances. Honneth, in *The Struggle for Recognition*, recognizes that emotions play this role supplying 'moral insight' and 'motivational impetus'—but he never quite explains why or how. By drawing on a wide range of sources, from feminist social reproduction theory to embodied cognitive science, I will argue that negative emotions are subjective experiences of social contradictions which, through struggle and analysis can lead to emancipatory standpoints.

While I do claim that this engagement with the political potential of emotional experiences concretizes the concerns about the grounds of critique, this does not mean that I shy away from abstraction. Ethnographic or 'grounded' approaches to critical theory can be incredibly fruitful,<sup>32</sup> but that is not what I am doing in this thesis. While I draw on concrete examples and first-personal accounts of emotions throughout, the aim is still a recognizably *philosophical* theory that answers, among other things, some of the abstract questions about critique and normativity that Frankfurt School critical theorists have been concerned with. With Charles Mills, I find it helpful to distinguish between the two forms of idealization that he terms 'ideal-as-idealized-model' and 'ideal-as-descriptive-model'.<sup>33</sup> The former refers to abstract theories of what something would be like in an ideal case (e.g., Rawls' Theory of Justice), whereas the latter refers to abstract models which are meant to help us understand features of the empirical world. 'Capitalism' or 'patriarchy' are 'ideal-as-descriptive-models'; they are abstract but empirical. Such abstractions are essential in helping us navigate the social world, and, in my view, the value of social and political theory depends on whether it furnishes such models of the social world that enable us to transform it. When I say that I want to reorient Critical Theory in a more concrete and political way, then, it is not because I want to get rid of abstraction, but

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<sup>31</sup> Honneth, 'Is There an Emancipatory Interest?', 919.

<sup>32</sup> Apostolidis, *The Fight for Time*, chap. 1; Herzog and Zacka, 'Fieldwork in Political Theory'; Longo and Zacka, 'Political Theory in an Ethnographic Key'.

<sup>33</sup> Mills, "Ideal Theory" as Ideology', 166–67.

because I want to connect abstract philosophical questions more clearly to politics and social transformation. Critical Theory has always, in principle, been committed to an understanding of critique as linked to praxis in this way, but, in practice, this link has arguably been weakened by a ‘neo-idealist’ turn in the post-Habermasian Frankfurt School.<sup>34</sup> In order to reorienting Critical Theory in a less idealist direction my approach will therefore reemphasize the materialist heritage of the Marxist tradition we are working in.

### 1.2 *Materialism old and new*

Marx and Engels classically laid out the materialist approach in *The German Ideology*: ‘The premises from which we begin are not arbitrary ones, not dogmas, but real premises [...] They are the real individuals, their activity and the material conditions of their life, both those which they find already existing and those produced by their activity’.<sup>35</sup> What they faulted the German idealists for was the assumption that ideas are both independent of and determine material reality and social change. Instead, according to the two communists, we need to understand ‘the production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness’ as ‘directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men’.<sup>36</sup> What this means for political theory is that we cannot conceive of the theorist as standing outside of society and its ‘material activity’ —as already mentioned, there is no ‘view from nowhere’. Mental activity is itself a part of our material practices and must be thought of as part of the life-process of human beings. As Marx and Engels point out, the very separation between theory and practice is historically contingent upon the division between mental and material labour.<sup>37</sup>

This leads to what Peter Gordon calls the ‘challenge of self-reflexivity’: if the theorist cannot stand outside the social world, then ‘social theory must provide a portrait of the social world in which it would at least be possible to imagine the emergence of that social theory itself’.<sup>38</sup> The need to meet this challenge explains a key methodological choice of

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<sup>34</sup> Thompson, *The Domestication of Critical Theory*.

<sup>35</sup> Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology* (1998), 36–37.

<sup>36</sup> Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology* (1998), 42.

<sup>37</sup> Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology* (1998), 50.

<sup>38</sup> Gordon, *A Precarious Happiness*, 21; see also Horkheimer, *Critical Theory*, 188–243.

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this thesis which is otherwise not obvious: namely, my choice to bring an account of how critique *in fact* can arise from emotional experience to bear on the normative question of how we *should* do critique. I will spend much time discussing both the social and the psychological preconditions for forming critical consciousness—in other words, the sociology and psychology of critique.<sup>39</sup> This is not because I think normative or metanormative views follow directly from empirical knowledge about human normative reasoning,<sup>40</sup> but because a correct understanding of what we do when we do critique must form part of any account of the methods of critique. Nor do I want to suggest that we can have an ‘empirical’ account of how critique works in practice independently of a normative theory of critique: our interpretation of the empirical world is always already pre-shaped by the conceptual (theoretical) framework we bring to this interpretation. It is therefore not a question of starting from empirical description in order to develop a ‘bottom-up’ theory of critique, just as little as it is a question of measuring empirical cases against a ‘top-down’ account of critique. Instead, the challenge of reflexivity requires us to recognize the imbrication of critical-theoretical activity with its material conditions, meaning that there is no privileged starting point for theoretical work either in empiricist ‘grounded’ description or in the idealist *a priori*.

The way critical theorists have generally answered the challenge of self-reflexivity is by locating normative potentials within existing ideals, institutions, or practices, which are immanent to the social world but also have the potential to transcend it. While we cannot stand outside of society and impose external principles, we can, so the idea goes, identify ‘unrealized normative potentials’ because the already institutionalized normative principles ‘are constantly open to further and more radical interpretations’.<sup>41</sup> This focus on immanent norms and their intersubjective discursive contestation arguably satisfies the requirement of self-reflexivity. But it does so in a rather less materialist fashion that

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<sup>39</sup> The concept of ‘sociology of critique’ is associated, first and foremost, with the work of Luc Boltanski. Boltanski et al., ‘Sociology of Critique or Critical Theory?’ The idea that an understanding of human psychology might inform our understanding of normative reasoning is, of course, well-known from mainstream moral philosophy where it is studied under the heading of ‘moral psychology’.

<sup>40</sup> On this, see debates about the (in)significance of neuroscientific research for metaethical theory. Greene, ‘From Neural “is” to Moral “Ought”’; Greene, *Moral Tribes*; Berker, ‘The Normative Insignificance of Neuroscience’; Kamm, ‘Neuroscience and Moral Reasoning’.

<sup>41</sup> Boltanski et al., ‘Sociology of Critique or Critical Theory?’, 576.

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amounts, as Marx and Engels put it in their critique of the Young Hegelians, to little more than ‘a demand to interpret the existing world in a different way’.<sup>42</sup> For this reason, contemporary Critical Theory has been accused of turning its back on the commitment to materialism which shaped the earlier generation and adopting instead a ‘neo-idealist’ methodology.<sup>43</sup>

Michel Foucault—always one to try to out-Marxist the Marxists—once asked ‘whether, before one poses the question of ideology, it wouldn’t be more materialist to study first the question of the body and the effects of power on it’.<sup>44</sup> He was accusing Marxists (though not Marx<sup>45</sup>) of ‘occlud[ing] the question of the body, in favour of consciousness and ideology’.<sup>46</sup> I think this is precisely the mistake contemporary critical theorists make when trying to locate the possibility of immanent critique within the realm of norms (no matter how much they may insist that these norms are not free-floating but ‘constitutive’ of social practices<sup>47</sup>). What these approaches miss is that normative surplus, in itself, does not lead to critique, and that critique does not come from disembodied minds but arises within ‘the material activity and the material intercourse of men—the language of real life’.<sup>48</sup> This thesis, therefore, will make the case for a conception of immanent critique that starts not from the norms that govern social practices, but from the emotional experiences of embodied subjects.

Given this concern with emotions and embodiment, it may seem odd to some that I base my study on methodological assumptions lifted directly from Marx. After all, Marxist historical materialism is widely ‘associated with “mechanistic” standpoints, with “reductionism,” with the denial of life, agency, embodiment, meaning, value’<sup>49</sup>—an approach that could not sound more incompatible with a work on emotion. On the other hand, a number of so-called ‘new’ materialisms have sprung up precisely to deal with these

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<sup>42</sup> Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology* (1998), 36.

<sup>43</sup> Thompson, *The Domestication of Critical Theory*.

<sup>44</sup> Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 58.

<sup>45</sup> Marx’s writings, Foucault thought, contained ‘some very interesting things about the body’. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 58. For a good account of some of these very interesting things, see Mau, ‘The Body’.

<sup>46</sup> Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 59.

<sup>47</sup> Jaeggi, *Critique of Forms of Life*, 200.

<sup>48</sup> Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology* (1998), 42.

<sup>49</sup> Wolfe, ‘Materialism New and Old’, 215.

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perceived deficits.<sup>50</sup> Equally dissatisfied with the perceived ‘cold’ economic determinism of Marxists and the disembodied rationalism of much liberal philosophy, these approaches have turned to the materiality of bodies, things, and affects.<sup>51</sup>

I shall have something to say about what I see as the shortcomings of affect theory, a key strand of new materialism, shortly. What I want to emphasize for now is that I disagree with the interpretation of ‘old’ materialism as incompatible with an appreciation of ‘life, agency, embodiment, meaning, [and] value’. Fortunately, scholars of Marx and Marxism are increasingly challenging that received view, pointing to the centrality of bodily,<sup>52</sup> sensuous,<sup>53</sup> agential,<sup>54</sup> ethical,<sup>55</sup> and indeed emotional<sup>56</sup> aspects of Marx’s materialism. This thesis too is meant as a contribution to this welcome re-evaluation of ‘old’ materialism. I aim to do so, however, not through any exegetical work on Marx or other Marxists, but by developing a novel approach to emotions and critique which is recognisably materialist in the ‘old’ sense. Thereby, I hope to show that materialism as a methodological principle by no means stands in opposition to a critical theory that centres the affective underpinnings of critical consciousness and political agency. In fact, in chapter 2, I will argue that an ‘old’ materialist approach to emotions can better account for political agency than ‘new’ materialist approaches, such as affect theory.

As will also become clear in chapter 2, my own materialist approach owes less to a direct engagement with Marx than to engagement with the Marxist feminist tradition of social reproduction theory. This tradition has been an important influence on the critiques of capitalism offered by contemporary critical theorists (most notably in the work of Nancy Fraser<sup>57</sup>), but it has not so far been brought together with an account of *critique*. This is understandable, on the one hand, because social reproduction theory is usually seen as providing an analytical lens for empirical analysis of the crises of capitalism, rather than a theory of critique (and, tellingly, in Fraser’s work, her structural analysis of capitalism

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<sup>50</sup> For the relationship between Critical Theory and these new materialisms, see Rosa et al., *Critical Theory and New Materialisms*.

<sup>51</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*; Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*.

<sup>52</sup> Mau, ‘The Body’.

<sup>53</sup> Bremner, ‘The Early Marx’s Materialism of Sensibility as Activity’.

<sup>54</sup> Bremner and de Canson, ‘Ideology as Relativized *A Priori*’, 88.

<sup>55</sup> Wills, *Marx’s Ethical Vision*.

<sup>56</sup> Weyher, ‘Re-Reading Sociology via the Emotions’.

<sup>57</sup> Fraser, ‘Behind Marx’s Hidden Abode’; Fraser and Jaeggi, *Capitalism*, 31ff.

stands awkwardly apart from her deontological approach to normativity in a way that, arguably, fails to meet the challenge of self-reflexivity). On the other hand, however, given Critical Theory's commitment to an understanding of normative critique as entwined with empirical analysis, it would seem natural to draw a connection. What is more, Nancy Hartsock's influential feminist standpoint epistemology already provides a sophisticated understanding of feminist knowledge as grounded in women's position within the reproduction of capitalist social relations.<sup>58</sup> Through a materialist understanding of negative emotions as experiences of social contradictions, this thesis will bring together feminist social reproduction theory and materialist standpoint theory with the Frankfurt School's concerns with the normativity of critique. The result will be, as I explain most explicitly in chapter 6, what I see as a truly materialist understanding of critique grounded in the materiality of the body—not as an extra-social “ground” of social critique outside of ideology,<sup>59</sup> but the body as it is produced and reproduced within given relations of production.

## 2. Moral feelings and political emotions

While Critical Theory has not engaged much with emotions, other philosophers have been more forthcoming. It is hardly the case anymore, as Ferry and Kingston claimed in 2008, that political theory shows ‘little serious regard for the [...] roles that emotion plays and should play within the political arena’.<sup>60</sup> Not only have political theorists started paying attention to feelings, but at the same time analytic philosophers of emotion and epistemologists have increasingly taken a social and political (and, especially, feminist) turn,<sup>61</sup> and dealt extensively with what we may call the political epistemology of emotions.

While much of this work will provide valuable resources throughout this thesis, the existing literature also has certain weaknesses which, I believe, justify approaching political emotions afresh from a perspective informed by the concerns of the Frankfurt

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<sup>58</sup> Hartsock, ‘The Feminist Standpoint’; Hartsock, *The Feminist Standpoint Revisited*.

<sup>59</sup> Haslanger, ‘Disciplined Bodies and Ideology Critique’.

<sup>60</sup> Ferry and Kingston, ‘Introduction’, 3.

<sup>61</sup> See Bordonaba Plou et al., *The Political Turn in Analytic Philosophy*. On the overlap between the methods of analytic philosophy and critical theory, see also Friedrich, ‘Philosophy from the Texture of Everyday Life’.

School and grounded in Marxist social theory. There are two things, in particular, that I hope to contribute to the extant literature by injecting more Critical Theory into our understanding of feelings: a more nuanced understanding of normativity, and a better grounding in materialist social theory. I will explain these two contributions in turn.

### 2.1 *Moral feelings and normativity*

To begin with the first point, feminist philosophers, in particular, have done important work on the connection between emotions and normative claims. The impetus for this work has often come from the need to challenge the traditional Western understanding of emotion as opposed to reason and reasonability.<sup>62</sup> On this latter view, feelings (often associated with femininity) are something that distorts our capacity for sound judgment and argumentation (often coded as masculine). Against such views, feminists have convincingly pointed out that our emotions are often the very thing that leads us to make apt normative claims about injustice and oppression. Negative emotions, in particular, can *alert* us that something is wrong,<sup>63</sup> they can embody *correct judgments* about the world,<sup>64</sup> be *apt responses* to injustice,<sup>65</sup> and effectively *communicate* moral disapproval.<sup>66</sup> I take this important work to have decisively established that emotions have a legitimate place in moral and political deliberation. While the reasonableness of particular emotions, like anger, is still a matter of controversy,<sup>67</sup> very few philosophers now deny outright that emotions play an important part in normative reasoning and political life.

However, when it comes to explaining exactly why and how feelings are connected to normative judgments, most contemporary philosophers fall back on an understanding of normative reasoning which is, in fact, not so different from the Enlightenment understanding of disembodied rationality they sought to challenge. As I will explain in some detail in chapter 3, recent feminist theories of anger have tended to explain the

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<sup>62</sup> See, for instance, Mansbridge, 'Reconstructing Democracy'; Young, 'Communication and the Other'; Sanders, 'Against Deliberation'.

<sup>63</sup> Cherry, *The Case for Rage*, 31; Jaggar, 'Love and Knowledge'.

<sup>64</sup> Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*.

<sup>65</sup> Srinivasan, 'The Aptness of Anger'.

<sup>66</sup> Silva, 'The Efficacy of Anger'; Shoemaker, 'You Oughta Know'.

<sup>67</sup> E.g., Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness*; Paytas, 'Aptness Isn't Enough'; Flanagan, *The Geography of Morals*; Pettigrove, 'Meekness and "Moral" Anger'.

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potential of this emotion to disclose injustice by appealing to the fact that anger either constitutes, expresses, or implies some kind of moral claim.<sup>68</sup> On this view, emotions, like anger, have a legitimate place in politics because they amount to a form of moral reasoning: as John Rawls puts it, ‘moral feelings’ are admissible in political deliberation when and because they ‘presuppose an explanation by reference to an acceptance of the principles of right and justice’.<sup>69</sup> This is precisely the idea of normative reasoning, dominant in analytic moral philosophy and liberal political theory, which has historically been used to exclude many forms of emotional expression from what is considered sober political deliberation. By claiming that emotions can embody sound moral judgments of this type, we secure a place for (some) feelings in politics, but only to the extent that they ultimately can and will be explicated in terms of the fundamental moral principles which they rely on.

Apart from the fact that this view does not go very far in actually challenging disembodied, hyper-rational ideals of normative reasoning, it also cannot make sense of the oft-asserted claim that emotions as such can *disclose* that something is wrong with the world.<sup>70</sup> Since ‘moral feelings’ presuppose prior normative principles that they can express, a feeling like anger might be a way of fully appreciating the moral facts or drawing attention to a violation,<sup>71</sup> but it discloses no new normative information. One instructive example is Alison Jaggar’s important work on ‘outlaw emotions’.<sup>72</sup> This concept is meant to capture exactly how feelings that are incompatible with ‘dominant perceptions and values’ and therefore often initially ‘puzzling’ can nevertheless inform critical judgments about society.<sup>73</sup> Yet, when considering the normative foundations for any such judgments, Jaggar falls back on a very traditional view: ‘emotions are appropriate if they are

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<sup>68</sup> Elizabeth Spelman, for instance, explains that anger arises when I perceive that someone has ‘done something not just that I wish he hadn’t done, but something I think he should not have done, because it was bad, or wrong, or unfair, or uncalled for, or harmful to me or to others’. Spelman, ‘Anger and Insubordination’, 266. See also Cherry, ‘Political Anger’; Frye, *The Politics of Reality*, 84–94.

<sup>69</sup> Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 427. Note that Rawls denies the status of ‘moral feeling’ to anger, reserving it for indignation and resentment.

<sup>70</sup> Spelman, ‘Anger and Insubordination’.

<sup>71</sup> Srinivasan, ‘The Aptness of Anger’, 141; Cherry, *The Case for Rage*, 31.

<sup>72</sup> Jaggar, ‘Love and Knowledge’.

<sup>73</sup> Jaggar, ‘Love and Knowledge’, 166–67.

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characteristic of a society in which all humans [...] thrive' and if they 'incorporate reliable appraisals of situations'.<sup>74</sup> Apart from the fact that we are, once again, referred back to an a priori theory of an ideal society and of what constitutes correct appraisals, this focus on appropriateness and reliability also unduly narrows our understanding of which emotions can disclose injustice. For example, as chapter 4 will explore, depression may well play the epistemic role of an 'outlaw emotion'—but it is neither characteristic of a flourishing society, nor is it likely to embody 'reliable appraisals' of the world. Such feelings, I shall argue, can lead to critique not because they already constitute appropriate moral judgments, but because they are experiences of the world as *problematic*. This problem-consciousness spurs on a process of interpretation and practical problem-solving which, in turn, can lead to critique and resistance.

On the 'moral feelings' view, if we want emotions to be a basis for critique, we are left either to measure each expression of feeling against some independent theory of justice—in which case the real basis for critique is really that theory—or we simply take people's judgments for granted. This is precisely the kind of dilemma Critical Theory has dealt with extensively: is there a way of making normative judgments about society that avoids arbitrarily imposing certain normative principles that the theorist has devised ('external critique') without simply reverting to uncritical relativism ('internal critique')?<sup>75</sup> To avoid this dilemma, critical theorists have developed various sophisticated models of 'immanent critique' which reject the idea that normative judgments must either rely on specifiable normative principles or be arbitrary. While immanent approaches to critique have faced important criticisms,<sup>76</sup> engaging with debates about the normative foundations of critique adds much-needed nuance to our understanding of emotions' relation to normative judgment. In fact, understanding emotions as subjective experiences of social contradictions, will allow me to develop a novel conception of immanent critique that, as I shall argue in chapter 6, overcomes some of the shortcomings of existing versions.

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<sup>74</sup> Jaggar, 'Love and Knowledge', 169.

<sup>75</sup> Stahl, *Immanent Critique*; Jaeggi, *Critique of Forms of Life*, 173–214.

<sup>76</sup> E.g., Fraser, 'The Limits of Immanent Critique'; Radhakrishnan, 'Critique as Coloniality'.

## 2.2 *Political emotions and social theory*

While philosophers of emotion have increasingly engaged with political questions, political theorists, for their part, have also heeded the calls to consider feelings a part of legitimate political discourse. This has produced a growing literature on the role of so-called ‘political emotions’.<sup>77</sup> However, this work, like much contemporary political philosophy, is all too often cut off from social theory and abstracted from real political struggles. This ‘social weightlessness’ is a problem particularly for those theorists who explicitly see their work as informed by the aim of emancipation.<sup>78</sup> An emancipatory theory needs some understanding of social reality and particularly of the mechanisms of social change that could lead to emancipation—and this is precisely what most work on political emotions struggles to provide.

Within political theory, much work on emotions is carried out within the framework of democratic theory in its Rawlsian, Habermasian, and Schmittian guises—all of which tend to abstract emotions from their social context. From a Rawlsian perspective, as alluded to earlier, the question is which emotions have a place within an ideal liberal society and what role they can play in public reason.<sup>79</sup> Rawls himself discussed the role of emotions in maintaining the stability of an imagined just society,<sup>80</sup> but had, as has often been remarked, little interest in the question of social change.<sup>81</sup>

Theories of deliberative democracy inspired by Habermas do not assume an ideal society, but instead try to devise ideal deliberative procedures and debate the role of emotions in these.<sup>82</sup> Habermasians are generally sceptical about the place of emotions in public discourse, worrying that ‘partial, affective, and situated mode of communication would have the consequence of inducing arbitrariness’.<sup>83</sup> Critics, like Iris Marion Young, have pointed out that this both relies on an implausible, dualist understanding of language

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<sup>77</sup> Nussbaum, *Political Emotions*; Brooks, *Political Emotions*; Szanto and Slaby, ‘Political Emotions’.

<sup>78</sup> McNay, *The Misguided Search for the Political*.

<sup>79</sup> Nussbaum, *Political Emotions*; Brooks, *Political Emotions*. For a criticism of this ideal-theoretic perspective in Nussbaum’s work, see Srinivasan, ‘The Political Limits of Compassion’.

<sup>80</sup> Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, chap. 8.

<sup>81</sup> Mills, ‘“Ideal Theory” as Ideology’.

<sup>82</sup> Young, ‘Communication and the Other’; Benhabib, ‘Toward a Deliberative Model’; Habermas, *Justification and Application*.

<sup>83</sup> Benhabib, ‘Toward a Deliberative Model’, 83.

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and reason, and, in practice, is biased in favour of the ‘speech culture of white middleclass men [which] tends to be more controlled, without significant gesture and expression of emotion’.<sup>84</sup> However, Young’s solution to simply include ‘more excited and embodied’ forms of communication in our image of the ideal deliberative situation does not get us much farther. For her more capacious account of democratic communication, in turn, still operates on the level of what deliberative processes *should* look like. It therefore does not tell us much about the actual role of feelings in social struggles, including the way they can be mobilized for reactionary, as well as emancipatory, aims.

Finally, Schmittian, or agonistic, theories of democracy, such as Chantal Mouffe’s, focus on the role of passion and antagonistic feelings in fuelling democratic engagement.<sup>85</sup> While this latter perspective may initially seem less idealizing than public reason theory or discourse ethics, it, in fact, performs a similar abstraction by treating ‘the passions’ as an ontologized libidinal force. Rather than investigating the social genesis and articulation of specific feelings, approaches like Mouffe’s treat them as invariant forces which needs to be ‘domesticated’—that is, channelled into agonistic democratic contestation, rather than hate and xenophobia.

Democratic theory, even in its ‘radical’ instantiations, then, concerns itself with the role emotions ideally *should* play in whichever version of democratic deliberation is the theorist’s preferred one. This means that they are not particularly useful in understanding the reality of widespread anger and depression nor what role such emotions may play in bringing about a better society.

Much of the contemporary work on the political epistemology of emotions, discussed above, faces the same problem. Despite an increasing interest in the role emotions can play in activism and social change, contemporary philosophers of emotion tend to be limited by their grounding in moral philosophy and analytic epistemology with its moralizing and individualizing biases.<sup>86</sup> Emotions are usually treated as purely individual phenomena, and hence the focus is still overwhelmingly on whether particular feelings

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<sup>84</sup> Young, ‘Communication and the Other’, 124.

<sup>85</sup> Mouffe, *Politics and Passions*; Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*; Mihai, ‘Theorizing Agonistic Emotions’.

<sup>86</sup> On the ‘methodological conservatism’ of analytic feminist philosophy, see Crary, ‘The Methodological Is Political’.

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are morally or epistemically justified.<sup>87</sup> To the extent that philosophers are increasingly interested in more practical questions of social change, they often focus on the level of individual psychological motivation to engage in social change without embedding their accounts in a social theory.<sup>88</sup>

In this thesis, I will not be concerned with the question of whether people *should* feel certain emotions (whether for moral, epistemic, or prudential-political reasons). Rather, a critical-theoretical perspective begins from the fact that negative emotions are widespread and asks what this tells us about society and tries to identify any emancipatory potentials in the existing situation. To this end I will provide a theory of negative emotions which explicitly embeds an account of the subjective and phenomenological aspects of feelings within a materialist social theory.

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A Critical Theory approach to emotions, then, will enrich existing work on political emotions with two things: immanent critique and social theory. Of course, for a critical theorist, these two elements are tightly interwoven and, as it will turn out, it is in fact by embedding emotions in social theory that we can solve the problem of their normativity. To give a small preview, my approach will embed emotions within a feminist-Marxist social theory, that sees feelings as part and parcel of the material reproduction of society.<sup>89</sup> From this point of view, widespread experiences of negative emotions will emerge not only as individual judgments about the wrongness of society, which may or may not be apt, but also as crises of social reproduction and, on the individual level, the consciousness of social contradictions. My version of immanent critique, which will be outlined in chapter 6, will ground normative judgments in this experience of social contradiction, thus showing emotions to be indispensable for both critique and social change.

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<sup>87</sup> Cherry, 'Political Anger'; Stockdale, 'Losing Hope'; Lepoutre, 'Rage Inside the Machine'; Silva, 'Emotions and Their Reasons'; Emerick and Yap, 'Betrayed Expectations'; Hirji, 'Outrage and the Bounds of Empathy'; Kim, 'Racial Emotions'; Bell, *Hard Feelings*.

<sup>88</sup> Silva, 'The Efficacy of Anger'; Cherry, *The Case for Rage*, 67–72.

<sup>89</sup> In large part, I take my cue from Alva Gotby's recent pioneering book, which is, to my knowledge, the first systematic attempt to combine feminist philosophy of emotions with social reproduction theory. Gotby, *They Call It Love*.

### 3. Why anger and depression?

I have made a case for why critical theorists ought to think about emotions and argued that Critical Theory has something valuable to contribute to our understanding of emotions. However, in keeping with my aim of making the discussion about critique and suffering more concrete, I will dedicate three central chapters of this thesis to detailed engagement with two particular feelings: anger and depression. In the beginning of this introduction, I suggested that these two emotions are particularly salient in contemporary politics—but, of course, that does not in itself justify treating them *together* in one thesis under the common header of ‘negative emotions’. Indeed, the juxtaposition of these two feelings may initially seem strange since, on the face of it, they could not be more different. Ordinarily, we tend to think of anger and depression as opposed in several ways: anger is a rational reaction to a perceived slight, while depression is a disordered state of mind; anger motivates action, depression leads to inaction; anger is a focused feeling with a concrete intentional object, depression is a prolonged and diffuse state of low general mood; anger is political, depression medical. Here, I want to briefly explain why I think anger and depression are fruitfully analysed together.

First, the obvious similarity: both are *negative* feelings. To be clear, by ‘negative’ I do not mean to imply that they are always bad to feel, undesirable, or unproductive.<sup>90</sup> To the contrary, my point is to show how negative emotions are crucial in alerting us to things that are wrong with the world and motivating us to change them. All I have in mind when I speak of ‘negative’ and ‘positive’ emotions is what is called their ‘valence’: whether, in a given emotional state, one’s situation is experienced as ‘good or bad, helpful or harmful, rewarding or threatening’.<sup>91</sup> This is not to deny that the *expression* of anger can be cathartic and pleasurable, nor that one can take masochistic pleasure in one’s own suffering. Rather, a negatively valenced emotion is one in which *one’s situation* is experienced as displeasing, bad, or harmful—how we feel *about our feelings* is a separate, second-order, question.

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<sup>90</sup> For a convincing argument that ‘bad’ feelings are an important part of a flourishing life, see Thomason, *Dancing with the Devil*.

<sup>91</sup> Barrett, ‘Valence Is a Basic Building Block of Emotional Life’, 36. For more on the idea of valence (including a challenge to the usefulness of the concept), see Solomon, *Not Passion’s Slave*, chap. 10; Prinz, ‘For Valence’.

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The main reason that it is generative to compare anger and depression, though, is that, apart from their shared negative valence, they are *contrasting* emotional reactions to life under conditions of oppression. A lot of research has explored anger as an emotion that can alert us to injustice and motivate political action,<sup>92</sup> but sometimes oppression does not lead to indignation and resistance but to hopelessness and withdrawal. Here, exploring depression as a possible emotional response to oppressive conditions serves to correct some potential biases that result from the prominent place anger has been accorded in the literature. Political philosophers have focused on anger largely because it seems to be an emotion that plays a significant (if controversial) role in emancipatory political movements. This is understandable if one wants to explore the connection between emotions and resistance. But the danger of focusing on those emotions that evidently *can* fuel resistance is that we might end up with an overly optimistic image; we might lose sight of the fact that many people do not feel righteous fury against the injustices of the world, but rather hopelessness, resignation, or self-blame.

If critical theory is to ‘give a voice to suffering’, it must reckon not only with those whose suffering is already recognizably political but also those whose emotions tend to *prevent*, rather than fuel, action; those whose emotions are, in a sense, ‘pre-political’ and further depoliticized through medicalization.<sup>93</sup> Precisely because depression is, in these ways, the polar opposite of anger, it serves as an important counterweight to the existing literature’s focus on anger.

Taking a capacious view of critical theory—including, say, everything from the eclectic cultural theory of Mark Fisher to the Black feminism of bell hooks—critical theorists have certainly dealt with both anger and depression. Yet, the types of questions asked and the approaches applied to these two feelings have been very different. Discussions of depression (often subsumed under labels like ‘mental health’) have generally taken place within the realm of empirically informed critical social theory. The dominant question is generally, in one way or another, how to counter an individualized, medicalized understanding of depression and replace it with a social, politicized one—with answers

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<sup>92</sup> E.g., Jasper, *The Art of Moral Protest*; Jasper, ‘Constructing Indignation’.

<sup>93</sup> See Degerman, *Political Agency*.

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drawing on everything from social epidemiology<sup>94</sup> and critical psychiatry<sup>95</sup> to queer theory<sup>96</sup> and sociological critiques of neoliberalism.<sup>97</sup> In other words: what does depression, as a *symptom* of social pathology, reveal about our society and how do ideological narratives about depression serve to naturalize this state of affairs?<sup>98</sup>

Work on anger tends to focus on very different questions. Certainly, theorists have also been concerned with countering the depoliticization of anger, but the enemy has not usually been medicalization but claims of irrationality or counterproductivity.<sup>99</sup> This has led to a focus on the epistemology and rationality of anger and on the practical usefulness of anger for emancipatory politics.<sup>100</sup> Broadly speaking, then, depression has been addressed using the tools of critical sociological theory while anger has been approached through normative philosophy and epistemology.

I hope to show in this thesis that such a division is not helpful. One of the distinctive aspects of the Frankfurt School tradition is its commitment to an interdisciplinary approach combining sociological theory, epistemology, and normative philosophy. There is much to gain, I wager, by developing a Critical Theory approach to negative emotions which deals with both anger and depression *and* integrates the different sets of questions that theorists have asked about them. In many cases, applying the types of questions usually asked about depression to anger addresses significant blind spots in the literature—and *vice versa*. For example, in chapter 3, I argue that the sociogenic perspective usually applied to depression can function as a useful corrective to the often overly individualized and moralized approach philosophers of anger have adopted. On the other hand, chapter

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<sup>94</sup> Freyenhagen, 'Critical Theory and Social Pathology'; Rose, *Our Psychiatric Future*, chap. 3.

<sup>95</sup> Moncrieff, 'It Was the Brain Tumor'; Read and Moncrieff, 'Depression'.

<sup>96</sup> Cvetkovich, *Depression*.

<sup>97</sup> Davies, 'The Political Economy of Unhappiness'; Berardi, *La Fábrica de La Infelicidad*; Andrews, 'Depression Today'.

<sup>98</sup> See also Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*.

<sup>99</sup> For a rare counterexample, see Degerman, *Political Agency*, chap. 4. Of course, as is often acknowledged, anger, including in overtly political forms, has a long history of medicalization especially in gendered diagnoses, like hysteria. While this is sometimes mentioned in passing, contemporary theory does not seem to concern itself much with the medicalization of anger—perhaps because it is hard to find anyone who would seriously defend a medical interpretation of (female) anger today, while many are nevertheless ready to dismiss such anger as 'irrational' or 'counterproductive' (e.g., Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness*).

<sup>100</sup> E.g.: Cherry, *The Case for Rage*; Spelman, 'Anger and Insubordination'; Srinivasan, 'The Aptness of Anger'; MacLachlan, 'Unreasonable Resentments'.

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4 will apply some of the epistemological and normative questions usually asked of anger to the topic of depression. If my arguments throughout are convincing, by the end of this thesis anger and depression should look like they have much more in common than it might initially have seemed. Both, I will argue, should be understood as experiences of social contradictions which can (but far from always do) lead to a process of problem-solving which allows people to understand and resist the conditions that cause their misery.

When I say that anger and depression are two contrasting emotional responses to encountering problems in the world—aggression and withdrawal—I do not want to imply, though, that they constitute two different hard-wired ways that human beings across time and space can react to difficulties. I do not treat them as innate ‘basic emotions’, but rather as culturally and historically specific emotion categories that help us carve up our emotional lives in ways that make them socially intelligible.<sup>101</sup> Both categories cover a wide range of experiences: from ‘ordinary’ sadness to clinical depression, and from mild anger to blind rage or righteous indignation. I do not mean to set up anger and depression as monolithic categories or natural kinds. As should become clear throughout the thesis, what interests me most is the way our emotional apprehension of the world fluctuates: how one goes, for example, from feeling a vague, inchoate dissatisfaction to focused anger against an injustice; or, conversely, from feeling rage against a particular person or action to a more general indignation about the deep structural injustices of our social world at large.

Especially in the literature on anger, there is a tendency to define more and more different ‘anger types’ and distinguish their political roles.<sup>102</sup> In addition to ordinary terms, like ‘rage’, ‘outrage’, ‘resentment’, ‘indignation’, and ‘fury’, philosophers speak of ‘ressentiment’, ‘rogue rage’, ‘transition anger’, ‘reform anger’, and ‘Lordean rage’—to list just a few.<sup>103</sup> These distinctions can be helpful in capturing the diversity of emotional experiences, but the drawback of this approach is that focusing on defining emotion ‘types’ can end up cutting short the analysis of how we end up interpreting our feelings in one

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<sup>101</sup> See Dixon, *What is the History of Anger a History of?*

<sup>102</sup> Cherry, ‘Nature and Normativity of Anger Types’.

<sup>103</sup> Jaeggi, ‘Modes of Regression’; Ure, ‘Resentment/Ressentiment’; Cherry, *The Case for Rage*; Hirji, ‘Outrage and the Bounds of Empathy’; Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness*.

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way rather than another: the claim that some subjects feel (unhealthy) ‘ressentiment’ rather than (healthy) ‘indignation’ ends up substituting for an account of the political processes that lead some people to channel their dissatisfaction into reactionary movements and others into progressive ones.<sup>104</sup> I have therefore chosen to employ rather broad definitions of anger and depression in this thesis—definitions which aim to capture the ‘common core’ of the variety of experiences which we refer to as anger and depression,<sup>105</sup> but which allow us to pay attention to the internal variation within each category and the way our emotional life is always in flux. As I will be highlighting, our negative feelings can also fluctuate across the boundaries of the emotion categories I employ: anger can turn into depression and vice versa. To some extent the way we cut up and parcel out our infinitely variable and constantly fluctuating emotional lives will always have an element of arbitrariness to it: there is no clear-cut answer to when one emotion changes into another. The way I employ the categories of anger and depression therefore should be seen not as making essentialist claims about which ‘basic emotion’ people are feeling, but as heuristically useful ways of highlighting different aspects of our emotional lives and the role they play in fostering political consciousness.

Every PhD student knows that one of the hardest, and most necessary, parts of writing a thesis is limiting one’s ambitions. While, of course, I could have engaged with the interesting work that has been done on grief,<sup>106</sup> fear,<sup>107</sup> disgust,<sup>108</sup> hopelessness,<sup>109</sup> or shame<sup>110</sup>—to name but a few other feelings—I have limited myself to just anger and depression. The choice fell on these two feelings precisely because they are, in so many ways, polar opposites, and because they can each be seen as paradigmatic of two very different approaches that political theorists have so far taken when addressing emotions. Naturally, focusing on two specific feelings means that I cannot claim to provide an

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<sup>104</sup> E.g.: Jaeggi, ‘Modes of Regression’. More on this in chapter 5.

<sup>105</sup> See Miceli and Castelfranchi, ‘Anger and Its Cousins’.

<sup>106</sup> Butler, *Precarious Life*; Hooker, *Black Grief*.

<sup>107</sup> Degerman, *Political Agency*, chap. 5; Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, chap. 3.

<sup>108</sup> Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, chap. 4; Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity*; Kim, ‘Racial Emotions’, 452–61.

<sup>109</sup> Stockdale, ‘Losing Hope’.

<sup>110</sup> Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, chap. 5; Fischer, ‘Gender and the Politics of Shame’ (see also the further contributions to this special issue); Calhoun, ‘An Apology for Moral Shame’.

absolutely comprehensive theory of negative emotions—the extent to which my claims generalize to other feelings is a question for future work. Nevertheless, comparing two feelings that contrast so starkly ensures that I am bringing into the picture the widest possible spectrum of emotional reactions to oppression and injustice without sacrificing depth and focus.

#### 4. Emotions, affect, feelings, moods

One might still ask, though: why the concept of *emotion*? Why not speak about affect? Or feelings? Or mood? Many people are especially hesitant to classify depression as an emotion. A few remarks about my choice of the concept of emotion over affect, feeling, or mood are in place.

First of all, *affect* might seem like a natural option given the recent ‘affective turn’ in some areas of political theory and cultural studies, and the popularity of ‘affect theory’.<sup>111</sup> There is no agreed-upon definition of affect but, when contrasted with emotion, it is usually taken to refer to the bodily aspects of feelings whereas emotion refers to cognitive, interpretative aspects. Affect theorists, as Linda Zerilli writes, want to ‘unsettle strict cognitivist conceptions of the liberal subject and rationalist ideals of politics’<sup>112</sup>—and, as will become clear, this is also part of my project. I share with affect theorists a certain materialist orientation towards politics, that rejects naïve Enlightenment pictures of politics as a struggle between *ideas* in favour of a view that centres the embodied human being whose agency is always shaped by a material context. Nevertheless, as I will argue in chapter 2, affect theorists often end up going too far in reifying ‘affect’ as something *non-rational*.<sup>113</sup> Massumi, for instance, draws a strong distinction between ‘affect’ as something which escapes all mediation (rather grandiosely: ‘the perception of one’s own vitality’<sup>114</sup>), and ‘emotion’ which is cognitively mediated and thus constitutes the ‘closure and capture’ of affect.<sup>115</sup> As I will explain further in chapter 2, I am highly sceptical of this idea of unmediated affect.

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<sup>111</sup> Zerilli, ‘The Turn to Affect’; Clough and Halley, *The Affective Turn*.

<sup>112</sup> Zerilli, ‘The Turn to Affect’, 261.

<sup>113</sup> For similar critiques of affect theory, see Zerilli, ‘The Turn to Affect’; Leys, *The Ascent of Affect*.

<sup>114</sup> Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 36.

<sup>115</sup> Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 35.

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Other affect theorists, to be fair, have made efforts to correct this aspect of Massumi's thought. Mazzarella, for instance, cautions us to reject the fantasy of 'pre-mediated existence' as 'a principle of comprehensive refusal, of perennial liberation', recognizing instead that affect is always already mediated.<sup>116</sup> Yet, if affect is always already mediated, it is unclear what distinguishes it from emotion. As Sara Ahmed argues, even the most seemingly immediate sensation of pain involves 'an act of reading and recognition' and, therefore, 'the distinction between sensation [or affect] and emotion can only be analytic, and as such, is premised on the reification of a concept'.<sup>117</sup> Of course, some feelings are more diffuse and inchoate, like a lingering sadness, while others are very determinate, like anger at a police officer's racism. But this is a matter of degree, and turning such a quantitative difference into a qualitative distinction would be to reify concepts.

It is not that it is never legitimate to apply such reified distinctions for specific analytical and hermeneutic purposes. But since I am interested in the process whereby people come to understand their own emotions as being *about* injustice, the term 'affect' would be confusing. Given the connotations of affect as something non-mediated, it would easily give the impression that I am talking about a process where subjects take this unmediated, mysterious substance and mould it into something determinate and recognizable. Staying with the term 'emotion' is more helpful here, as it highlights that our feelings always come to us in an already meaningful, that is, mediated, shape: interpreting one's feelings is always an act of *re*interpretation. I may come to understand my lingering sadness as being *about* my lack of social connection, or I may interpret my anger at the officer as actually being about wider structures of structural racism. In neither case do I start from scratch: even the vaguest, inchoate feeling of sadness already has *some* meaning even if it is only a vague sense that *something* is wrong with the world.

'Feeling' is sometimes used as a synonym for 'affect', but more often it serves as an umbrella category encompassing emotions along with feelings like pain, hunger, attraction etc.<sup>118</sup> I will retain this use of the word 'feeling' as a higher-level clade; and if I

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<sup>116</sup> Mazzarella, 'Affect', 303.

<sup>117</sup> Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 24, 6.

<sup>118</sup> This is, for instance, how Agnes Heller uses the term in Heller, *A Theory of Feelings*.

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occasionally refer to, say, anger as a feeling rather than an emotion, this is simply like referring to a grizzly as a mammal rather than a bear.

However, the term ‘feeling’ has also been used in slightly more specialized ways in philosophy that might be relevant to my work. Ratcliffe, for instance, refers to ‘existential feelings’ which he acknowledges closely approximates the Heideggerian notion of ‘mood’. Both terms refer to a general sense of one’s place in the world: ‘we might feel close to the world, distant from it, part of it, estranged from it’, etc.<sup>119</sup> These generalized states of feeling form the backdrop against which we experience more specific ‘focused’ feelings, like anger or fear.<sup>120</sup> Some of the emotional experiences I discuss in this thesis seem to fall into the category of mood or existential feelings. Especially depression is not usually an experience of being depressed about such-and-such determinate event, but rather a general feeling of a lack of hope and meaning<sup>121</sup> (anger too can sometimes be a generalized state of feeling resentful at the world as such). The distinction between focused and generalized emotional states is, however, usually recognized to be a matter of degree rather than a qualitative difference—and sometimes mood is defined as a ‘non-specific emotion’, i.e., as a special subclass of emotions.<sup>122</sup> I prefer to maintain the concept of emotion, rather than feeling or mood, because I want to highlight aspects of what I call ‘emotion’ that are common to both focused and generalized feelings. In fact, throughout this thesis I will call into question any categorical distinction between mood and emotion: even the most focused instance of anger actually involves my relationship to the world around me at large, and even the most generalized state of depression is, in a sense, ‘about’ something: it is about my own estrangement from the world (as I will argue in chapter 4).

On a more general level, terms like ‘affect’, ‘feeling’, or ‘mood’ are usually employed to highlight aspects of our experience that are more inchoate and harder to express than emotions which are assumed to be specific, focused, and articulable by contrast. However,

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<sup>119</sup> Ratcliffe, ‘The Feeling of Being’, 54.

<sup>120</sup> Ratcliffe, ‘The Feeling of Being’, 62.

<sup>121</sup> The distinction between emotion and mood is also sometimes drawn in terms of whether the feeling has an intentional object (emotion) or not (mood). See, for example, Elster, *Alchemies of the Mind*, 272. I dislike that categorical distinction and prefer speaking of feelings which are more or less focused on a specific intentional object. It is not that a feeling like depression is not ‘about’ anything at all—it may just be about something very general and vague, such as the world at large and my place in it.

<sup>122</sup> Goldie, *The Emotions*, 144.

as I will try to show throughout this thesis, dividing these emotional states into different categories based on their specificity hides the important continuities between them. Hence, I find it helpful to analyse both anger and depression as instances of one phenomenon which I term ‘emotion’.

## 5. Doom and gloom

Why, though, does it all have to be so gloomy? One of the most frequent questions I have been asked when presenting my thesis project in various settings is ‘What about joy?’ That is a fair question.

If the Marxist and Critical Theory tradition has historically been heavily preoccupied with the suffering of the oppressed classes,<sup>123</sup> there has recently been something of a counter-reaction against perceived ‘suffer-mongering’ in left theory and politics.<sup>124</sup> Often drawing on a Nietzschean concept of *ressentiment*, theorists like Wendy Brown worry that excessive attention to experiences of suffering may ‘breed a politics of recrimination and rancor’ and a kind of ‘slave morality’ that is ‘deeply invested in its own impotence, even while it seeks to assuage the pain of its powerlessness through its vengeful moralizing’.<sup>125</sup> The constant focus on the negative feelings produced by injustice, so the argument goes, can, on one hand, lead to an attachment to suffering that ‘supersedes any desire to recover’,<sup>126</sup> or, on the other hand, to the idea that the abolition of this suffering is the *only* aim of politics.<sup>127</sup> As such, Brown and Halley suggest that we should ‘demote suffering from its pride of place as an organizing value for political intellectual work’ and ask instead ‘what if pleasure is itself a crucial source of political motivation?’<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> There is particularly a sociological tradition, now somewhat unfashionable, that concerns itself with documenting and diagnosing the suffering of the oppressed running from Engels’ *Conditions of the Working Class* to Bourdieu’s sociology. Engels, *The Conditions of the Working-Class*; Bourdieu et al., *The Weight of the World*.

<sup>124</sup> Brown and Halley, ‘Introduction’, 33. See also Brown, ‘Resisting Left Melancholia’; Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*, 57.

<sup>125</sup> Brown, ‘Wounded Attachments’, 390, 403. See also Max Scheler’s much earlier description of ‘*ressentiment* criticism’. Scheler, *Ressentiment*, 34.

<sup>126</sup> Brown, ‘Resisting Left Melancholia’, 20.

<sup>127</sup> See Berlant, ‘The Subject of True Feeling’.

<sup>128</sup> Brown and Halley, ‘Introduction’, 32–33.

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I am sympathetic to certain elements of this critique. No doubt, pleasure and joy can be powerful sources of political motivation. What drives people concretely to take political action is often both their unhappiness with existing conditions and the joy of joining others in collective resistance.<sup>129</sup> None of what I will have to say about the importance of paying attention to anger and depression is meant to deny the political salience of joy. Much less do I want to posit ‘attention to suffering rather than pleasure as an index of the value of all intellectual and political work’.<sup>130</sup>

Nor do I want to elevate suffering as the final arbiter of truth. I share Lauren Berlant’s criticism of discourses that assume ‘the *self-evidence* and therefore the *objectivity* of painful feeling’.<sup>131</sup> As will become clear throughout this thesis, and especially in chapters 3 through 5, the political value of negative emotions comes not from any immediate disclosure of the brute fact of unjust suffering; rather, it comes from their expression of a certain *lack* or *contradiction*. Unhappiness reveals that *something* is not quite how it could be, and drives us to figure out what it is that is amiss. This should not lead to the utilitarian conclusion that we should try to eradicate unhappiness, but rather to an approach that stays with the unhappiness and asks what it reveals about the world. With Sara Ahmed, we should challenge the assumption that ‘bad feelings are backward and conservative and good feelings are forward and progressive’.<sup>132</sup> Suffering is not the final word of politics but the first one: the starting point for a process of interpreting and ultimately, hopefully, changing it for the better (a process, we should add, that may well involve much joy).

However, it is also in part *because* I agree with thinkers like Wendy Brown on the disempowering nature of negative feelings that I find it important to keep thinking about them. There is a tendency, especially among theorists of ‘radical democracy’ in the Arendtian and left-Schmittian veins, to focus on and celebrate the unpredictability and contingency of creative political action to the exclusion of analysis of the social conditions which may inhibit such agency.<sup>133</sup> However, the paradox is that the existence of suffering,

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<sup>129</sup> See, for example, Segal, *Radical Happiness*; Cohen, ‘Sovereign Chaos and Riotous Affects’.

<sup>130</sup> Brown and Halley, ‘Introduction’, 32.

<sup>131</sup> Berlant, ‘The Subject of True Feeling’, 107.

<sup>132</sup> Ahmed, ‘The Politics of Good Feeling’, 12.

<sup>133</sup> McNay, *The Misguided Search for the Political*.

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depression, or apathy are often precisely what undermines such radical political agency.<sup>134</sup> Brown too recognizes this problem but recommends simply ‘throwing off the melancholic [...] habits of the Left to invigorate it with a radical [...] critical and visionary spirit again’.<sup>135</sup> This is very well in theory, but we know that in reality depression and melancholy cannot simply be ‘thrown off’. Pleasure may well be a crucial source of political motivation, but what about those whose emotional state makes it hard for them to even see the possibility of pleasure in the world around them? If melancholy is such a big obstacle to agency, surely critical theorists ought to think more, not less, about negative emotions and how to overcome them.

Centring the joy of open-ended political action rather than the misery that holds us back, as McNay has argued, may be ‘a valuable democratic ethos’, but ultimately such ideas remain ‘ungrounded exhortations that do not connect to the embodied experience of the very subjects they wish to mobilize’.<sup>136</sup> The social world may well be open-ended and transformable, but to someone suffering from depression it sure does not seem that way.

This thesis is in many ways an attempt to think through the possibilities for political agency in a world where people are unhappy. Unsatisfied with the voluntarism of radical democratic theory, I find it incumbent on political theorists to think through the material conditions that obstruct agency—and how these concretely might be overcome. I am not interested in the question of whether we *should* be angry and depressed or joyful; I start from the fact that massive numbers of people *are* angry and depressed rather than joyful. However, as I will argue, these feelings are not *only* obstacles to political action; even a debilitating emotion like depression harbours a certain political potential in that it is a subjective state of dissatisfaction with the world and thus always carries a wish for things to be otherwise (see chapter 4).

While Adorno is often portrayed as the ultimate pessimist among critical theorists, it is important that he emphasized pain and negativity not as obstacles to the revolution but, on the contrary, as ‘the moving forces of dialectical thinking’ and indeed as sources of

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<sup>134</sup> For an Arendtian analysis of the way emotions can both empower or disempower political agency, see Degerman, *Political Agency*.

<sup>135</sup> Brown, ‘Resisting Left Melancholia’, 26.

<sup>136</sup> McNay, ‘Feminism and Post-Identity Politics’, 512.

hope for a better world.<sup>137</sup> On this, I am Adornian. Pleasure and joy play important roles in politics and are certainly worthy of serious theoretical engagement. But a theory that disavows the negative not only fails to do justice to the material conditions of the world but also neglects an important source of political potential.

## 6. What is to follow

I have explained why critical theorists ought to engage with emotions, why philosophers of emotion, on the other hand, have something to learn from Critical Theory, why I have chosen to focus on anger and depression, why I use the term ‘emotion’ to refer to these phenomena, and finally why it all *does* have to be so gloomy. Before jumping into the substantive parts of this thesis, a short overview of what will follow is in order.

In the first substantive chapter, I begin by looking at the role experiences of suffering have played in the Frankfurt School’s accounts of critique. That chapter seeks to prepare the ground for the ones to follow by, first, making an argument for why the Frankfurt School ought to engage with emotions to provide a convincing account of how suffering motivates critique, and, second, by identifying promising and less promising aspects of the Frankfurt School theorists’ approaches, thereby giving some initial direction to my own project. I begin by providing an elaboration and interpretation of Theodor Adorno’s well-known claim that critique should ‘give voice to suffering’, arguing that these claims have to be understood in the context of his critique of ‘identity thinking’ and ‘concept fetishism’. I then move on to survey how Axel Honneth and Rahel Jaeggi have more recently tried to reorient Critical Theory towards an Adornian account of social suffering in the wake of Habermas’ turn to discourse ethics. While I identify some promising aspects of their respective theories of recognition and alienation, I argue that they ultimately do not capture the political potential of negative emotional experiences, because they reduce suffering to a symptom to be diagnosed by the social critic and evaluated according to immanent normative principles.

After chapter 1, I will, temporarily, leave the Frankfurt School behind. The conclusion of the first chapter is that an engagement with the normative and epistemological role of

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<sup>137</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 202, 203.

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emotions is needed to ground critique in experiences of suffering. I therefore prefer to spend the bulk of the thesis engaging with other literatures that have had much more to say about emotions to see what can be learned from them, instead of trying to develop an understanding of feelings from the fragmentary resources offered by Critical Theory in the narrow sense.

Chapter 2 therefore turns to recent (and some less recent) philosophical work on emotion. That chapter has as its aim to survey the resources for understanding political emotions found in the extant literature and to provide the building blocks for a materialist account of negative feelings. I argue that much contemporary political theory adopts latently dualistic understandings of emotion—either by over-rationalizing feelings and assimilating them to reason, or by reifying their embodied and ‘non-rational’ aspects in the concept of affect. Instead, I turn to the phenomenological tradition to start developing an understanding of emotions as embodied but always socially and semiotically mediated. Negative emotions, I argue are subjective experiences of frustrated agency that arise from mismatches between one’s embodied habitus and the affordances for action encountered in the material world. Linking this understanding of feelings to feminist social reproduction theory, I argue, allows us to see negative emotions as the subjective side of social-reproductive contradictions.

To concretize this sketch of negative emotions, I then consider the potential of anger, in particular, to lead to critique and resistance in chapter 3. Anger is a natural starting point because it is by far the best-explored affect in the contemporary literature on political emotions. Nevertheless, the chapter shows that existing work on political anger tends to make the connection between rage and an emancipatory standpoint look too immediate. In attempting to rescue anger from accusations of irrationality and violence, many authors end up with a sanitized image of this feeling making it emancipatory, as it were, by fiat. Instead, my phenomenological and materialist rethinking of anger highlights that coming to understand one’s oppression on the basis of feeling mad is always a *political achievement*. Anger at oppressive conditions is not automatically emancipatory, just like feminist standpoint theorists have emphasized that a standpoint does not follow directly from one’s social position. Rather, an emancipatory standpoint is the outcome of

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interpreting and channelling angry feelings through a dialectical process of ‘analysis and political struggle’.<sup>138</sup>

While chapter 3 stresses the fact that emancipatory anger is by no means automatic, the connection between negative emotions and political resistance still needs to be complicated further. After all, our negative emotions do not always lead us to aggressively seek to change the world; all too often people under oppressive circumstances feel exhausted, dejected, and depressed instead of furious. And even when negative emotions are channelled into a political movement, this movement, alas, may not be an emancipatory one, as contemporary upsurges in reactionary populism make clear. Therefore chapters 4 and 5 turn to the emotional experiences of depression and misdirected rage.

The first of these argues that even though depression is characterized by withdrawal and a loss of meaningful affordances for action, it should not be understood as a form of resignation. Instead, it is a painfully experienced state of being cut off from a meaningful lifeworld and, under the right hermeneutical and social conditions, it is possible to come to understand one’s alienation from the world as a political problem. Drawing on the example of feminist consciousness-raising groups, I show how depression, in the best case, through a process of what Kathie Sarachild calls ‘political therapy’,<sup>139</sup> can lead one to disengage from dominant values and interpretive frameworks and instead search for new collective forms of understanding an alienating world. In short, the political function of feelings of depression can be to disengage from forms of action that have proven futile under oppressive conditions to instead reconsider one’s basic interpretive schemas—though, as I also stress, this is a possible but not exactly a likely outcome, and we should guard against any romanticization of depressive experiences.

Depression, in turning the blame for one’s problems inwards, is, in a sense, a misdirected feeling. But in other cases, blame is misdirected because it is turned outwards at innocent scapegoats. Such feelings of misdirected rage are the theme of chapter 5. Its arguments are twofold. First, I argue against the tendency in much critical theory literature to understand misdirected anger psychoanalytically as a kind of *ressentiment* resulting from

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<sup>138</sup> Hartsock, ‘The Feminist Standpoint’, 174.

<sup>139</sup> Sarachild, ‘A Program for Feminist “Consciousness Raising”’.

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repressed affects. Given the difficulty of arriving at an emancipatory interpretation of one's feelings, we should not be surprised that political anger can easily be misdirected—and it is neither plausible nor politically fruitful to assume that reactionary forms of anger are the result of repressed or otherwise malformed feelings. Second, I address the thorny normative question of how we can determine what the 'correct' target of a feeling is. I argue for a forward-looking, rather than backward-looking, account where anger is misdirected insofar as it does not help address the problematic situation that brought it about.

Chapter 6 then returns explicitly to the concerns raised in the first chapter about critique and the sources of normativity. It ties together the various threads of the intervening discussion of anger and depression and shows how my account of negative emotions amounts to a theory of immanent critique. This approach, I argue, overcomes some shortcomings of existing versions of immanent critique and does not fall prey to common objections of subjectivism or particularism. Indeed, grounding critique in the normative impetus of embodied experiences of dissatisfaction delivers on Critical Theory's promise to furnish an account of critique that is materialist, immanent, and connected to the real emancipatory interest of those oppressed by existing conditions.

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At the head of this introductory chapter stands a short epigraph from Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*: 'Woe speaks: "Go."' <sup>140</sup> Adorno takes this phrase—in the original German: '*Weh spricht: "Vergeh"*'—from a poem by Nietzsche. The German verb *vergehen* would perhaps more accurately be rendered as 'go away' or 'disappear', and Nietzsche's translators have gone with 'pass' or 'refrain'. <sup>141</sup> I like the connotations of the simple 'Go' in E. B. Ashton's translation of Adorno, however. Rather than merely pointing to the need to eliminate our woes, it suggests that suffering is the beginning of something. With suffering begins the critical thought whose *telos* is the negation of unhappiness. And thus too it is time to begin

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<sup>140</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 203.

<sup>141</sup> Alexander Tille's 1896 translation renders the line 'Saith woe: "Pass! Go!'", whereas Adrian Del Caro's contemporary translation is 'Pain says: refrain!'. Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, 332; Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 184.

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the substantive part of this thesis with a discussion of Adorno's thought on suffering and critique.

## Chapter 1

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# Desiring Negations: On Suffering, Misrecognition, and Alienation in the Frankfurt School

*Something can make me cry, but the cause of my tears can't be found in the traces they leave on my cheeks.*

—Jean-Luc Godard<sup>1</sup>

Arguably, a defining feature of Frankfurt School Critical Theory is a commitment to ‘methodological negativism’: the principle that ‘[s]ocial criticism should take as its starting point symptoms of social problems that can be found in the social world’.<sup>2</sup> Rather than starting from an abstract theory of justice, ‘[n]ormative reflection arises from hearing a cry of suffering or distress, or feeling distress oneself — from what Iris Marion Young terms a ‘desiring negation’.<sup>3</sup> The central claim of this thesis is that if critique is to be understood as rooted in affective experiences of distress, then we need an explanation of the epistemological, normative, and motivational dynamics of negative emotions. This initial chapter will clear the ground for my exploration of those dynamics by surveying the way the idea of social suffering has figured in the Frankfurt School tradition. The aim of the chapter is twofold: first, I will motivate the project by arguing that the Frankfurt School has not yet produced an adequate account of how critique arises from distress and that engaging more closely with the concept of emotion is a promising way to address the

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<sup>1</sup> Godard, *2 Ou 3 Choses Que Je Sais d'elle*, 42. Translation mine.

<sup>2</sup> Lepold, ‘Should Nonideal Theory Rely on Ideal Theory?’, 5.

<sup>3</sup> Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 5–6.

shortcomings; second, by identifying both those aspects of the Frankfurt School's ideas that I find promising and the ways in which they ultimately go wrong, I provide direction for my inquiry into negative emotions in the subsequent chapters.

The idea of suffering as a source of critique played a prominent role in the thought of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, with the latter's programmatic account describing Critical Theory as rooted in 'present distress' to which it must find a solution.<sup>4</sup> While Jürgen Habermas subsequently moved Critical Theory away from concerns with embodied distress in favour of a much more abstract discourse ethics, the third generation, with Axel Honneth, was largely shaped by a return to those earlier concerns with feelings of social injury. We can thus say that the concern with suffering 'skipped a generation' in the Frankfurt School. Nevertheless, as we shall see, the later Frankfurt School's engagement with experiences of suffering, including Honneth as well as Rahel Jaeggi, have not remained untouched by the Habermasian turn to a reconstructive methodology that seeks normative foundations for ethical claims in the structure of human interaction. Their theories of recognition and alienation furnish 'formal' accounts of social suffering, which derive the normativity of negative affective experiences from accounts of the preconditions for human flourishing. I will argue, though, that this approach ends up unduly depoliticizing and limiting the range of critical claims that can intelligibly arise from negative emotional experiences by deciding a priori which normative claims are valid and which are not. What is more, by grounding critique in abstract formal standards of human flourishing, their accounts end up treating suffering only as a symptom to be diagnosed by the social theorist, and not, as Adorno and Horkheimer suggested, as experiences that can subjectively disclose social wrongs.

Below, I begin, in section 1, by explaining the role Adorno accorded to embodied distress in driving critique. I argue that a proper understanding of his oft-quoted claims about suffering requires placing them in the context of his wider ideas about the priority of the object and the relationship between the mental and the somatic. Section 2 then turns to the way Honneth, two Frankfurt School generations later, took up the concern with social suffering mediated by Habermas' intervening turn to a Kantian communicative ethics. I show how Honneth's (all too brief) engagement with the concept of emotion led

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<sup>4</sup> Horkheimer, *Critical Theory*, 217.

him to an overly subjectivist picture of the ‘feelings of injustice’ he sought to capture — forcing him, in time, to gradually subordinate the phenomenological aspects of his work to the ‘normative surplus’ of institutionalized recognition orders to put his account of critique on firm ground. Sections 3 and 4 go on to critique Honneth’s and Jaeggi’s ‘formal’ accounts of social suffering, respectively. Both suffer from similar flaws in that they depoliticize negative emotions through the imposition of an abstract theoretical framework limiting, a priori, the kinds of normative claims that can arise from emotional experiences. The way forward, I suggest in the conclusion, is to rethink Honneth’s subjectivist account of negative emotions to provide an understanding of how these feelings can, in the words of Adorno, help us ‘crash through’ the façades of the status quo.<sup>5</sup>

### 1. Suffering in Adorno

My point here is not to provide anything like a full reconstruction of Adorno’s approach to critique—that would require a book-length project of its own.<sup>6</sup> Rather, I simply want to draw out some ideas about the role of suffering in critique that I find especially generative. I shall contrast my interpretation of these ideas with Fabian Freyenhagen’s influential work in order to highlight the aspects of Adorno’s ideas that I believe have not yet received the kind of attention they deserve.

Those who have drawn on Adorno to develop ‘a social critique grounded in a phenomenology of negative social experiences’<sup>7</sup> usually quote his claim from the introduction to *Negative Dialectics* that ‘[t]he need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth’<sup>8</sup> as well as his remarks from the ‘Suffering physical’ section that ‘[t]he physical moment tells our knowledge that suffering ought not to be, that things should be different’.<sup>9</sup> These claims—that embodied suffering plays a key epistemological role in disclosing that something is wrong, and that the role of critical theory, in turn, is to give expression to knowledge thus gained—will also be the point of departure for my approach in this thesis. However, to fully appreciate the meaning of those remarks, it will be helpful

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<sup>5</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 17.

<sup>6</sup> For an example of such a reconstruction, see Freyenhagen, *Adorno’s Practical Philosophy*.

<sup>7</sup> Renault, ‘A Critical Theory of Social Suffering’, 230.

<sup>8</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 17.

<sup>9</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 203.

to briefly place them in the context of Adorno's other claims in *Negative Dialectics* about the priority of the object and the relation between the mental and the somatic.

A crucial part of Adorno's critique of idealism is that it excises the physical body from cognition. Philosophy that moves purely in the realm of concepts forgets that without physical, embodied beings, consciousness itself would not be possible: 'The somatic moment as the not purely cognitive part of cognition is irreducible'<sup>10</sup> (here, Adorno is, of course, entirely in line with contemporary cognitive science<sup>11</sup>). Conceptual thought, Adorno reminds us, is no less a part of our species' natural 'struggle for existence' than labour or any other aspect of human action.<sup>12</sup> We develop concepts out of a need to interact with the physical world to ensure our survival—even thought's 'remotest objectifications are nourished by impulses'.<sup>13</sup> Philosophy that forgets its own basis in natural beings' struggle for survival is guilty of self-misunderstanding. Naturally, we cannot do away with conceptual thought, but if we treat concepts as if they were independent of or prior to embodied action, we are in the thrall of 'concept fetishism'.<sup>14</sup>

This leads Adorno to invert the idealist claim that objectivity consists in removing oneself as far as possible from one's situated and embodied perspective. Thomas Nagel describes that view nicely:

This means not only not thinking of the physical world from our own particular point of view, but not thinking of it from a more general human perceptual point of view either: not thinking of how it looks, feels, smells, tastes, or sounds. These secondary qualities then drop out of our picture of the external world, and the underlying primary qualities such as shape, size, weight, and motion are thought of structurally.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 193.

<sup>11</sup> Foglia and Wilson, 'Embodied Cognition'; Chemero, 'Radical Embodied Cognitive Science'.

<sup>12</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 179.

<sup>13</sup> Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 122. Cf. also Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 202: 'Urge [...] is the mind's preliminary form'.

<sup>14</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 197.

<sup>15</sup> Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, 14. Nagel urges us to reject this particular view of objectivity which he terms the 'physical conception' (pointing out that it is, in fact, a version of idealism (p. 26)). Nevertheless, his own preferred view, while acknowledging the importance of the first-person view, still maintains that objectivity consists in removing oneself as far as possible from a particular point of view.

## CHAPTER 1

That is, we understand reality ‘objectively’ by subsuming the particulars we encounter under abstract universal categories thereby detaching the description from our own subjective point of view. However, what Adorno points to is that, while abstraction is necessary for thought, it is also always a kind of untruth because a concept is never identical with its object. Furthermore, this gap between object and concept is where ideology creeps in, because our conceptual schema is necessarily social and thus shaped by the social world we inhabit. What is left when we try to remove our own situated experience from our judgment is precisely that conceptual schema which itself is a product of social history but now treated fetishistically as a ‘view from nowhere’.

Rather, for Adorno, objectivity means insisting on the subject’s particular experience of the object which is never exhausted by conceptual description:

To give the object its due instead of being content with the false copy, the subject would have to resist the average value of such objectivity and to free itself as a subject. It is on this emancipation, not on the subject’s insatiable repression, that objectivity depends today.<sup>16</sup>

It is the particularity of the subject’s experience of the object that allows it to see what is obscured by ‘identity thinking’, i.e., by the conflation of the object with its concept (its ‘false copy’). This should not be understood as a naïve faith in unmediated contact with the ‘real’ world; rather, Adorno simply claims that objectivity is not achieved through the repression of the subjective perspective because, far from allowing us a picture of the world free of the imprint of human subjectivity, it just means surrendering to the ‘average value’ of a socio-historical *a priori*.<sup>17</sup>

In this light, the role Adorno ascribes to suffering in critical thought becomes clearer. As a physical experience, ‘suffering is objectivity that weighs upon the subject; its most subjective experience, its expression, is objectively conveyed’.<sup>18</sup> Adorno sees suffering as a material element that breaks through the façade of identity thinking which tells us that everything is as it should be; as such, it is ‘is the mind’s negative reminder of its physical

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<sup>16</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 170–71.

<sup>17</sup> In this regard, see Foucault’s notion of the ‘historical *a priori*’ as well as Bremner and de Canson’s recent account of ideology as a ‘relativized *a priori*’. Foucault, *The Order of Things*, xxiii, 172, 375; Bremner and de Canson, ‘Ideology as Relativized A Priori’.

<sup>18</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 18.

aspect'.<sup>19</sup> Most importantly, however, suffering is also what *motivates* critical thought. For Adorno, the forgotten *telos* of conceptual thought is precisely physical survival and the negation of suffering, and hence pain and negativity, in revealing the inadequacy of the world as it is, constitute 'the moving forces of dialectical thinking'.<sup>20</sup> '[O]nce the last trace of emotion has been eradicated, nothing remains of thought but absolute tautology'.<sup>21</sup>

What does this concretely mean for social critique? It means that the conventional conception on which critique consists in measuring society against some normative standard is inadequate—or, to be more precise, it is fetishistic. The insistence that, for normative judgments not to be 'arbitrary' and 'subjective', we need to base them on an 'objective' standard of justice is guilty of forgetting that normative thought is driven by materially situated and embodied beings trying to ensure their physical existence. It is physical suffering that tells us 'that things should be different'<sup>22</sup> and motivates normative thought in the first place—any conception of justice is the outcome of our attempts to respond to the problem that the world is not as it ought to be, and not the basis for that judgment.<sup>23</sup>

To clarify that claim, let me contrast my interpretation of Adorno with Fabian Freyenhagen's. Freyenhagen also defends a 'negativist' approach to social critique drawn from Adorno on which critique proceeds from knowledge of the bad. He provides a detailed reconstruction and defence of Adorno's claims that, while we may not know what a good world would look like, 'what the inhuman is we know very well indeed'—and this in itself is enough to normatively ground critique. However, Freyenhagen does so without challenging the understanding of normative judgments that Adorno urges us to reject: namely, that '[t]o make normative claims is to invoke standards of judgement, and these standards are (part of) the account we give of the reasons we have'.<sup>24</sup> This leads him to defend the claim that suffering, for Adorno, 'can be cashed out in terms of a shortfall from

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<sup>19</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 203.

<sup>20</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 202.

<sup>21</sup> Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 123.

<sup>22</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 203.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Iris Marion Young: Critique 'does not occur on the basis of some previously discovered rational ideas of the good and the just. On the contrary, the ideas of the good and the just arise from the desiring negation that action brings to what is given'. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 6.

<sup>24</sup> Freyenhagen, *Adorno's Practical Philosophy*, 7.

a basic state of human functioning<sup>25</sup>—thus, the standard we invoke in our normative judgments is not a standard of the Good, but just a minimal standard of the basic requirements for human flourishing. This standard is not imposed from the outside, but rather, in Aristotelian fashion, seen as an inherent part of what it means to be human: ‘What is good (and bad) depends on what kind of thing the something to be evaluated is, on its *ergon* (its purpose, function, or characteristic activity)’.<sup>26</sup>

One may, of course, ask whether critique that relies on a positive, but minimalist, standard is still as negativist as Freyenhagen claims<sup>27</sup>—but leaving that issue aside, the larger problem with his account is that it clashes with Adorno’s critique of identity thinking which his account of suffering is inextricably bound up with. If our judgments about the world’s badness are based on a standard of what is required for humans to fulfil their own concept, then we are precisely applying a kind of thought that seeks to subsume its object under abstract categories—and fetishistically understanding the standard as the basis, rather than the outcome, of our normative reasoning. Thus, Freyenhagen’s reconstruction of Adorno fails to capture the latter’s claim that *particular* experiences of suffering, not suffering as an abstract category, are the source of critique and the ‘moving force’ of dialectical thinking.<sup>28</sup>

What I want to explore, then, is whether we can understand suffering not as a criterion for critique, i.e., a shortfall from a standard of minimal human flourishing, but rather as a ‘particular moral experience’ that undergirds critique.<sup>29</sup> There is, however, a second (mis)interpretation that we should guard against here. Some people have interpreted Adorno as positing suffering as a ‘*pre-rational* ground for critique’.<sup>30</sup> Thus, Zuidervaart

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<sup>25</sup> Freyenhagen, *Adorno’s Practical Philosophy*, 216.

<sup>26</sup> Freyenhagen, *Adorno’s Practical Philosophy*, 232. Emphasis original.

<sup>27</sup> Here, I concur with Peter Gordon: ‘if [Freyenhagen] is right, then Adorno should not be permitted to appeal to any positive norm of human flourishing. But the neo-Aristotelian idea of a “potential” is just such a norm’. Gordon, *A Precarious Happiness*, 26.

<sup>28</sup> Raymond Geuss also fails to appreciate this nuance when he criticizes Adorno for his ‘undialectical’ focus on the abolition of suffering. Geuss’ critique would be on the mark, if Adorno had posited the abolition of suffering as a *criterion*, but his understanding of suffering as the ‘moving force of dialectical thinking’ has very little in common with the liberal politics of alleviating suffering that Geuss conflates it with. Nonetheless, it is hard to disagree with Geuss’ wish that Adorno should have developed ‘a more sophisticated and differentiated analysis of suffering’—I hope that this thesis provides just such an analysis. Geuss, *Outside Ethics*, 130.

<sup>29</sup> Stahl, ‘Immanent Critique and Particular Moral Experience’.

<sup>30</sup> Renault, ‘A Critical Theory of Social Suffering’, 235. Emphasis mine.

criticizes him for assuming that ‘suffering is immediate (unmediated) [and] its expression self-authorizing’.<sup>31</sup> This is not an entirely unfair interpretation: Adorno certainly sometimes speaks of suffering as something taking place entirely in a pre-rational, ‘somatic, unmeaningful stratum of life’.<sup>32</sup> Yet, Adorno also constantly guarded against any idea that there is such a thing as an immediate experience of suffering prior to conceptual mediation.<sup>33</sup> Positing the somatic as somehow ‘prior’ to the mental would be ‘a pre-dialectical proceeding’.<sup>34</sup> Whatever is the right interpretation of Adorno, we certainly ought to guard against the temptation of seeing pain as a kind of ‘prelapsarian knowledge’ providing access to a truth prior to social mediation.<sup>35</sup>

The fact that Adorno himself frequently fell into ‘pre-dialectical’ formulations that make it sound like suffering simply ‘speaks for itself’<sup>36</sup> is precisely one of the reasons that I think it will be helpful to turn to the notion of emotion. Unlike suffering and pain, which are often thought of as non-rational phenomena, emotions combine cognitive and somatic aspects. My hypothesis, then, is that by understanding how negative emotions underlie and motivate critique, we can make good on the Adornian idea of critique as rooted in particular experiences of suffering without treating the latter either as an *abstract criterion* or as a *pre-rational basis* for normative judgments. First, however, it is worth examining the way these Adornian ideas of social suffering have been developed in the later Frankfurt School.

## 2. From Adorno to Honneth

Jürgen Habermas, representing the second generation of the Frankfurt School, moved Critical Theory away from Adorno’s concerns with suffering and particular experiences

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<sup>31</sup> Zuidervaart, *Social Philosophy after Adorno*, 68, n24.

<sup>32</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 365.

<sup>33</sup> Here one can contrast Adorno’s notion of suffering with Massumi’s concept of ‘affect’ (to be discussed further in the next chapter). The latter insists that the emancipatory power of affect consists precisely in its *immediacy* contrasting this with the ‘*qualified intensity*’ of emotional experiences absorbed ‘into schematically and semiotically formed progressions’. Adorno would classify such an approach, with Henri Bergson’s, as a ‘cult of irrational immediacy’. Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 28. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 8.

<sup>34</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 202.

<sup>35</sup> Berlant, ‘The Subject of True Feeling’, 127.

<sup>36</sup> Zuidervaart, *Social Philosophy after Adorno*, 69.

towards a more rationalist and universalist discourse-theoretical approach. The critique of conceptual reason found in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Habermas pointed out, could not itself avoid relying on the very concepts and reasons that were under suspicion for being mere effects of power—and Critical Theory had thereby entangled itself in a ‘performative contradiction’. To overcome this contradiction ‘inherent in an ideology critique that outstrips itself’,<sup>37</sup> Habermas found it necessary to rescue an ideal of reason purified of power which could function as the normative justification for a critique of actual ‘impure’ practices of reasoning. This ideal he found in the communicative presupposition of an ‘ideal speech situation’ where only the ‘unforced force of the better argument comes into play’.<sup>38</sup> This meant banishing the body and affectivity from his understanding of critique as sources of arbitrariness and error, thus reintroducing the dualism of body and mind that Adorno had militated against (albeit with the mind now conceived in intersubjective terms, rather than as a singular world-constituting consciousness).<sup>39</sup>

The work of Axel Honneth can largely be understood as an attempt to resuscitate elements of Adorno’s concern with suffering and particular moral experiences in light of the Habermasian critique. Thus, Honneth welcomed Habermas’ turn to intersubjectivity but objected to the overly linguistic way in which the latter conceived of it. The move to ground critique in the ‘purified’ realm of an ideal speech situation introduced a worrying ‘split between the level of moral-theoretic statements and that of our everyday moral experiences’.<sup>40</sup> On an empirical level, Honneth claims that progressive social change and political resistance is not usually oriented ‘toward positively formulated moral principles, but rather is the experience of violence to intuitively pre-supposed conceptions of justice’.<sup>41</sup> Equally, on a theoretical level, he points out that participation in rational discourse always already presupposes a subject with a well-formed subjectivity and that Habermas’ approach to critique therefore must remain silent about the kinds of injustice which prevent people from articulating their claims in the public sphere in the first

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<sup>37</sup> Habermas, *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 127.

<sup>38</sup> Habermas, *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 130.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Young, ‘Impartiality and the Civic Public’.

<sup>40</sup> Honneth, *The Fragmented World of the Social*, xiii.

<sup>41</sup> Honneth, *The Fragmented World of the Social*, xiv.

place.<sup>42</sup> These two claims led Honneth back to the Adornian concern with particular moral experiences that cannot be reduced to violations of accepted normative principles. Honneth, like Adorno, wants to anchor critique in pre-theoretical experiences of suffering and social injury, in concrete experiences and *feelings* of injustice which ‘do not reach the threshold of proposals for a just society’ yet contain ‘expectations of justice, need claims, and ideas of happiness preserved negatively in the consciousness of injustice’.<sup>43</sup>

The return to these Adornian themes, however, is, in Honneth, filtered through a concern with normative validity claims that he inherits from Habermas. Adorno had wanted to root critique in experiences of suffering but was loath to posit the absence of suffering as a criterion for a just society, since such an absence would always be under suspicion for being a ‘prescribed’ and repressive form of satisfaction. This potentially leads to a contradiction very much like the one Habermas identified in his critique of reason: if happiness itself is put under suspicion for being a mere effect of power, we seem to have no secure standard against which to criticize the existence of suffering. It could be said that the critique of ‘prescribed’ happiness itself presupposes a concept of *genuine* happiness, but in his refusal to articulate an explicit positive vision, Adorno might be committing another performative contradiction.<sup>44</sup> Since Honneth shared Habermas’ worry about such performative contradictions, he thus needed a way of recuperating a conception of psychic wellbeing to ground his critique of suffering just like Habermas needed an ideal of reason to ground the critique of ideology.

Honneth, however, shares with most of modern political theory the distrust of substantive ideals of the Good Life. The reference point for adjudicating between genuine and ‘prescribed’ happiness cannot be some externally imposed theory of what kind of life is valuable.<sup>45</sup> Instead, Honneth believes we can identify a ‘formal’ ideal of the preconditions for living *any* Good Life. He finds this formal ideal in the notion of intersubjective recognition as the precondition for developing a normal subjectivity: ‘in order to be able to acquire an undistorted relation-to-self, human subjects always need [...]’

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<sup>42</sup> Honneth, ‘Diskursethik Und Implizites Gerechtigkeitskonzept’, 192; Honneth, *The Fragmented World of the Social*, 207.

<sup>43</sup> Honneth, *The Fragmented World of the Social*, 212.

<sup>44</sup> For the claim that Adorno *did* articulate an explicit ideal of happiness, see Gordon, *A Precarious Happiness*.

<sup>45</sup> See Honneth, *Disrespect*, chap. 1.

the experience of affectionate care and legal recognition [as well as] a form of social esteem that allows them to relate positively to their concrete traits and abilities'.<sup>46</sup> Negative emotional experiences, such as shame and anger, are then significant to the extent that they reveal such unmet recognition needs.

Here, then, Honneth introduces the category of emotions in a way that militates against the danger of a reifying suffering as a 'pre-rational' reference point for critique. 'Negative emotional reactions' constitute, for him, 'the affective motivational basis' for critique and social struggles,<sup>47</sup> but they also have an important cognitive dimension. It is through these emotional reactions that 'the injustice done to one will cognitively disclose itself and become a motive for political resistance'.<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, Honneth did not provide a detailed theory of emotions to support these claims and instead, as I shall argue, relied on an underdeveloped understanding of emotions that is overly subjectivist and ignores their embodied aspects. This deficient theory of emotion, furthermore, forced Honneth to gradually abandon the focus on the phenomenology of injustice in favour of the historical dynamics of institutionalized recognitive orders which take on an increasingly central role in his later work.

In *Struggle for Recognition*, he suggests adopting a Deweyan pragmatist theory of emotions.<sup>49</sup> On that theory, feelings

appear in either positive or negative dependence on actions: either they accompany the experience of particularly successful 'communications' (with people or things) as bodily states of excitement, or they emerge as the experience of being repelled by a failed, interrupted attempt to execute an action.<sup>50</sup>

He then, in a minor tweak with major consequences for his theory, introduces a categorical difference between moral and non-moral emotions. When our instrumental

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<sup>46</sup> Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, 121.

<sup>47</sup> Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, 135.

<sup>48</sup> Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, 138.

<sup>49</sup> Honneth attributes the theory to John Dewey citing the latter's two papers on 'The Theory of Emotion'. One would be hard pressed to find Honneth's 'Deweyan' theory in those papers, though. Rather, it seems that Honneth simply extrapolated a theory of emotion from Dewey's wider philosophy of action. See Dewey, 'The Theory of Emotion I'; Dewey, 'The Theory of Emotion II'; Garrison, 'Dewey's Theory of Emotions'.

<sup>50</sup> Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, 136.

actions are interrupted by unanticipated obstacles, this leads to merely ‘technical’ disruptions and non-moral forms of annoyance. ‘By contrast, should actions guided by norms be repelled by situations because the norms taken to be valid are violated, this leads to “moral” conflicts in the social lifeworld’.<sup>51</sup> From here, Honneth proceeds on the assumption that only the latter category is relevant for a theory of critique.

This distinction between moral and non-moral emotions— not to be found in Dewey— and the exclusion of the latter from our field of concern ends up subordinating Dewey’s attention to action to a focus on norms rendering his pragmatism epiphenomenal. Clearly, if we were to limit our understandings of the relevant moral emotions to cases where people experience violations of *explicitly held* norms, emotions could hardly be said to *disclose* injustice: the recognition of something *as* an injustice is the ground for the emotional reaction and not vice versa. That reaction may then play an important role in motivating action and in focusing attention on the injustice, but it did not disclose it. Honneth, however, wants to say that we sometimes experience violations of implicitly held and unarticulated moral norms, the content of which only becomes conscious through the negative emotional reactions that reveal their violation. He speaks of a ‘consciousness of injustice’ which ‘rests upon unarticulated and uncoordinated ideas of justice’.<sup>52</sup> Negative emotions constitute a ‘hidden’ ‘moral condemnation of the existing social order’.<sup>53</sup>

We are speaking, then, of implicitly held norms which are revealed negatively at the moment of their violation through an emotional reaction. However, it is obvious that not any implicitly held norm is automatically justified, and hence we have to ask, once some implicit norm has been disclosed, whether the norm in question is justified or not. Negative feelings, then, might bring previously implicit norms to consciousness, but the normativity itself comes from those norms and not from our experience of distress. This is why Nancy Fraser challenged Honneth’s account on the grounds that it does not provide us with the conceptual tools to distinguish ‘what really *merits* the title of injustice’ from ‘what is merely *experienced* as injustice’.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, 137.

<sup>52</sup> Honneth, *The Fragmented World of the Social*, 215.

<sup>53</sup> Honneth, *The Fragmented World of the Social*, 218.

<sup>54</sup> Fraser and Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition?* Emphasis original.

This was a problem Honneth already recognized in *Struggle for Recognition* writing that, ‘in order to be able to distinguish between the progressive and the reactionary’ expressions of dissatisfaction, we need ‘a normative standard that, in light of a hypothetical anticipation of an approximate end-state’ can determine which claims are justified and which are not.<sup>55</sup> Nonetheless, he admitted, in response to Fraser’s criticisms, ‘that the attempt to locate the normative standards of critique in the experiences of misrecognition involves the risk of regarding all expectations as justified’.<sup>56</sup> And this, in fact, prompted him to gradually subordinate the phenomenological aspects so central in his earlier work to a focus on the historical dynamics of institutionalized orders of recognition.<sup>57</sup> The principles of recognition of any social order, he argued, always harbour a ‘normative surplus’ that one can tap into to criticize the existing application of the principles. In his 2015 book, *Die Idee des Sozialismus*, he made it explicit that he no longer saw ‘rebellious subjectivities but objective improvements, not collective movements, but institutional achievements [...] as the social bearer[s] of those normative claims’.<sup>58</sup> While the idea of social suffering never completely dropped out of his theory, as a source of critique, he made it ‘parasitic’ on the normative ideals embodied in historical orders of recognition.<sup>59</sup>

Thus, in order to put the Adornian concern with particular moral experiences on firm normative footing, we can see that Honneth ends up in a very different place to Adorno. If in Adorno, suffering is what (potentially) allows us to break out of the automatism of historical ‘progress’, then Honneth has turned experiences of misrecognition into nothing but a motor of the progressive unfolding of the normative potentials inherent in existing orders of recognition. In Adorno, we find the clear influence of Benjamin, who once wrote that the revolutionary potential of the proletariat is ‘nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than that of liberated grandchildren’.<sup>60</sup> In other words: the normative potential for abolishing oppression comes from the *negative* experiences of the working class and not from the promise of liberation that the existing order constantly dangles in

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<sup>55</sup> Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, 168–69.

<sup>56</sup> Boltanski et al., ‘Sociology of Critique or Critical Theory?’, 573.

<sup>57</sup> Boltanski et al., ‘Sociology of Critique or Critical Theory?’, 573–74.

<sup>58</sup> Cited in Celikates, ‘Critical Theory and the Unfinished Project’, 215.

<sup>59</sup> McNay, ‘Historicizing Recognition’, 90; Celikates, ‘Critical Theory and the Unfinished Project’, 215.

<sup>60</sup> Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 260.

front of it like a carrot in front of a donkey. In Honneth, on the other hand, recognition *is* the carrot, and the suffering of the poor donkey is the engine that drives history forward.

I will elaborate on the shortcomings of Honneth's approach in the following section, but what I have tried to underline here, by way of a short reconstruction of the development of his ideas, is that the turn to a philosophy of history followed from his reduction of negative emotions to experiences of the violation of one's (implicitly held) norms. This moves the focus onto said norms, and forces Honneth to address the validity of those norms which, in turn, can only be secured through the assumption that they, as if 'by dint of a secret heliotropism',<sup>61</sup> always point us towards justice.

### 3. The limits of recognition

There has been no lack of criticisms of the paradigm of recognition since it was first popularized (in the Anglophone world) with the 1995 publication of Honneth's *Struggle for Recognition* (along with Charles Taylor's influential 1992 essay 'The Politics of Recognition'<sup>62</sup>). Among other things, critiques of recognition have focused on its normalizing and statist bias,<sup>63</sup> its tendency to reify or essentialize identities,<sup>64</sup> or how it diverts attention from struggles over material distribution to an inert politics of cultural difference.<sup>65</sup> I do not mean to revisit all those criticisms here. Instead, I want to make a more specific claim about how the recognition framework fails to provide the understanding of emotions that allows us to ground critique in a phenomenology of suffering. Assimilating negative emotions to psychic injuries of misrecognition, I argue, reduces them to symptoms for the social theorist to diagnose rather than experiences which can subjectively disclose social ills—this perspective all too easily becomes complicit in a depoliticizing politics of recognition and 'healing' that substitutes affirmative recognition for radical transformation.

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<sup>61</sup> Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 255.

<sup>62</sup> Taylor, *Multiculturalism*.

<sup>63</sup> Butler, 'Recognition and the Social Bond'; Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks*; Povinelli, *The Cunning of Recognition*; Markell, *Bound by Recognition*.

<sup>64</sup> Schaap, 'Political Reconciliation Through a Struggle for Recognition?'

<sup>65</sup> Fraser and Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition?*; Cicerchia, 'No, Marxism Isn't Economic Determinism'.

Perhaps the most prominent criticism of Honneth's work is Nancy Fraser's claim that the recognition paradigm is complicit with a neoliberal identity politics that has served to displace economic struggles over material resources. While there is certainly force to this critique, she arguably overstates the case in a way that 'leads to an objectivist style of analysis that forecloses any understanding of the subjective dimensions of oppression and agency'.<sup>66</sup> The strength of Honneth's early work was precisely that he recognized the need to connect critique to the emotions that constitute 'the motivational raw material' of social struggles.<sup>67</sup> This need arises from the Adornian insight that abstraction and critique are nothing but activities of embodied beings striving for survival, and that, therefore, any critique that does not recognize its own basis in embodied urge as 'the mind's preliminary form' is guilty of self-misunderstanding.<sup>68</sup>

Yet, Honneth's theoretical reduction of negative emotional experiences to symptoms of misrecognition ends up severing this very link by determining a priori the legitimate content of political claims arising from them. We can see this already in the categorical distinction Honneth draws between moral and non-moral emotional experiences. This distinction ignores the fact (of which Honneth at other times is keenly aware) that whether we experience an obstacle as moral or 'natural' is itself a function of extant norms and power relations. One of the functions of ideology is precisely to naturalize socially created obstacles to human flourishing as ineradicable, 'technical' disruptions. Take, for example, the 'technical' disruption faced by a gig-work delivery driver when their bike breaks down during a delivery. This is an obstacle encountered 'in the context of expectations of instrumental success' and not 'in the context of normative behavioural expectations'.<sup>69</sup> The ensuing frustration may well be experienced by the rider as the result of a mere 'natural' accident and, however infuriating, may not rise to the level of a moral complaint. The experience of this as a 'natural' obstacle to instrumental action, however, relies on the ideological obfuscation of the relations of production involved in this scenario. What is, in fact, a case of someone's labour power being exploited by a gig work company is presented as the natural operations of 'the market', where workers freely decide to take on

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<sup>66</sup> McNay, 'The Trouble with Recognition', 284.

<sup>67</sup> Honneth, *The Fragmented World of the Social*, 14.

<sup>68</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 202.

<sup>69</sup> Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, 137.

gigs for a set monetary reward—a naturalization that, in this case, allows the company to offload the cost and labour of repairing the means of production onto the worker in order to appropriate a larger share of the value of their labour.

Thus, while Honneth means for his theory to explicitly make visible forms of ‘pre-political’ suffering not yet articulated in explicitly moral language, his distinction between moral and non-moral emotions undermines that aim. ‘Drawing the line at explicitly moral resentments’, as Alice MacLachlan has argued in a different context, ‘limits the function of our emotional expressions to the articulation of already recognizable types of moral claims’.<sup>70</sup> Naturally, Honneth might insist that, in the scenario above, there is a submerged moral demand hidden in the gig worker’s inchoate sense of frustration. But we might worry, with MacLachlan, that the insistence ‘that underneath every vague sense of unfairness or grievance is a moralized claim about a right violated or an injury done stretches these words past their useful meanings’.<sup>71</sup> More to the point, it is clear that not every vague frustration is a hidden protest against the social order, so Honneth has the option of limiting himself to those feelings which are *experienced* as moral, or he must provide some theoretical a priori way of determining which experiences are secretly moral. The first option maintains the link between Critical Theory and the motivational force of feelings of injustice at the price of severely restricting the range of experiences we can take into account. The second option is able to extend that range only by severing the link between theory and its ‘motivational raw material’, since the recognition-theoretic normative criteria are imposed on these experiences from the outside, thereby reintroducing the ‘split between the level of moral-theoretic statements and that of our everyday moral experiences’ for which Honneth took Habermas to task.<sup>72</sup> A third option would be to reconsider the role of negative feelings which are experienced as non-moral reactions to ‘technical’ disruptions and allow that these too can become sources of political claims—this is a thread that I will pick up again in the next chapter and develop throughout this thesis.

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<sup>70</sup> MacLachlan, ‘Unreasonable Resentments’, 432–33.

<sup>71</sup> MacLachlan, ‘Unreasonable Resentments’, 435.

<sup>72</sup> Honneth, *The Fragmented World of the Social*, xiii.

Even once negative emotions have found an explicitly political articulation, however, reducing them all to demands *for recognition* can have depoliticizing effects. Honneth establishes the primacy of recognition through a quasi-transcendental argument: since the kind of subjectivity required for making normative claims on each other can only be formed intersubjectively through relations of recognition, the latter must be a central concern of any theory of justice. Yet, the argument that any normative claim *presupposes* intersubjective relations of recognition cannot be used to justify the entirely different claim that all normative claims are *reducible* to claims for recognition. This theoretical reduction imposes an a priori interpretative framework on the kinds of claims made by social actors and, crucially, overlooks the way power can function not just by *denying* recognition but also *through* recognition. Let me unpack these arguments.

The claim that a monist recognition-centric framework for interpreting normative demands unduly limits the scope of social critique has perhaps been made most forcefully by Indigenous theorists. Glen Coulthard, for example, has argued that the idea that Indigenous peoples' claims against settler-colonial states should be understood as demands for recognition 'rests on the problematic background assumption that the settler state constitutes a legitimate framework within which Indigenous peoples might be more justly included'.<sup>73</sup> The problem here concerns the way Honneth transposes an interpersonal dynamic of recognition modelled on Hegel's master-slave dialectic onto an institutional realm. The idea of mutual recognition between two subjects presupposes the continued existence of both subjects. In Hegel's dialectic, no mutual recognition would be possible if either the slave or the master were simply destroyed. But this is the very presupposition that becomes problematic when transposed onto the institutional context: to interpret the struggle between Indigenous peoples and the settler state in these terms ignores the fact that the settler-colonial state is not a subject whose recognition Indigenous peoples are seeking, but a structure that they (at least, in many cases) wish to do away with entirely.

Recognition theory is not defenceless against such objections. It is always possible to claim that settler-colonial recognition in fact constitutes *misrecognition* and that actual recognition of Indigenous peoples would require recognizing their independence and

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<sup>73</sup> Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks*, 36. For similar arguments, see Povinelli, *The Cunning of Recognition*; Markell, *Bound by Recognition*; Friedrich, 'Anger and Apology'.

sovereignty over the settled land—which, in turn, would require abolishing the settler-colonial state. However, it is not clear if Honneth actually has the theoretical resources to make this move, and this specifically has to do with how his theory posits negative emotions as oriented toward the fulfilment of a historically invariable emotional need for recognition.

Seeing antagonistic emotions, like anger, as expressions of an underlying need for recognition ignores the fact that power works not just by denying recognition to some but also through the way it fulfils people's needs for recognition thereby binding them to relations which reproduce existing power structures.<sup>74</sup> As Marxist and feminist social reproduction theorists have pointed out, for example, the reproduction of a capitalist society relies on producing subjects who, to some extent, “feel at home” in a reified world.<sup>75</sup> In this way, the labour of raising a child, which, from the point of view of recognition theory, constitutes ‘the first stage of reciprocal recognition’ ideally leading to the child’s healthy individuation,<sup>76</sup> takes on a different and ‘infinitely devastating meaning’<sup>77</sup>: namely, that the creation of individuals with healthy subjectivities within an exploitative social order is also, in part, the reproduction of that order.

This is not to deny that secure cognitive relations are essential to people’s flourishing—it is simply to say that the preconditions for living a good life, qua secure relations of recognition, are *also* the preconditions for the reproduction of capitalism. This is increasingly true to the extent that power is exercised less through brute force and more through the interpellation of subjects as willing participants in this reproduction. Foucault’s early and prescient analysis of ‘neoliberal governmentality’, for example, describes a mode of government where power gets a hold of individuals, not through the imposition of brute force or discipline, but through the management of their free and autonomous action.<sup>78</sup> *Homo oeconomicus*, conceived as an autonomous, rational, and self-maximising agent, ‘appears precisely as someone manageable, someone who responds systematically to systematic modifications artificially introduced into the environment’

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<sup>74</sup> Friedrich, ‘Anger and Apology’.

<sup>75</sup> Davis, ‘Women and Capitalism’, 170.

<sup>76</sup> Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, 95.

<sup>77</sup> Davis, ‘Women and Capitalism’, 170.

<sup>78</sup> McNay, ‘Self as Enterprise’.

and can thus be governed ‘at a distance’.<sup>79</sup> From this point of view, ‘to govern humans is not to crush their capacity to act, but to utilize it for one’s own objectives’, in other words, to govern *through*, not *against*, freedom.<sup>80</sup>

An approach that reduces negative emotional reactions a priori to demands for recognition easily becomes complicit with this type of governmentality. In settler-colonial contexts, for instance, mainstream reconciliation narratives often frame negative feelings, trauma, and expressions of discontent as obstacles to be overcome in the interest of ‘healing’ (both individuals and the nation).<sup>81</sup> The assumption is that anger against the settler-colonial state is to be overcome through recognitive responses, like truth-telling commissions, apologies, and healing initiatives, which will help close the wounds of misrecognition.<sup>82</sup> But this, again, presumes the legitimacy of the framework of the settler-colonial state to which people must be ‘reconciled’: in the words of Cree poet Billy-Ray Belcourt, ‘ours are bodies that still shake, that traffic in the bad because we know that a world reconciled is not necessarily a world decolonized’.<sup>83</sup> The idea that Indigenous peoples’ negative emotions are to be understood as a desire for recognition, rather than a rejection of the settler-colonial status quo, serves to depoliticize radical challenges to existing power structures and justifies a liberal politics of integration.

Again, it is easy enough to imagine possible responses from a defender of Honneth’s theory: the dissatisfaction with the status quo is fuelled by the fact that it leaves people’s need for genuine recognition unfulfilled and perhaps only a fully decolonized world would be able to deliver adequate recognition for all. But at this point, we would, again, have severed the link between critique and people’s everyday emotional reactions. If any expression of discontent is simply evidence that we have not yet reached the utopia of perfect recognition, then it is hard to see how Critical Theory is any different from the kind of ideal theory Honneth is keen to distance himself from: after all, the critique now does not seem to follow from the *content* of people’s emotional expressions but rather from a counterfactual idea of what a just world would look like. Therefore, it is not surprising

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<sup>79</sup> Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, 270.

<sup>80</sup> Rose, *Powers of Freedom*, 4.

<sup>81</sup> See Million, *Therapeutic Nations*.

<sup>82</sup> Friedrich, ‘Anger and Apology’; Friedrich, ‘Settling Accounts at the End of History’.

<sup>83</sup> Belcourt, ‘The Day of the TRC Final Report’.

that Honneth himself did not go down this route, but rather, in his later work, moved the emphasis away from the ‘ontology’ of recognition towards a more historicized focus on the normative potentials of historically developing institutional orders of recognition. This, however, leaves Honneth even more vulnerable to anti-colonial critiques because of the way he now explicitly locates the source of normative potentials in the modern bourgeois (and settler-colonial) state.<sup>84</sup>

I am not the first, of course, to accuse Honneth’s theory of recognition of being overly psychologizing. As mentioned, one of Nancy Fraser’s main critiques of Honneth in their famous exchange was precisely that many ‘injustices are not best conceived psychologically, as violations of personal identity’.<sup>85</sup> She therefore claimed that ‘instead of treating denied recognition as the normative kernel of all daily suffering, one would do better to construe it as one kind of felt unfairness among others’.<sup>86</sup> I am in agreement here with Fraser’s point that the claims articulated on the basis of ‘felt unfairness’ should not be reduced to psychological injuries of misrecognition. However, Fraser takes the rejection of psychologization a step too far in her own alternative model of social critiques which combines an ‘objective’ structural analysis of society with evaluative standards derived from a deontological moral theory.<sup>87</sup> On that approach, the way unfairness is *felt* actually drops out of the picture entirely in favour of an objective and detached analysis of injustice. The approach I shall develop in this thesis will be one that, by contrast, maintains focus on the experiential and emotional content of negative social experiences—but without reducing this emotional content to psychological injuries of misrecognition.

#### 4. Alienation and formalism

Misrecognition, of course, is not the only lens through which the normative dimension of social suffering has been understood in the Frankfurt School. Another way in which the experience of not feeling at home in the world has frequently been analysed in the wider Marxist tradition, as well as the Frankfurt School in particular, is through the concept of alienation. Since Marx’s use of the concept, alienation has been understood as having

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<sup>84</sup> Allen, *The End of Progress*, chap. 3; Radhakrishnan, ‘Critique as Coloniality’.

<sup>85</sup> Fraser and Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition?*, 219.

<sup>86</sup> Fraser and Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition?*, 204.

<sup>87</sup> See McNay, ‘The Trouble with Recognition’.

both a subjective, phenomenological aspect (“The worker [...] in his work feels outside himself”<sup>88</sup>) and an objective, structural aspect (the worker’s alienation from their labour is a necessary structural feature of the capitalist mode of production).<sup>89</sup> Thus, alienation links the experience of suffering to its social-structural conditions in a way that allows for a critique of society based on how it ‘mortifies [the worker’s] body and ruins his mind’.<sup>90</sup> It is not my aim here to survey all the transmutations that this concept has been through since Marx—an endeavour that, apart from the Frankfurt School, would also have to take us through the existentialist and wider Western Marxist traditions. Rather, I will limit myself to a brief discussion of Rahel Jaeggi’s recent systematic rethinking of alienation critique. Her work is especially pertinent to discuss here, because she explicitly focuses on the phenomenological aspect of alienation and links it to social critique in a way that is informed by the Frankfurt School’s concern with normativity.

The concept of alienation has often been thought to presuppose an ideal of human flourishing from which humans are alienated.<sup>91</sup> Jaeggi argues that such a substantive ideal of human flourishing is no longer tenable in the wake of postmodern and liberal critiques of universal and/or essentialist accounts of the Good Life. (I am less worried than Jaeggi about essentialism and paternalism, but the same conclusion can be drawn from my Adornian argument above that critique based on an objective standard is guilty of self-misunderstanding.) Jaeggi therefore adopts a negativist and phenomenological approach which aims to recover the ‘experiential content’ of the concept of alienation qua negative experiences of ‘apathy and indifference toward life’.<sup>92</sup> Her approach thus re-centres the experiential grounds of critique which Honneth had come to gradually subordinate to the normativity of institutionalized orders of recognition.

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<sup>88</sup> Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, 74.

<sup>89</sup> In my view the distinction between ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’ alienation that is sometimes made is misguided and negates the analytical usefulness of the concept. From Marx onwards, alienation critique has been a tool that links subjective experience to its objective determinants and conversely uncovers the way objective structures manifest in individual consciousness. Thus, alienation is always subjective *and* objective. I shall have more to say about this in chapter 4. For the subjective/objective distinction, see Hardimon, *Hegel’s Social Philosophy*, 120–21; Leopold, *The Young Karl Marx*, 206.

<sup>90</sup> Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, 74.

<sup>91</sup> E.g., Leopold, ‘Marx’, 141.

<sup>92</sup> Jaeggi, *Alienation*, xx, 222n4.

Naturally, Jaeggi, just like Honneth, recognizes the danger of falling into a pure subjectivism that can only ‘justify partisanship for social struggles in a decisionistic or merely standpoint-theoretical way’.<sup>93</sup> The way she characterizes the feeling of alienation, however, gives her an advantage over Honneth in this regard. Whereas the latter, as we saw, understands the feeling of misrecognition as a disappointment of the subject’s normative expectations, Jaeggi’s understanding of alienation is less cognitivist. The feelings of powerlessness and indifference she analyses are not seen as disappointments of a normative demand, but rather as failures in the subject’s practical relation to the world. Feeling alienated is a ‘practical disruption’ or a ‘contradiction’ in experience which calls for a solution.<sup>94</sup> This enables her to sidestep the question of whether the subject’s particular normative expectations are justified or not: whenever people subjectively feel alienated from the world this constitutes an objective problem in their relationship to the social world.

Despite this advantage, however, Jaeggi’s version of alienation critique ultimately faces some of the same problems that dog Honneth’s theory. Her work, too, clearly stands under the influence of Habermas and his concern with providing normative criteria for critique, and she follows Honneth in grounding Critical Theory in a ‘formal conception of ethical life’ qua ‘intersubjective conditions that can be shown to serve as necessary preconditions for individual self-realization’.<sup>95</sup> In this regard, Jaeggi adopts and adapts Ernst Tugendhat’s notion of ‘psychological health’.<sup>96</sup> Tugendhat’s argument is precisely that in order to avoid the twin traps of untenable paternalism and relativist subjectivism, we can base ethics on a concept of psychological health. However, since any substantive ideal of mental health is in danger of paternalistically ‘depending on a specific normative idea, a specific conception of humanity’, it has to be a ‘*formal* conception of mental health’.<sup>97</sup> This formal conception Tugendhat defines as the psychological capacity to control one’s own will, that is, in terms of *how* one is able to pursue one’s idea of the Good Life, not in terms of *what* that idea may be. From this notion of mental health, Jaeggi then develops her conception

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<sup>93</sup> Jaeggi, ‘Reply to My Critics’, 198.

<sup>94</sup> Jaeggi, ‘Reply to My Critics’, 230–31.

<sup>95</sup> Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, 173.

<sup>96</sup> Tugendhat, *Probleme Der Ethik*.

<sup>97</sup> Tugendhat, *Probleme Der Ethik*, 82. Translation mine.

of alienation as ‘a condition in which one is unable in crucial respects to *appropriate* the life one is leading and in which one does not *have oneself at one’s command* in what one does’.<sup>98</sup> Because we need to experience the world as meaningful in order to experience our actions as free, then, the feeling of alienation reveals ‘discrepancies between the claims of modern ideals of freedom and their actual realization’.<sup>99</sup> This leads to a straightforward form of immanent critique: since meaningful freedom and autonomy require an unalienated relation to the social world, we can criticize liberal societies that produce alienation as failing to live up to their own ideals.<sup>100</sup>

However, in introducing an (immanent) ideal of autonomy as a normative criterion, Jaeggi, just like Honneth and Freyenhagen, ends up deriving the normativity of critique not from the experience of suffering but from an abstract principle. Critique is not derived from particular moral experiences, as Adorno argued it should be, but from existing liberal ideals. The normative significance of any given experience of suffering depends on whether it can be categorized as a violation of this ideal of autonomy—a procedure Adorno would recognize as an example of ‘identity thinking’.

Now, I do not expect all readers to be convinced yet that critique *should* in this Adornian way be driven by particular moral experiences—it is the task of this thesis as a whole to convince readers that such an approach is desirable. Therefore, as I did with Honneth above, it is worth briefly giving a concrete illustration of the problems Jaeggi’s version of critique faces in practice in order to further motivate the alternative direction I will pursue in the chapters to come.

In practice, Jaeggi essentially divides alienation critique into two separate methodological steps: first, an analysis of experiences of disturbed relations to the world reveal a gap between ideals and their realization; and then, once we have identified the (formal) ideal society fails to realize, we go on to ask, in the second step, what ‘social institutions [would] look like that could be understood as embodiments of freedom’.<sup>101</sup> Thus negative social experiences may serve as a symptom that something is wrong, but ultimately our constructive critique of social structures will be guided by that positive

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<sup>98</sup> Jaeggi, *Alienation*, 48. Emphasis original.

<sup>99</sup> Jaeggi, *Alienation*, 41.

<sup>100</sup> Jaeggi, *Alienation*, 41–42.

<sup>101</sup> Jaeggi, *Alienation*, 220.

(formal) ideal of autonomy (in a way, again, not so very different from a Rawlsian type of ideal theory, which she explicitly wants to challenge).

To see the pitfalls of this approach, it is worth considering the critique of ideal theory as famously articulated by Charles Mills.<sup>102</sup> His claim is that ideal-theoretic approaches tend to obscure the very processes of power and domination that stand in the way of realising the ideals they profess—not only due to the fact that concrete power structures and historical processes of domination are dropped from the analysis, but also because ideal theory obscures how the ideal itself can get caught up in these processes. Consider ideals like “colour-blindness” (or “gender-blindness”) as expressed, for instance, in Rawls’ methodological device of the veil of ignorance. Critics of colour-blindness are not claiming that the ideal of a world where race does not matter is a false or undesirable one<sup>103</sup>—hardly anyone would dispute that in a perfectly just world racial categories would not exist. Rather, the claim is that adherence to certain ideals which are far from realized in reality can serve to further entrench unjust structures: ‘the complete refusal to see color in a racist society’, for instance, ‘involves implicitly the refusal to acknowledge the force of racist prejudices and their insidious impact on interpersonal dynamics’.<sup>104</sup> Thus, it is not a substantial critique of the content of the ideals employed, but a methodological critique of the role ideals play in theorising.

In principle, Jaeggi is strongly committed to avoiding this trap, as her critical theory is meant precisely to start from negative social experiences of alienation in order to derive a critique of social structures. Yet, her reliance on an ideal of nonalienation, however formalized, introduces the exact same kinds of problems that plague Rawlsian ideal theory. While the ideal of having one’s self at one’s command may well be sound in itself—we may agree that in a perfect world it would be realized—the reliance on this ideal obscures how it itself is imbricated in processes of exploitation and domination. Consider the phenomenon described by Honneth as organized self-realization or by Foucault as the entrepreneurial self.<sup>105</sup> Authors like Honneth and Boltanski and Chiapello have remarked

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<sup>102</sup> Mills, “Ideal Theory” as Ideology’.

<sup>103</sup> E.g., Medina, ‘Color Blindness, Meta-Ignorance, and the Racial Imagination’.

<sup>104</sup> Medina, ‘Color Blindness, Meta-Ignorance, and the Racial Imagination’, 40.

<sup>105</sup> Honneth, ‘Organized Self-Realization’; Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*; McNay, ‘Self as Enterprise’.

how the 1960s' critiques of the alienating nature of conformist mass society have been appropriated by a new form of neoliberal capitalism so that 'the mounting claims to self-realization are transformed into a productive force in the capitalist economy'.<sup>106</sup> In this context the demand to internalize, to *appropriate as one's own*, the demands of capital via the idea of developing one's own human capital or 'employability' is precisely what keeps many people all the more attached to the conditions of their own exploitation. Jaeggi's methodology, then, seems to obscure how the very ideal of 'having oneself at one's command' is imbricated in both power and indeed in the production of new kinds of suffering.

Interestingly, in Jaeggi's subsequent work, she has moved towards a model of critique that relies less on the application of such normative ideals. In her *Critique of Forms of Life*, she develops an account of forms of life as problem-solving entities which can be critiqued based on their ability to solve social problems. Critique, then, rather than relying on normative ideals, can start from 'the phenomenon of forms of life *becoming problematic*', where 'problematic' cannot be reduced to a wholly subjective nor entirely objective property.<sup>107</sup> Problems arise from 'what is [objectively] there independently of our influence and *makes itself felt* [subjectively] as a disruption'.<sup>108</sup> The experience of a situation as *problematic* exerts a kind of normative pressure of its own independently of any normative ideals, and therefore forms of life are criticizable when they do not enable successful processes of problem-solving. Yet, Jaeggi never links this work on forms of life to her earlier concern with subjective experience, and she does not explain how exactly a problem in one's form of life 'makes itself felt'. In the next chapter, I will suggest that negative emotions can be understood as the subjective experience of social contradictions: that is, as the way objective dysfunctions in the reproduction of the social world register subjectively as disruptions in our experience of the world. Such an approach, I will further argue throughout this thesis, allows us to ground critique in negative emotional experiences and account for their normativity without relying on abstract normative principles.

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<sup>106</sup> Honneth, 'Organized Self-Realization', 473; Boltanski and Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*.

<sup>107</sup> Jaeggi, *Critique of Forms of Life*, 135. Emphasis original.

<sup>108</sup> Jaeggi, *Critique of Forms of Life*, 143. Emphasis mine.

## 5. Conclusion

The point of this initial chapter has been twofold: first, to make a case for why Frankfurt School theorists interested in the connection between critique and negative social experience ought to pay more attention to emotion; and, second, to give some initial direction to my own attempt at developing an account of critique grounded in negative emotions.

Let us briefly summarize the results of this chapter's discussion. I take my point of departure in Adorno's oft-cited claims that experiences of pain and suffering are the 'moving forces' of critical thought. Understanding these claims in the context of his wider critique of identity thinking, I further argued, clarifies their significance. For him, physical suffering is not merely an occasion for investigating whether the social world fails to live up to certain standards of justice, but rather it is a reminder of the origin of our concepts of justice and injustice in our own physical nature. The particularity of experiences of suffering harbour an objectivity which can break through the fetishism of concepts and standards. Adorno, however, did not provide anything like a satisfying account of critique grounded in such particular moral experiences. Apart from his notorious vagueness and occasional obscurity, a more particular problem in his account is the tendency to conceive of physical suffering naïvely as existing entirely outside of social mediation. Despite his own insistence that any separation of mind and body is a 'pre-dialectical' proceeding, he never gave an adequate account of how experiences of suffering are embodied yet also cognitive.

Among those who have, in different ways, developed accounts of critique inspired by Adorno's concern with social suffering are Fabian Freyenhagen, Axel Honneth, and Rahel Jaeggi. As my discussion revealed, all three of them suffer from a shared flaw: rather than explaining how particular moral experiences can disclose social ills, they all revert to the use of normative standards for analysing the shortfalls of society. Freyenhagen refers to a minimal Aristotelian account of human flourishing, whereas Honneth and Jaeggi both prefer immanent forms of critique that tap into the unrealized normative potentials of modern ideals of self-realization and autonomy. All of them thus ultimately treat experiences of suffering not as the 'moving forces of dialectical thinking' but as mere symptoms to be diagnosed by the social critic armed with a normative yardstick against

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which to assess them. Of the three, only Freyenhagen intends his contribution as an explicit elaboration of Adorno's account, and so only he can directly be blamed for not honouring Adorno's critique of identity thinking. I have tried to show, in the cases of Honneth and Jaeggi, however, how we have independent grounds for rejecting their versions of critique because they depoliticize emotional experiences and do not adequately account for how ideals of recognition and autonomy are themselves imbricated in power structures (this imbrication of ideals and ideology, of course, being one of Adorno's key reasons for his suspicion of identity thinking).

Despite their failings, though, there are also elements of Jaeggi's and Honneth's work which I find congenial to the present project. The latter, for instance, provides an important corrective to Adorno's sometimes naïve understanding of physical suffering as located in an 'unmeaningful' substratum of human life by centring the cognitive aspects of the experience of social suffering through his focus on emotions. Further, his (much too brief) engagement with a pragmatist understanding of negative emotions as interrupted agency is, I believe, a promising direction to follow—in the next chapter, I shall elaborate an account of emotions that is strongly inspired by this idea, though I do so through engagement with phenomenology, rather than Dewey.

The exact way in which Honneth's account ultimately falls short is also very instructive. I argued that his turn towards institutionalized recognition orders as a source of normativity was necessitated by his overly subjectivist understanding of emotions. To be more precise, it was the decision to understand the morally relevant emotional experiences in terms of disappointed normative principles (be they explicitly or only implicitly held) that forced him to shift the grounds of critique onto the source of those principles (namely, existing orders of recognition). The question I wish to follow up on throughout this thesis, then, is whether that move can be avoided. Throughout the next chapters, I will explore the normative significance of emotional experiences that are not always already conceived of as relying on latent normative principles—and argue that these, in fact, furnish the normativity of a critique grounded in the particular experience of embodied subjects.

In this regard, Jaeggi's work, while not engaging explicitly with the concept of emotion, provides some interesting pointers. Her work on alienation also understands this phenomenon as an experience of interrupted agency, but without conceiving of it in terms

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of the disappointment of specific normative expectations. Instead, she conceives of the feelings of powerlessness and apathy characteristic of alienation in terms of a deficient *relation* between agent and world. Thus, she moves the focus away from the subjective expectations latent in emotional experiences to the objective relationship of a subject to its environment. This relational character of experience, the way in which ‘the individual’s relations to self and social forms of life [...] are conceptually intertwined’,<sup>109</sup> will form an important part of my analysis of negative emotions.

The main point to take away from this chapter, however, is that if the Frankfurt School wants to deliver on the promise of providing a form of critique that finds its roots in the suffering which ‘tells our knowledge [...] that things should be different’,<sup>110</sup> then we need to engage much more closely with the concept of emotion. After all, if critical theory is ‘nothing but a methodologically disciplined extension of epistemic efforts undertaken by oppressed groups in their daily struggles’,<sup>111</sup> then it seems advisable to begin by investigating the epistemology of those daily struggles, instead of treating negative social experiences as mere symptoms to be analysed by the theorist.

‘Something can make me cry,’ says the main character Juliette in Jean-Luc Godard’s film *Two or Three Things I Know About Her*, ‘but the cause of my tears can’t be found in the traces they leave on my cheeks’.<sup>112</sup> This line, like so much of Godard’s dialogue, has a productive ambiguity. On one hand, it can be read as denying the self-transparency of emotions. My own tears do not tell me what is wrong with the world. Suffering is not a self-authorizing ‘prelapsarian knowledge’,<sup>113</sup> but an experience that propels me outward into the world to understand the causes of my tears. On the other hand, the line also suggests that the meaning of suffering is not accessible to an external observer. My tears’ traces are only the visible manifestation of my subjective feelings which are not intelligible by reference to observable facts only. To understand emotions, we must look both outwards into the world and inwards into the subject. It is in the subjective experience of the need to make sense of suffering that grounds critique—or so I will argue. If theoretical

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<sup>109</sup> Jaeggi, *Alienation*, xxiii.

<sup>110</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 203.

<sup>111</sup> Honneth, ‘Is There an Emancipatory Interest?’, 919.

<sup>112</sup> Godard, *2 Ou 3 Choses Que Je Sais d’elle*, 42. Translation mine.

<sup>113</sup> Berlant, ‘The Subject of True Feeling’, 127.

## CHAPTER 1

work is an extension of everyday efforts to make sense of and resist oppression, then an understanding of the epistemology and normativity of the negative social experiences that ground those struggles should also inform critical theory. Fortunately, the epistemology and normativity of emotional experience is by no means uncharted territory. The following chapter will therefore turn to an engagement with work in the philosophy of emotion.

## Chapter 2

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# ‘Consciousness of the Degradation of the World’: On Negative Emotions as Social Contradictions

*The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men—the language of real life.*

—Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels<sup>1</sup>

Much of Western political thought has been coloured by a deep suspicion of emotions: Agnes Heller once quipped that feelings have been treated ‘like the stepchildren’ of philosophy.<sup>2</sup> Yet, over the last few decades, emotions have become quite a fashionable topic within mainstream political theory. On one hand, there is a booming literature on ‘political emotions’ in Anglophone analytic philosophy shaped by a fortuitous confluence between political philosophers’ growing interest in feelings, and a corresponding ‘political turn’ among philosophers of emotion.<sup>3</sup> The work of influential feminists, like Martha Nussbaum, Amia Srinivasan, and Myisha Cherry, has been key to this development.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, there has been an ‘affective turn’ in cultural studies and the wider humanities, which has influenced the more continental strands of contemporary political

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<sup>1</sup> Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology* (1998), 42.

<sup>2</sup> Heller, *A Theory of Feelings*, 1.

<sup>3</sup> On the ‘political turn’ in analytic philosophy, see Bordonaba Plou et al., *The Political Turn in Analytic Philosophy*.

<sup>4</sup> Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*; Nussbaum, *Political Emotions*; Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness*; Srinivasan, ‘The Aptness of Anger’; Cherry, *The Case for Rage*.

theory.<sup>5</sup> The time of neglect seems to be over, and it looks like the stepchildren have been embraced as fully valued members of the family.<sup>6</sup>

I would wager that there are two main reasons for this surge of interest in the emotions: one empirical and one theoretical. Empirically, there is a widespread perception that emotions—more specifically *negative* emotions, from anger and hatred to anxiety and depression—play an increasingly important role in contemporary politics.<sup>7</sup> Anger seems to fuel both emancipatory and reactionary political movements, from Black Lives Matter<sup>8</sup> to xenophobic populism,<sup>9</sup> and there is talk of an ‘epidemic’ of depression,<sup>10</sup> as well as growing ‘climate anxiety’.<sup>11</sup> All this talk of negative feelings certainly seems to call for engagement on the part of political theorists. On the other hand, much of the interest in political emotions seems to me also driven by theoretical concerns: chief among them the growing dissatisfaction with overly rationalized, Cartesian models of political deliberation which ignore embodied and affective dimensions of political engagement. The appeal of emotions, in this regard, is that they promise to furnish a link between the body and the mind in that they combine both embodied and cognitive elements.

These concerns, of course, are also the ones driving this thesis. As we saw in the last chapter, Critical Theory, if it is to make good on its own self-understanding as an extension of everyday struggles against oppression, needs to be grounded in an epistemology of social suffering that overcomes the mind-body dichotomy. Hence, I find it helpful, in this chapter to turn to the philosophy of emotions literature to look for resources for a critical theory of anger and depression. With the analytic-leaning part of the emotion literature, I

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<sup>5</sup> Zerilli, ‘The Turn to Affect’.

<sup>6</sup> Of course, emotions have been a big topic in the history of philosophy for much, much longer than this recent revival—one only needs to think of canonical thinkers, such as Aristotle, Hobbes, Spinoza, or Hume, to name a few. The recent literature on political emotions within Anglophone political theory and analytic philosophy is thus by no means a discovery, but rather another rediscovery of the political import of feelings. On the history of emotions in Western philosophy, see Cohen and Stern, *Thinking About the Emotions*.

<sup>7</sup> As Lucile Richard has suggested to me, it might be fair to say that interest in emotions within political thought tends to surge at times of crisis when the impassionate business-as-usual is challenged by the promise or threat (depending on perspective) of the unruly passions.

<sup>8</sup> Woodly, *Reckoning*, 71–77.

<sup>9</sup> Emerick and Yap, ‘Betrayed Expectations’; Jaeggi, ‘Modes of Regression’; Tietjen, ‘The Affects of Populism’.

<sup>10</sup> Rose, *Our Psychiatric Future*, chap. 2.

<sup>11</sup> Clayton, ‘Climate Anxiety’.

have in common a concern with the epistemological and normative role of feelings and a desire to challenge dispassionate accounts of political deliberation; while, with affect-theoretical and phenomenological approaches, I share a concern with embodiment and materiality. This chapter, therefore, engages with this extant literature to begin developing an understanding of emotion which can help us fill in the gaps in the Frankfurt School's understanding of suffering and critique identified in the preceding chapter.

This does not mean that I provide a full-fledged theory of negative emotions here, which I then, in later chapters, go on to apply to case studies. Rather, I want to achieve two things. First, through an engagement with existing approaches to political emotions, I seek to identify potentials and pitfalls for a critical theory of negative emotions. Second, I want to introduce some of the key theoretical resources that will help me understand the politics of anger and depression in the following chapters. This chapter, thus, should be seen as taking the first steps towards the critical theory of negative emotions which will be fully developed throughout the course of the thesis as a whole.

What I am looking for is a specifically *materialist* understanding of political emotions. In this regard, I will challenge the analytic-leaning literature for its lack of attention to the materiality of the body, while I find that much of the so-called 'new materialism' of affect theory unduly reifies body and matter. Instead, I will draw on some lesser-explored sources in phenomenology and Marxist social theory<sup>12</sup> to start forming what could be called an 'old' (or 'dialectical') materialist theory of negative feelings. Key among the somewhat eclectic mix of resources I will introduce, are the concept of affordances from ecological psychology, habitus from Bourdieu's sociology, and the idea of social-reproductive contradictions from Marxist feminism. The upshot is a view of negative emotions as embodied experiences of social contradictions.

In section 1, I begin by arguing that, despite a declared desire to challenge dichotomies between reason and passion and mind and body, much work on the politics of emotions still exhibits some residual Cartesian dualism. In the analytic literature, we usually find overly rationalized cognitivist accounts of emotion which avoid the passion-reason dichotomy only by excising the embodied and material aspects from our understanding of

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<sup>12</sup> 'Lesser explored', that is, in the context of work on emotion. I am not claiming that these are neglected sources *as such*.

feelings. In affect theory, on the other hand, there is a tendency to reify the body and affect as unmediated thereby maintaining Cartesian dualism while reverting the hierarchy of mind over body. In section 2, I engage with work on emotions from the phenomenological tradition which, I argue, provides better tools for understanding emotions as embodied yet always socially and semiotically mediated. I also introduce the concept of affordances from ecological psychology as especially important for understanding emotions as an aspect of our conscious interaction with the material world. This allows me, in section 3, drawing on Sartre, Fanon, and Bourdieu, to paint a picture of negative emotions as experiences of frustrated agency, as a mismatch between one's embodied expectations, or habitus, and the affordances offered by the environment. Section 4 connects this account to Marxist and feminist social reproduction theory and shows how anger, dissatisfaction, and unhappiness on a large scale can be understood as crises of social reproduction. Negative emotions reveal that subjects are not fully interpellated into the social order and, as subsequent chapter will show, they thereby always constitute opportunities for critique, resistance, and social change.

### 1. Emotion and reason

Much of the surge in interest in emotions within political theory has been motivated by a dissatisfaction with what Adorno called the 'pre-dialectical' separation between mind and body and the associated prejudice about emotions as arational. This foil—the view that emotions are “non-reasoning movements,” unthinking energies that simply push the person around—has been termed the ‘hydraulic view’ or, more straightforwardly, the ‘Dumb View’.<sup>13</sup> While people still dispute the rationality of specific emotions, like anger,<sup>14</sup> the idea that emotions *tout court* are irrational has very few adherents these days. Indeed, the general perception is that ‘the argument for divorcing reason from emotion does not have enough life in it even to be a straw man’.<sup>15</sup> However, despite the best intentions to overcome the separation of emotion and reason, I would argue that some version of this

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<sup>13</sup> Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, 24; Spelman, ‘Anger and Insubordination’, 265.

<sup>14</sup> Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness*.

<sup>15</sup> Chakravarti, *Sing the Rage*, 4.

dichotomy still tacitly underlies much work in political theory. In this section, I therefore attempt to reconstruct the strawman anyway.

Most prominently, the *cordon sanitaire* separating reason from the passions is found in certain theories of public reason and deliberative democracy. Habermasian theories of deliberation, for instance, assume an ‘ideal speech situation’ purged of power, rhetoric, and passion. While Habermas recognizes that, in reality, ‘discourse is never definitively “purified”’ in this manner, we nevertheless cannot ‘do without the supposition of a purified discourse’.<sup>16</sup> Allowing, within public deliberation, ‘a more partial, affective, and situated mode of communication would have the consequence of inducing arbitrariness’, as Benhabib puts it.<sup>17</sup> This is the familiar enlightenment picture that reason alone will emancipate humanity from the tyrannic distortions of power and passion.

This exclusion of emotion from the public sphere, confining it instead to the ‘private’ realm, has, of course, been plenty criticized. Feminist theorists, in particular, have aptly pointed to the biases inherent in deliberative theories ‘influenced by the enduring coding of “emotion as female” and “reason as male.”’<sup>18</sup> Likewise, agonists and communitarians have questioned whether such a dispassionate politics is possible or desirable. Models of politics starting from an ‘unencumbered self’<sup>19</sup> miss the fundamental truth that challenging ‘established hierarchies of power and wealth’ requires ‘arous[ing] the affiliative and combative passions of the people’.<sup>20</sup> Agonists, like Chantal Mouffe, have therefore vigorously defended the value of ‘the passions’ for true democratic politics against the rationalizing, depoliticizing tendencies of liberal and deliberative theories of democracy.<sup>21</sup> For Mouffe, politics cannot be purged of emotions, and any insistence on ‘rational’, non-emotional deliberation runs the risk of driving these passions to the ‘extremes’ of xenophobia and violence. But, while recognizing the importance of passion for politics, it is not clear to what extent these perspectives deconstruct the division between reason and emotion. While Mouffe and Walzer challenge the idea that a ‘purified

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<sup>16</sup> Habermas, *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 323.

<sup>17</sup> Benhabib, ‘Toward a Deliberative Model’, 83.

<sup>18</sup> Mansbridge, ‘Reconstructing Democracy’, 122; see also Sanders, ‘Against Deliberation’; Young, ‘Communication and the Other’.

<sup>19</sup> Sandel, ‘The Procedural Republic’.

<sup>20</sup> Walzer, ‘Passion and Politics’, 631.

<sup>21</sup> Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*; Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*.

discourse' is desirable, they retain the conceptual distinction between passions and rational deliberation.<sup>22</sup>

Pushing this point to the extreme, in what we may call 'counter-enlightenment discourses',<sup>23</sup> we sometimes find a tendency to entirely reverse the values assigned to body and mind—but still without challenging the bifurcation. For those who equate reason itself with oppressive instrumental rationality, the body, as reason's other, becomes the source of emancipation. Most clearly, this is exemplified by some types of affect theory and the so-called new materialisms. Brian Massumi, for instance, wants to retrieve a notion of affect that escapes all discursive mediation: conceptual thought itself is for him an attempt to box things in; affect is what escapes this confinement. Even emotion is tainted by conceptual mediation as it is '*qualified* intensity, the conventional, consensual point of insertion of intensity [...] into function and meaning'.<sup>24</sup> Affect, on the other hand, is the *unmediated* 'perception of one's own vitality, one's sense of aliveness, of changeability (often signified as "freedom")'.<sup>25</sup> Or, in a similar formulation by Jane Bennett, it is a pre-conscious 'thing-power of the human body', an 'animating energy' that drives us to attempt to close the gap between how things are and how they could be.<sup>26</sup> The attraction of such approaches is that affect, as an arational force, furnishes 'an outside to the closures wrought by rationalization in the form of capitalism, bureaucracy and patriarchy' and therefore a source of resistance.<sup>27</sup> Yet, this view, if anything, doubles down on the strict separation between reason and feeling while reversing their relationship to power and

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<sup>22</sup> In Walzer's case, his embrace of 'the passions' without any attention to the way emotions are socially and politically mediated arguably mirrors his failure to reconcile a communitarian politics of belonging with a radical concern for justice. Edward Said, for instance, in his forceful critique of Walzer's defence of Zionism, points out that the latter's insider perspective and uncritical commitment to a Zionist community, seems to make it harder for him to 'feel compassion, [...] call injustice injustice, [and] speak directly and plainly of all oppression'. In other words, one could say that his uncritical embrace of the 'affiliative and combative passions' of Zionism illustrates precisely the gravest dangers of a politics that embraces passion without understanding its mediation by material structures, like (in this case) settler-colonialism and anti-Palestinian racism. Said, 'Michael Walzer's "Exodus and Revolution"', 106. See also Andrawos, 'The Long Shadow'.

<sup>23</sup> Coole, 'Habermas and the Question of Alterity', 235.

<sup>24</sup> Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 28. Emphasis mine.

<sup>25</sup> Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 35.

<sup>26</sup> Bennett, 'The Force of Things', 363.

<sup>27</sup> Coole, 'Habermas and the Question of Alterity', 236.

emancipation.<sup>28</sup> In a straightforward reversal of Habermasian discourse ethics, it is rationality which threatens tyranny while unmediated affect carries the promise of freedom.

As mentioned, most contemporary theorists of political emotions are keen to overcome the idea of emotion as akin to ‘gusts of wind or the currents of the sea’ pushing the subject about<sup>29</sup>—whether that be the tide of irrational despotism or the winds of radical emancipatory change. To do so, they highlight the cognitive and rational aspects of emotion, generally by appealing to what Martin Hartmann has called the ‘epistemological model’ and what I shall here term ‘cognitivist’ approaches.<sup>30</sup> On this model, emotions are seen as either judgments about or representations of normative features of the world—they are thus similar to beliefs in that they constitute or imply claims about what the world is like and should be judged by whether ‘the emotion in question somehow fits the world as it (really) is’.<sup>31</sup> One prominent version of this model is Martha Nussbaum’s ‘cognitive-evaluative’ theory which conceptualizes emotions as judgments of value. Emotions, she writes, ‘always involve thought of an object combined with thought of the object’s salience or importance’.<sup>32</sup> To feel grief, for instance, is to make the judgment that something very

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<sup>28</sup> See Zerilli, ‘The Turn to Affect’; Leys, *The Ascent of Affect*, chap. 7.

<sup>29</sup> Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, 25.

<sup>30</sup> The terminology used to classify different theories in the philosophy of emotions is unfortunately muddy. Often the term ‘cognitive theories’ is reserved for approaches that, like Martha Nussbaum’s ‘cognitive-evaluative’ theory, treats emotions as judgments (also sometimes termed ‘judgmentalism’). Thus, perceptualist and representationalist theories, which think of emotions in terms of perceptions and representations, are often considered opposed to ‘cognitive’ theories—an odd misnomer considering that perceiving and representing are key components of cognition. I shall use the term ‘cognitivist’ to include all approaches which theorize emotions mainly in terms of thoughts, beliefs, judgments, perceptions and/or representations, as opposed to my preferred embodied understanding of emotions. (I am not alone in using ‘cognitive’ in this broader sense; see Lacewing, ‘Emotion and Cognition’; Tappolet, *Emotions, Values, and Agency*, 9.) This broad use is, admittedly, still a bit of a misnomer if we believe, as I do, that cognition itself is embodied, and that emotions are therefore not opposed to cognition. I follow others, however, in reserving the term *cognitivist* for theories that understand cognition in terms processing and representation, while myself adopting an embodied, ‘post-cognitivist’ view of cognition. See Heras-Escribano, *The Philosophy of Affordances*, 2. Another reason to stick with the label *cognitivist* is that this use of the term—misnomer or not—has become commonly used in social theory, for example to describe theories of ideology that rely excessively on belief and representation. See Haslanger, ‘Racism, Ideology, and Social Movements’.

<sup>31</sup> Hartmann, ‘A Comedy We Believe In’, 146.

<sup>32</sup> Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, 23.

valuable has been lost. Alternatively, emotions can be seen as more akin to perceptions as *presenting* the world to us in a certain way: ‘Just as perceptual experiences rationalize empirical beliefs in virtue of presenting reality as being some way, so too do certain of our emotional experiences’.<sup>33</sup> Thus, anger, for example, ‘presents its object as involving a moral violation’.<sup>34</sup> As we saw in the last chapter, Axel Honneth also ends up adopting this model in understanding (at least the morally relevant) emotions as the perception that one’s explicitly or implicitly held normative expectations have been violated.

On the epistemological model, emotions have a place in democratic deliberation not because they are superior to reason (as in Massumi) or as a necessary complement to rational deliberation (as in Mouffe or Walzer), but because emotions *are* rational. Emotions present the world in a certain way and, like beliefs, they can be correct or mistaken, but, either way, they constitute intelligible claims which can be evaluated by rational standards: ‘anger that *p* is apt only if *p* constitutes a genuine moral violation’.<sup>35</sup> ‘Moral feelings’, as Rawls puts it, ‘presuppose an explanation by reference to an acceptance of the principles of right and justice’.<sup>36</sup> This model, then, denies the dichotomy between rationality and emotion.

However, in virtually assimilating emotion to reason, the epistemological model surreptitiously reinscribes the underlying Cartesian dualism. Seeing emotions as judgments or perceptions, after all, elides their embodied nature. This does not mean that these authors deny that emotions typically have bodily aspects; however, they do not provide the necessary conceptual tools for understanding the relation between the cognitive and somatic elements as anything more than a contingent correlation. Nussbaum, for instance, argues that the body’s ‘fluttering or trembling’ cannot be equated with emotion, because this ‘movement seems to lack the aboutness and the capacity for recognition that must be part of an emotion’.<sup>37</sup> It is convincing enough that emotions cannot be *reduced* to bodily movements, yet this hardly justifies defining emotions without *any* reference to their bodily aspects, as Nussbaum does. For we may think that the body’s

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<sup>33</sup> Milona, ‘Taking the Perceptual Analogy Seriously’, 900.

<sup>34</sup> Srinivasan, ‘The Aptness of Anger’, 129.

<sup>35</sup> Srinivasan, ‘The Aptness of Anger’, 129.

<sup>36</sup> Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 427.

<sup>37</sup> Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, 44.

‘fluttering and trembling’ is not a merely incidental feature of emotions either. Psychological experiments, for example, show that emotions can be induced by injecting unknowing subjects with adrenaline. Having received an injection which produces ‘a state of physiological arousal for which the individual has no immediate explanation, he will “label” this state and describe his feelings in terms of the cognitions available to him’.<sup>38</sup> On the epistemological model, we have to say the following: emotions are judgments/perceptions, but the body’s ‘non-reasoning movements’ can (at least sometimes) induce these judgments/perceptions. This, however, reintroduces the dichotomies between feeling and reason, and body and mind. If we simply define emotion as being on the side of reason, but divorced from the body’s ‘non-reasoning movements’, then the latter become nothing but violent currents pushing about the ship of reason. Indeed, if emotions are cognitive judgments, always discursively mediated, and the body’s physiological changes are entirely external to this judgment, we are back to something like Massumi’s affect theory—just with another reversal of the normative values assigned to mind and body.

The conclusion, then, is that the dichotomy between emotion and rationality, while discredited in theory, turns out to be very hard to avoid—crypto-dualism seems to stubbornly reappear even in the work of authors who explicitly aim to challenge it. A political theory that avoids such dichotomous thinking needs a model of emotions that starts from their embodied nature without divorcing them from cognition.

## 2. Phenomenology of emotions

Increasingly, some authors have turned to phenomenology to explain political emotions.<sup>39</sup> Especially work on feelings like anxiety and grief, not least climate anxiety and climate grief, has productively applied phenomenologically grounded approaches.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, phenomenological approaches to anger as a political emotion have been proposed.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Schachter and Singer, ‘Cognitive, Social, and Physiological Determinants’, 381.

<sup>39</sup> One of the best examples of this is Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. See also Szanto and Slaby, ‘Political Emotions’.

<sup>40</sup> Butler, *What World Is This?*, chap. 2; Fernandez Velasco, ‘Ecological Grief as a Crisis in Dwelling’.

<sup>41</sup> Leboeuf, ‘Anger as a Political Emotion’.

These approaches focus on how the world is experienced in and through emotions. Rather than mere perceptions of moral valences, they tend to focus on how the subject experiences their place in the world and the possibilities for action open to them. Starting from a phenomenological point of view, at least two salient features of emotions emerge that are not adequately accounted for by cognitivist models: their embodied nature and their connection to action. I argue that the concept of *affordances* from ecological psychology can help us make sense of both aspects while avoiding the danger of inadvertent dualism.

### 2.1 *Embodied feelings*

Phenomenology begins from the *experience* of emotion by, initially, suspending our theoretical attitude to the phenomenon under investigation. It asks us to abstract—as far as possible and only temporarily—from any theoretical knowledge we have of X, and instead reflect on *what it is like* to experience X. Consider the following quote from Maurice Merleau-Ponty:

It is only afterwards, when I reflect on what anger is and remark that it involves a certain (negative) evaluation of another person, that I come to the following conclusion. Anger is, after all, a thought; to be angry is to think that the other person is odious and this thought, like all others, cannot—as Descartes has shown—reside in any piece of matter and therefore must belong to the mind. I may very well think in such terms but as soon as I turn back to the real experience of anger, which was the spur to my reflections, I am forced to acknowledge that this anger does not lie beyond my body, directing it from without, but rather that in some inexplicable sense it is bound up with my body.<sup>42</sup>

What Merleau-Ponty points out here is that we tend to rationalize our emotions after the fact, and this is precisely what makes cognitivist accounts look plausible. As social beings, we are usually called upon to explain and justify our emotions, and we learn to make sense of our feelings in normative terms.<sup>43</sup> It is a tempting step from here to conclude that it is this ‘cognitively sharpened’ version of my anger, the *thought* ‘that the other person is

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<sup>42</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, 64.

<sup>43</sup> D’Arms and Jacobsen term this process ‘cognitive sharpening’. See also next chapter for further discussion. D’Arms and Jacobson, ‘The Significance of Recalcitrant Emotion’, 137.

odious', that *really* constitutes anger, and that the 'unsharpened' anger of, say, a small child is just an embryonic, 'immature' version of the former.<sup>44</sup> Yet, Merleau-Ponty urges us to consider what it feels like to experience an emotion, and he claims that we do not, in the moment, experience anger primarily as a judgment but rather as an embodied reaction to the world.

Celine Leboeuf, likewise, argues that to understand the political potential of anger, we need to understand its bodily character. Discussing Frantz Fanon's account of his anger in *Black Skin, White Masks*, she describes anger as characterized by an 'expansiveness of the body'.<sup>45</sup> Here, she quotes Fanon: 'I can feel that familiar rush of blood surge up from the numerous dispersions of my being. I am about to lose my temper. The fire had died long ago, and once again the Negro is trembling'.<sup>46</sup> We can agree with Nussbaum that emotions cannot be *reduced* to the body's 'fluttering or trembling', but Leboeuf convincingly shows that Nussbaum's analysis of anger is severely lacking precisely because she ignores this aspect. For it is this bodily, surging feeling, Leboeuf argues, that 'enables members of oppressed groups to reaffirm themselves under oppressive conditions'.<sup>47</sup> Even when, say, Fanon's anger is 'tainted by ideas of retaliation'—on which grounds Nussbaum would dismiss it as irrational—it 'not only awakens him to his oppression but also sets the stage for reflections on racism that transcend the desire for revenge'.<sup>48</sup>

Of course, this surging, expansive character is specific to anger, rage, and perhaps, though in a different way, feelings like pride and joy.<sup>49</sup> Other emotions are constituted by entirely different bodily feelings. Sartre, for instance, describes 'passive sadness' as characterized by 'dejected behaviour; there is muscular relaxation, paleness and cold at the extremities; one turns away towards some corner to sit there motionless, making the least possible contact with the world'.<sup>50</sup> Or Ann Cvetkovich describes anxiety as 'a feeling deeply embedded in different parts of my body' which '[l]ike physical pain, [...] kept me

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<sup>44</sup> See Kauppinen, 'Valuing Anger'.

<sup>45</sup> Leboeuf, 'Anger as a Political Emotion', 23.

<sup>46</sup> Leboeuf, 'Anger as a Political Emotion', 23; Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 114.

<sup>47</sup> Leboeuf, 'Anger as a Political Emotion', 24.

<sup>48</sup> Leboeuf, 'Anger as a Political Emotion', 26.

<sup>49</sup> For an account of collective joy as a 'potent energy' in the context of political rioting, see Cohen, 'Sovereign Chaos and Riotous Affects'.

<sup>50</sup> Sartre, *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions*, 43.

fixated on the immediate present, unable to think about other things'.<sup>51</sup> The lesson I take from Merleau-Ponty, Leboeuf, and Fanon, for now, is simply that we need to treat the embodied feeling of emotions not as an accidental but as a central feature of political emotions.

## 2.2 *Emotion and action*

A second, closely related, feature of emotions that cognitivist theories neglect is their strong connection to action.<sup>52</sup> '[E]motions exist', according to psychologist Nico Frijda, 'for the sake of action, for dealing with the environment'.<sup>53</sup> Naturally, we do not always act on our emotions, but they always involve what psychologists call 'action tendencies' or 'action readiness'.<sup>54</sup> Thus, paradigmatically, fear involves a readiness to escape, anger involves readiness to attack, shame to hide, etc. In political contexts, this connection between emotion and action is, of course, also crucial in that emotions are thought to be key drivers of political action.<sup>55</sup>

Returning to Leboeuf's account of anger, we can see how the embodied experience of emotions is intimately linked to their action tendencies. The 'physical surge' one experiences is precisely a readiness for action. Fanon describes his rush of rage thus: 'At last I was set free from my rumination. At the same time, I accomplished two things: I identified my enemies and I made a scene. A grand slam.'<sup>56</sup> Anger, here, lets Fanon break free from 'rumination' and instead puts him on the path of aggressive action: identifying his enemy, in this case, is not just an intellectual task of making a judgment about who is blameworthy for racism, but rather involves the concrete identification of a target for the expression of his anger.

Even when we do not act on our emotions the action readiness is central to their phenomenology—and this gap between the *urge* to act and the *decision* to act precisely highlights the importance of making action tendencies central to our theory of emotions.

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<sup>51</sup> Cvetkovich, *Depression*, 35.

<sup>52</sup> See Naar, 'Emotion'.

<sup>53</sup> Frijda, 'Emotions and Action', 158.

<sup>54</sup> Frijda, 'Emotions and Action'; Fontaine and Scherer, 'Emotion Is for Doing'.

<sup>55</sup> Jasper, 'The Emotions of Protest'; Jasper, 'Motivation and Emotion'; Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, 138.

<sup>56</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 114.

A cognitivist like Martha Nussbaum would say that an emotion motivates me to act *because* it consists in a judgment that justifies such action: in fear, I judge that an object is dangerous, and this judgment logically leads me to conclude that I ought to run away. Yet, we very often feel emotions, and their accompanying urge to act in a certain way, which conflict with our better judgment: I may feel intense fear at a harmless spider yet know very well that there is no danger and decide not to flee (or my fear may override my judgment, and I do flee). Analysing such cases as instances of conflicting judgments (I simultaneously judge the spider to be dangerous and not dangerous) ignores the phenomenological difference between the embodied *urge* to flee and the rational, impassionate judgment not to flee.

Naturally, not all emotions invite explosive and aggressive action. Feelings like shame and sadness usually involve the opposite: *withdrawal* from action. In the extreme case, experiences of depression are often characterized by the complete loss of meaningful possibilities for action.<sup>57</sup> This, however, only further underscores the fact that emotions, phenomenologically, are largely characterized by their action tendencies or lack thereof: sometimes, like in depression, it is the very absence of possibilities for action that characterize a certain feeling. Again: depression is not characterized by the decision not to act (for we inevitably do carry out some actions even in depression), but by the way we no longer feel *pulled* to act.

### 2.3 *Affordances*

The two aspects of emotion described above—their embodied nature and their connection to action—are hardly controversial. I do not imagine that anyone would explicitly deny that these are important features. Yet, they are generally inadequately dealt with in most contemporary work on political emotions. There are two tendencies which we ought to avoid. First, there is the tendency, exemplified by the cognitivist perspective, to simply acknowledge emotions' embodied nature without letting it affect the theory. Emotions are theorized as judgments or representations and their bodily feelings are either

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<sup>57</sup> Ratcliffe, *Experiences of Depression*, chap. 6; Fusar-Poli et al., 'The Lived Experience of Depression', 356.

reduced to a secondary status, as in Nussbaum,<sup>58</sup> or indeed embodied action is simply assimilated to judgment by calling it ‘bodily judgment’.<sup>59</sup> On the other hand there is the tendency, exemplified in affect theories, to fetishize these bodily features by seeing affect as a mysterious subliminal and impersonal process that drives action, so to speak, behind the subject’s back.<sup>60</sup> In order to avoid both tendencies, I propose introducing the concept of *affordances* from ecological psychology. This concept helpfully connects the claims about embodiment and action, lending them further specificity and clarity, and it allows us to make embodied action central to our understanding of emotion without reifying it.

The concept of affordances was first developed as part of James and Eleanor Gibson’s ecological approach to perception strongly influenced by the work of Merleau-Ponty, among others. Simply put, affordances are opportunities for action that subjects perceive in their environment. According to the Gibsons’ theory, an organism’s perception is structured by its goal-directed interaction with its environment.<sup>61</sup> The organism perceives its environment always in relation to its own body and the possibilities that the environment affords for need satisfaction. These affordances, crucially, are not inferences that the mind draws based on its prior perception of the environment and its own body, but rather perceived directly as features of the objects of perception. Thus, Gibson writes, quoting the earlier Gestalt psychologist Kurt Koffka, “‘a fruit says ‘Eat me’; water says

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<sup>58</sup> Nussbaum acknowledges that ‘emotions are, like other mental processes, bodily’. But this precisely sidesteps the claim that, while all mental processes are instantiated in a physical body, there is a phenomenological difference between judgments and emotions. She further claims that we ‘probably do not have reason even to include in the definition of a given emotion-type reference to any definite bodily state’. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, 25.

<sup>59</sup> Solomon, ‘Emotions, Thoughts and Feelings’. Tellingly, Solomon—one of the most important contemporary philosophers of emotion—began his career by developing a theory of emotions as judgments, then, in response to criticisms that he had neglected the bodily aspects, first included ‘bodily judgments’ in his theory, only to eventually renounce the idea of emotions as judgments as ‘too intellectual’ in favour of an account of emotions as ‘engagements with the world’. See Solomon, ‘Emotions in Phenomenology and Existentialism’, 300; Solomon, *True to Our Feelings*, 204.

<sup>60</sup> In this regard, see for example Massumi’s discussion of the famous ‘half second’ experiment which showed that subjects exhibited brain activation associated with a specific decision 0.5 seconds before reporting awareness of their decision. Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 195–98. For a critique of his use of this experiment, see Leys, *The Ascent of Affect*, 324–30.

<sup>61</sup> Gibson, *The Ecological Approach*, 119; Segundo-Ortin and Raja, *Ecological Psychology*, 22–25.

‘Drink me’; thunder says ‘Fear me’” [...] These values are vivid and essential features of the experience itself.<sup>62</sup>

This allows us to say with additional precision how emotions are connected with action: emotions are constituted by the affordances for action that we do or do not perceive in our environment. Sartre already expressed something like this idea in *Being and Nothingness*, when he wrote that

modifications to be imposed on the world are given thetically in present things as objective potentialities which have to realize themselves by borrowing our body as the instrument of their realization. It is thus that the man who is angry sees on the face of his opponent the objective quality of asking for a punch in the nose.<sup>63</sup>

Thus anger, here, is characterized by the affordance for punching one’s adversary. The affordances that characterize a specific feeling, however, need not be limited to affordances of the *object* of one’s emotion, but can be features of the environment at large. For example, when Koffka writes that thunder says, ‘Fear me’, he is being slightly imprecise, for while the thunder is the object of my fear, fearing is not an action afforded by thunder in the way a fruit affords eating or a face affords punching. Rather, my fear is characterized by the way I now perceive my whole environment in relation to my urge to find shelter. Equally, a feeling like grief is characterized not by any affordances that the object of my grief takes on but by how I experience the world in the absence of the lost object: when losing a beloved, the ‘wrenching character’ of grief ‘comes in part from the fact that it violently tears the fabric of hope, planning, and expectation that I have built up around her all my life’.<sup>64</sup> Thus, it is far too narrow to understand emotions as judgments or representations of specific objects; an emotion, rather, is ‘a specific manner of apprehending the world’, to speak with Sartre once again.<sup>65</sup>

Affordance theory also allows us to highlight the role of the body and its relation to action without falling prey to a naïve cult of immediacy. For ecological psychology, all perception is embodied perception: ‘One sees the environment not with the eyes but with

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<sup>62</sup> Gibson, *The Ecological Approach*, 129.

<sup>63</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 163; cf. also Sartre, *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions*, 39.

<sup>64</sup> Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, 80.

<sup>65</sup> Sartre, *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions*, 35.

the eyes-in-the-head-on-the-body-resting-on-the-ground'.<sup>66</sup> What our environment affords to us, after all, depends on our bodies and their potential interactions with the environment. Recall, again, Leboeuf's description of anger: in rage, it is not just that my opponent's face 'asks for a punch in the nose', but this is also accompanied by a surging, expansive feeling in my own body which makes certain affordances available. Thus, my body shapes my perception, but it clearly does not do so in a way that is unmediated by concepts and cognition. An affordance is a relation between a material body and a material environment,<sup>67</sup> but this is not a relationship of unmediated 'thing-power' as new materialist, like Jane Bennett, might put it.<sup>68</sup> Rather, as Gibson writes, an affordance 'is *both* physical and psychical'<sup>69</sup>—it is because I have a concept of 'apple' that I see the apple as affording eating. Affordances *appear as* immediate features of objects, but 'the "immediacy" of the reaction is not itself a sign of a lack of mediation'.<sup>70</sup> Fuchs describes this as a 'circular' relationship between a subject and its material environment: while 'the living being [subjectively] makes sense of the environment as affording certain possibilities of action', this environment, in turn, 'objectively offers precisely these possibilities of interaction, [and through] the course of a concrete action, these affordances and their sensory flow continually define the body's further sense-making activity'.<sup>71</sup> There is no unmediated experience, but neither is experience ever disembodied.

Thus, affordance theory nicely ties together the two claims above about the centrality of body and action in the experience of emotion in a way that does more than pay lip service to embodiment yet avoids overstating the case. At the same time, a third important feature of emotions has emerged from this discussion: they are *relational*. As Sara Ahmed also points out, 'emotions are not simply "in" the subject or the object' but in the relationship between the two.<sup>72</sup> If we make affordances central to our understanding of emotions, then we can see how they are shaped in reciprocal interactions between subjects

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<sup>66</sup> Gibson, *The Ecological Approach*, 195.

<sup>67</sup> For an account of affordances as 'objective relational properties', see Chemero, 'An Outline of a Theory of Affordances'.

<sup>68</sup> Bennett, 'The Force of Things'.

<sup>69</sup> Gibson, *The Ecological Approach*, 121. Emphasis mine.

<sup>70</sup> Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 7.

<sup>71</sup> Fuchs, 'The Circularity of the Embodied Mind', 5.

<sup>72</sup> Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 6.

and their material environment—and this opens the door for considering emotions as a social and political phenomenon from a materialist point of view, as we shall see.

### 3. Negative emotions as frustrated agency

Emotions, then, should be understood as a kind of ‘transformation of the world’ characterized by a change in the salience of affordances. But it remains to be explained how exactly this transformation should be understood: after all, our experience of the world is always constituted by affordances and these affordances are always changing (because the environment changes, because we move, or because we shift our attention, etc.). I am not assuming that we ever have anything like an affectively neutral experience of the world that can be contrasted with an emotional experience—but nevertheless, our experiences can be more or less affectively charged, and the affective charge can have different valences and qualities. It is this variation in the affective quality of our experience that allows us to pick out discrete ‘emotions’ and label them instances of ‘anger’, ‘sadness’, ‘joy’, ‘shame’, etc. So, what is specific about negative emotions as transformations in our experience?

At this point, it is worth recalling the discussion of Honneth’s approach to emotions described in the previous chapter. He introduced an understanding of negative emotions, which he attributes to Dewey, as ‘the experience of being repelled by a failed, interrupted attempt to execute an action’—only to then single out the normatively relevant emotions as those where one’s *normative expectations* are disrupted.<sup>73</sup> I want to suggest revisiting the idea of negative emotions as interrupted agency but without the reliance on implicit normative principles which led to Honneth’s overly subjectivist understanding of feelings.

To my knowledge, however, Dewey never actually expounded the kind of theory of emotion Honneth attributes to him.<sup>74</sup> Someone who *did* develop a theory very much along those lines, on the other hand, was Jean-Paul Sartre in an early and relatively neglected work, *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions*.<sup>75</sup> In it, he suggests that emotions arise as

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<sup>73</sup> Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, 136.

<sup>74</sup> It would certainly require some interpretive freedom to find that theory in Dewey’s two papers on ‘The Theory of Emotion’ which Honneth cites. See Dewey, ‘The Theory of Emotion I’; Dewey, ‘The Theory of Emotion II’. See also Garrison, ‘Dewey’s Theory of Emotions’.

<sup>75</sup> For a contemporary defence of Sartre’s theory, see Hartmann, ‘A Comedy We Believe In’.

reactions to frustrated agency. We ordinarily experience our world as ‘furrowed with strait and narrow paths leading to such and such determinate end’ but an emotion is a ‘transformation’ of this world that occurs ‘[w]hen the paths before us become too difficult’ and ‘we can no longer put up with such an exacting and difficult world. All ways are barred and nevertheless we must act’.<sup>76</sup> Sartre, it has to be clarified, intends this as an adequate explanation of *all* emotions, even joy.<sup>77</sup> I find this implausible as an account of emotion tout court—many positive emotions are caused by an expanded feeling of opportunities for action, rather than blocked agency. But it is fruitful, I suggest, to understand most, if not all, *negative* emotions as experiences of frustrated agency.<sup>78</sup>

Take, for example, Sartre’s description of ‘passive sadness’ (already briefly mentioned above). This is a type of sadness which is a reaction to a significant loss making it impossible to go on acting on the world as one is used to—be it through the loss of a significant relationship and the stability and emotional support it provided, or the loss of material means and the physical comfort and security they afforded. This sadness is characterized by a turning away from the world which is lived through as objectively ‘debased’ lacking in affordances for action. In this melancholy, I experience the world as ‘a totally undifferentiated structure’; ‘I make the world into an affectively neutral reality’. Having lost a significant condition of my agency, ‘lacking both the ability and the will to carry out the projects I formerly entertained, I behave in such a manner that the universe requires nothing more from me’.<sup>79</sup> This account bears a lot of similarity to more recent first-person phenomenological accounts of depression as an experience of the world as not offering opportunities for meaningful action.<sup>80</sup>

Sartre, though, ends up overgeneralizing the experience of being unable to act effectively, and considers emotion as such as opposed to action. He thinks that when ‘all ways out [are] barred, the consciousness leaps into the magical world of emotion’<sup>81</sup>—in

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<sup>76</sup> Sartre, *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions*, 39.

<sup>77</sup> Sartre, *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions*, 46.

<sup>78</sup> I think that the concept of negative emotional valence could fruitfully be cashed out in terms of blocked agency, making it definitive of ‘negative’ emotions. This, however, is not an argument I will make here, and, for the purposes of this thesis, I am quite satisfied with simply showing that anger and depression are fruitfully analysed as perceptions of frustrated agency.

<sup>79</sup> Sartre, *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions*, 44.

<sup>80</sup> Ratcliffe, *Experiences of Depression*; Fusar-Poli et al., ‘The Lived Experience of Depression’.

<sup>81</sup> Sartre, *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions*, 51.

other words emotional behaviour is an *Ersatz* for action. This may seem plausible for an emotion like sadness, but it is directly contradicted by the way many other emotional experiences *do* involve strong ‘action tendencies’ as described above—and by Sartre’s own later claim that the angry person ‘sees on the face of his opponent the objective quality of asking for a punch in the nose’.<sup>82</sup> Here, it seems clear that being angry is not a substitute for action, but indeed reveals new affordances in the world, such as the opportunity for physical violence.

We cannot see negative emotions as constituted by a lack of possibilities for action as such. However, there is a different sense of frustrated agency that will allow us to retain the gist of Sartre’s theory. First, there is a straightforward sense in which negative emotions often result from the frustration of specific action directed toward a determinate aim. So, if someone obstructs me in my attempt to walk down the street, and I get angry at them, this can be understood as a frustration of my agency even though the anger itself may lead to action (e.g., shoving the person away) rather than withdrawal. The same can be said if I walk down the street and am interrupted by something dangerous (e.g., a fire) and run away in fear. Sometimes, then, negative emotions arise from the obstruction of specific aims and desires, and our emotions are ways of dealing with those obstructions—whether that be by aggressively asserting our agency or by ‘giving up’ on action and divesting the world of its affective significance.

However, focusing on the frustration of specific aims can be misleading insofar as we often have strong emotional reactions to events that do not clearly obstruct a definite goal-directed course of action. Sights and insults are often examples of this. Let us return once more to Fanon’s description of his encounter with the ‘white gaze’ and the anger it arouses in him when a girl on a train identifies him with a racial epithet—a situation that enrages him despite not in any obvious sense obstructing his actions. Fanon describes his reaction not in the popular Aristotelian terms as the perception of having been unjustly slighted (though, of course, he does not deny that it *also* involves that) but rather in embodied terms as a breakdown of what he, following Merleau-Ponty, calls the ‘body schema’. The body schema is our intuitive understanding of our own body as a body in the world and the movements and actions we can accomplish with it; it is a ‘slow composition of my *self*

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<sup>82</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 163.

as a body in the middle of a spatial and temporal world [...], a definitive structuring of the self and of the world'.<sup>83</sup> Ordinarily, this body schema allows us to move through the world seamlessly, but in the encounter with the white gaze it breaks down as Fanon becomes aware that he does not fit into the white world around him:

the corporeal schema crumbled, its place taken by a racial epidermal schema. In the train it was no longer a question of being aware of my body in the third person but in a triple person. In the train I was given not one but two, three places.<sup>84</sup>

Fanon here describes how the experience of being recognized *as* a Black man leads to the breakdown of the seamless experience of acting on the world. 'The white world', Fanon continues, 'barred me from all participation. A man was expected to behave like a man. I was expected to behave like a black man'.<sup>85</sup> What is significant here is that it was not the obstruction of a specific action, but rather a general sense of one's agentive relationship to the world becoming problematic.

This situation occurs shortly after Fanon's arrival in France from the Antilles, and he explicitly contrasts his seamless, unburdened experience of existing in the Black world with the sudden 'unfamiliar weight' of 'the white world [in which] the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema'.<sup>86</sup> Fanon's rage responds to the loss of the normal, habitual space of seamless action that he experiences once he realizes that, in the eyes of the other, he is no longer a subject, but a racialized object 'unmercifully imprisoned' by the white gaze. He even likens this experience to 'an amputation'<sup>87</sup> in a way that tellingly recalls Merleau-Ponty's discussion of phantom limb syndrome. The continued subjective existence of a limb that has actually been amputated shows, for Merleau-Ponty, that 'our body comprises as it were two distinct layers, that of the habit-body and that of the body at this moment'.<sup>88</sup> In Fanon's case, we can say that the 'habit-body' of the Black world clashes with 'the body at this moment' as it is placed in the

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<sup>83</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 111.

<sup>84</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 112.

<sup>85</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 114.

<sup>86</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 110.

<sup>87</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 112.

<sup>88</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 95.

white world—in this case not because of a physical change in the body’s composition, but because of a change in the way the world around it structures its opportunities for action.

In strikingly similar terms, von Redecker has recently discussed the violent *ressentiment* of contemporary reactionary authoritarian movements in terms of ‘phantom possession’. ‘The notion of phantom possession’, she writes, ‘treats whiteness [and masculinity] as an embodied disposition and entitlement to appropriation’.<sup>89</sup> When this embodied entitlement to dominion over the labour and bodies of others is threatened by emancipatory movements, the ensuing backlash can be explained as an emotional reaction to the loss of these felt privileges and an attempt to violently restore them. We may once again say that the ‘habit-body’ of the patriarchal and white supremacist world clashes with the reality of a world where non-white and non-male subjects resist domination.

Negative emotions are, as Sartre poetically puts it in one place, ‘consciousness of the degradation of the world’.<sup>90</sup> ‘The world,’ here, refers to the world of my perception with the affordances for action it offers me, and its ‘degradation’ is the disintegration of the structures that support my habitual action. Negative emotions *can* arise from the frustration of actions directed at specific aims, but, perhaps more often, they respond to frustrations of our embodied expectations and dispositions: from what Bourdieu would call our *habitus*.

Bringing in Bourdieu at this point is helpful because the concept of habitus explicitly links subjective experience to a materialist social theory. As Bourdieu puts it, agents’ experiences of the world, ‘far from being interchangeable, as phenomenist perspectivism would have it, always depend, in reality, on their position in the social world of which they are the product but which they help to produce’.<sup>91</sup> One comes to acquire a specific habitus—that is, a system of bodily dispositions which allows the subject to intuitively ‘comprehend’ the outside world through action—through ‘the incorporation of social structures in the form of dispositional structures, of objective chances in the form of expectations or anticipations’.<sup>92</sup> Subjects have the experience of a harmonious existence

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<sup>89</sup> von Redecker, ‘Ownership’s Shadow’, 51.

<sup>90</sup> Sartre, *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions*, 52.

<sup>91</sup> Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 189.

<sup>92</sup> Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 130.

in the world insofar as their embodied dispositions are in accord with the objective possibilities afforded to them by their physical and social environment.

As such, Bourdieu suggests that agents' 'inner satisfaction' depends less on 'an abstract, universal capacity to satisfy needs and desires abstractly defined for an indifferent agent' and more on 'the degree to which the mode of functioning of the social world or the field in which they are inserted enables his habitus to come into its own'.<sup>93</sup> Correlatively, we can see negative emotions as the conscious experience of the mismatch between one's habitus and the world. Feeling 'out of tune' with the world can lead to a number of different emotional reactions: angrily trying to bend the world to one's will, hiding oneself in shame,<sup>94</sup> anxiously looking out for threats everywhere, or withdrawing from the world into depression. Such experiences would obviously not be possible if subjects were always fully and perfectly adjusted to the social world they function in—if they were always already constituted as completely 'docile bodies' as some caricatures of Foucault would have it. Negative emotions are examples of what Bourdieu calls 'mismatches, discordances and misfires'<sup>95</sup> which reveal chinks in the smooth reproduction of the social order—and it is precisely this that makes them politically interesting.

#### 4. Negative emotions as the experience of social contradiction

The last point—that negative emotions point to failures not just in the seamless interaction of a subject with its world but also in the reproduction of a social order—is crucial to a materialist theory of political emotions and requires further elaboration. Let us therefore move up and consider feelings not from the point of view of the individual, as we have so far, but from the point of view of society.

Bourdieu's theory highlights the way subjects and their emotions are products of the society they inhabit; for this reason it has often been criticized as determinist and denying agency. Probyn, for example, worries that the notion of habitus 'conceptually means that the body is captured by the social'.<sup>96</sup> This type of worry is what motivates the affect-

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<sup>93</sup> Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 150.

<sup>94</sup> For a phenomenological account of shame as a response to racism that fits well with my account, see Webster, 'Making Sense of Shame'.

<sup>95</sup> Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 159.

<sup>96</sup> Probyn, 'Shame in the Habitus', 232.

theoretical approaches criticized above to locate affect outside of this ‘capture’ as an extra-social source of resistance. However, saying that the body is thoroughly social only leads to a determinist view if we understand ‘the social’ as a closed totality that stands outside of and determines human consciousness. If we understand the social as itself produced and reproduced through human activity and, moreover, never fully closed but full of contradictions and fissures, then the determinism worry disappears. While Bourdieu did leave room for ‘mismatches, discordances and misfires’ in his concept of habitus,<sup>97</sup> it is fair to say that these contradictory moments remain undertheorized in his work. It is therefore worth turning to Marxist feminists who have focused more on the active and crisis-ridden character of social reproduction.

Any stable society needs to produce subjects who are adjusted to function in that society. This ‘interpellation’ of subjects involves, as Bourdieu and the likes of Althusser, Foucault, and Butler, have taught us, not only ideological beliefs but also the disciplining of bodies and their habits.<sup>98</sup> And, of course, a central part of that disciplining involves the shaping of subjects’ emotions and desires—what has been termed ‘emotional’ or ‘affective reproduction’.<sup>99</sup> In practice, this ‘physical, emotional and sexual’ labour of reproducing subjects who are able to function and produce in a capitalist society is heavily gendered.<sup>100</sup> Women are assigned, as Angela Davis puts it, ‘the mission of unknowingly creating human beings who will “feel at home” in a reified world’.<sup>101</sup> Social reproduction, then, is also *emotional* reproduction in at least two (interconnected) senses.<sup>102</sup> First, the labour of reproducing subjects is in large part emotional labour: it involves activities of caring and intimate relations that require displaying (and, to some extent, also *feeling*) certain

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<sup>97</sup> Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 159.

<sup>98</sup> See Haslanger, ‘Disciplined Bodies and Ideology Critique’; Butler, *Bodies That Matter*.

<sup>99</sup> Gotby, *They Call It Love*; Read, ‘The Affective Reproduction of Capital’.

<sup>100</sup> Federici, *Wages Against Housework*, 3.

<sup>101</sup> Davis, ‘Women and Capitalism’, 170.

<sup>102</sup> Whitney distinguishes three types of affective labour: productive, reproductive, and byproductive. The first two correspond roughly to the two senses of emotional reproduction I describe here, although I would draw the boundaries slightly differently. Thus, the labour of ‘producing’ affects is a key part of social reproduction which is why I am distinguishing between various forms of reproductive labour rather than between productive and reproductive. Whitney’s category of byproductive labour is in my view an important subtype of the labour of reproducing well-aligned subjects and should not be distinguished as a separate kind. Whitney, ‘Byproductive Labor’.

emotions. Second, what is reproduced in this process is, in part, subjects' emotional and affective dispositions: subjects whose embodied expectations align with the affordances of their social world and who internalize the appropriate 'feeling rules'.<sup>103</sup>

If the social whole were a closed context of seamless domination, if subjects were always already perfectly interpellated into this whole, then negative emotions would not be possible. Yet, negative emotions *do* exist. In fact, they are ubiquitous, and this precisely shows that domination is not total but that there are always 'mismatches, discordances and misfires' in the mechanism of social reproduction—when negative emotions occur on a socially significant scale, we can indeed speak of a *crisis* of emotional reproduction. Such crises are, as many Marxist and feminist thinkers have argued, not incidental but a necessary part of a capitalist society. Marx already noted the internal contradictions of social reproduction under capitalism in the 'Working Day' chapter of *Capital*. In extracting the maximum possible surplus value from its workers, capital 'sap[s] the vital energy of the people at the root'.<sup>104</sup> However, while the greatest possible exploitation of this vital energy is in the capitalist's short-term interest, capitalism hereby also threatens its own conditions of existence by undermining the reproduction of the labour power on which it relies. One way in which capitalism manages this contradiction is, of course, by assigning the labour of restoring the workers' vital energies to women without remuneration. Yet, 'capitalism's orientation to unlimited accumulation tends to destabilize the[se] very processes of social reproduction' by, for example, devaluing care work or drawing women into the labour market, leading to constant 'care deficits'.<sup>105</sup> Negative emotions are both *constitutive* of such contradictions to the extent that the failure of reproduction is a failure to reproduce the right emotional states for the smooth functioning of the capitalist order; *and* they are the subjective *experiences* of such contradictions. In other words, negative emotions are objective social contradictions subjectively experiencing themselves.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Hochschild, *The Managed Heart*, chap. 4.

<sup>104</sup> Marx, *Capital* (Vol. 1), 273.

<sup>105</sup> Fraser, 'Crisis of Care?', 24.

<sup>106</sup> I will therefore refer to emotions more or less interchangeably as 'social contradictions' or as 'experiences of social contradictions'.

## CHAPTER 2

One source of these contradictions, then, lies in the fact that there are certain ‘natural’ needs, for example for alimentation and basic care, which cannot be eliminated but the provision of which capitalism nevertheless tends to undermine.<sup>107</sup> The social-reproductive contradictions are most obvious when capitalism undermines people’s ability to live a minimally healthy life, physically and mentally. Another more subtle source of these embodied contradictions, though, is the fact that society is not homogenous but constituted by various different ‘fields’ which agents move between. One’s habitus is, to some extent, field-specific: I may behave rather differently in a social, educational, professional, or family setting. But, nevertheless, expectations and embodied dispositions formed in one field can be transferred into others.

Recall how Fanon’s expectations clashed with the ‘unfamiliar weight’ of the white world when he moved from the Antilles to Europe. The physical move from one place to another highlights the clash but, of course, this kind of contrast can and does also occur within one geographical location. No matter how deeply entrenched and normalized racism is in a society, marginalized communities will still experience care and mutual recognition within their own communities, which then clashes with the disrespect encountered from dominant groups. Angela Davis makes this point nicely in her discussion of the role of Black women in fostering resistance in slave communities:

In the area of production, the slaves—pressed into the mold of beasts of burden—were forcibly deprived of their humanity. (And a human being thoroughly dehumanized, has no desire for freedom.) But the community gravitating around the domestic quarters might possibly permit a retrieval of the man and the woman in their fundamental humanity.<sup>108</sup>

While the system of chattel slavery went as far as possible to dehumanize slaves to extinguish even the desire for freedom, it could not fully succeed because the relations of care which existed in the domestic realm between slaves would keep alive the expectation of being treated with humanity. However, as Nancy Fraser points out, it would be a mistake to construe this domestic sphere ‘romantically, as “outside” capitalism and as inherently

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<sup>107</sup> I do not want to suggest that there is a clear distinction between ‘natural’ and ‘social’ needs, because even the most ‘natural’ need, like the need for food, is always socially mediated. See Adorno, ‘Theses on Need’, and further discussion in my concluding chapter, section 4.

<sup>108</sup> Davis, ‘Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role’, 6.

opposed to it'.<sup>109</sup> The domestic care labour of Black slave women was a necessary part of the reproduction of slave labour, just as care labour is necessary to reproduce the labour power of free workers under capitalism. Such realms of mutual care provide necessary resources for resisting oppression, but they should not be understood as operating 'outside' the logic of the reproduction of the social order: they too are sources of *internal* contradictions which manifest themselves as negative emotional reactions when the habitus of one field clashes with the experience of another.

One objection to this view of negative feelings as social contradictions might be that some negative emotional reactions seem to be a part of the reproduction of existing social relations, rather than a dysfunction. Take the kind of 'white rage' that has emerged as a backlash against anti-racist emancipatory movements. We can understand this as a form of anger arising from the perceived threat to white subject's entitlement to a dominant position in the racial hierarchy. Or take the misogynistic 'rage of lonely men' that results when men experience their lack of care as the violation of an entitlement to women's reproductive labour.<sup>110</sup> These embodied entitlements, as von Redecker nicely explains, are themselves both products of and help reproduce a capitalist society that relies on the extraction of reproductive labour.<sup>111</sup> As such, misogynistic or racist rage is functional for the reproduction of a patriarchal capitalist social order. However, this does not contradict the claim that negative emotions constitute social contradictions. For it is precisely a response to the fact that these entitlements are *challenged*. If everyone were perfectly interpellated into their place in a racist patriarchal hierarchy, there would be no need for the disciplining rage that puts subordinate subjects back 'in their place'. Social contradictions manifest themselves as negative emotional reactions, but there is no guarantee that these emotions will be directed in an emancipatory way: one can always try to resolve a contradiction by further displacing suffering onto others. Reactionary expressions of angry backlash against emancipatory movements are functional for the

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<sup>109</sup> Fraser, 'Behind Marx's Hidden Abode', 69.

<sup>110</sup> Tietjen and Tirkkonen, 'The Rage of Lonely Men'.

<sup>111</sup> von Redecker, 'Ownership's Shadow'.

maintenance of a social order precisely because they are attempts at *reasserting* that social order in the face of crisis.<sup>112</sup>

Negative emotions, then, are the subjective consciousness of social contradictions. And while this consciousness does not necessarily express itself in emancipatory ways it is what makes social transformation possible. ‘It is a part of the mechanism of domination to forbid recognition of the suffering it produces’, as Adorno reminds us,<sup>113</sup> because it is the recognition of our dissatisfaction that drives us to change things. Or, in Sara Ahmed’s words: ‘the necessity of happiness [is] an exclusion not just of unhappiness but of possibility’.<sup>114</sup> The persistence of negative feelings shows that subjects are never fully interpellated into the social world and thereby offers the possibility for resistance and change. But it is no more than a possibility. What is needed to realize that potential, in the words of bell hooks, is for ‘rage against the status quo to assume the form of strategic resistance’.<sup>115</sup> How it can do so is the question I explore in the following chapters.

## 5. Conclusion

This chapter has surveyed various philosophical approaches that have had something interesting to say about political emotions, and it has provided the building blocks for the critical theory of anger and depression that I shall develop over the course of the remaining chapters.

The attraction of a theory of emotions for social and political philosophy is that it promises an understanding of the subjectivity of social actors linking the embodied and rational aspects of political action. Nevertheless, as I argued in my critique of cognitivism and affect theory, overcoming Cartesian images of the mind and the body is much easier said than done. To avoid the danger of relapsing into unintentional dualism myself, I have tried to provide some theoretical tools that make the relationship between mind, body, social structures, and social action more determinate. With Sartre, we should understand

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<sup>112</sup> Which is not meant to imply that there is ever a time when capitalism was *not* in crisis. One of the key points of theories that emphasize the contradictory character of capitalism is exactly that these crises are permanent and necessary features of this social order — and so are the emotional mechanisms of reaction to crisis.

<sup>113</sup> Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 93.

<sup>114</sup> Ahmed, ‘Killing Joy’, 592.

<sup>115</sup> hooks, *Killing Rage*, 30.

negative emotions in terms of the disruption of habitual embodied action. This understanding, though, needs to be supplemented, on one hand, by the psychological theory of affordances which specifies the way consciousness of the world and its action possibilities is constituted by the relation between an embodied subject and the material environment; and, on the other hand, by a theory of social and emotional reproduction that explains both the affective interpellation of subjects into their social world *and* the manifold contradictions and discordances which lead them to feel out of tune.

At first sight, this might seem like a rather eclectic mix of theoretical ideas. But, on closer inspection, they hang together very naturally to provide a materialist understanding of emotions. Marx and Engels, in *The German Ideology*, wrote that consciousness is ‘directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men—the language of real life’.<sup>116</sup> Far from the simplistic view of consciousness as merely superstructural or epiphenomenal still frequently attributed to Marxist materialism, this suggests an understanding of consciousness as an integral part of our interaction with the world quite reminiscent of the one found in phenomenology and ecological psychology. Our subjective perception of the world is shaped by the affordances offered by the relationship between the material environment and our physical bodies—and that perception, in turn, shapes how we act upon the world to reshape the material environment and the affordances it offers (the ‘circular’ relationship described by Fuchs<sup>117</sup>). Our consciousness is always the consciousness of beings actively reproducing themselves and their conditions of existence—including the emotional reproduction of subjects who ‘feel at home’ in that social world. Negative feelings, then, are the ‘consciousness of the degradation of the world’, but in revealing contradictions in the affective reproduction of society, they also harbour the possibility for social change.

While the main aim of this chapter has been to build the foundation for my theoretical treatment of anger and depression, I hope it has also contributed to dispelling some misunderstandings about materialism. One of the factors motivating the affective turn in political theory, I argued above, was a dissatisfaction with models of political agents as disembodied rational or utility-calculating individuals. In response to both liberal

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<sup>116</sup> Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology* (1998), 42.

<sup>117</sup> Fuchs, ‘The Circularity of the Embodied Mind’.

rationalism and the supposedly ‘mechanistic’ or ‘reductionist’ materialism of Marxists,<sup>118</sup> so-called ‘new’ or ‘vital’ materialisms have highlighted the way political action is driven by desires and affects. However, in their eagerness to assert the autonomy of affect, these theories have often ended up reifying affect in ways that obscure political agency: either it is as an ontological source of freedom outside of social determination, as in Massumi, or it is at times reduced to a mere ‘effect of the social order’—in either case, operating ‘[b]eneath subjects and their supposed wills’.<sup>119</sup> Understanding negative emotions as experiences of social contradictions allows us to understand the agency of socially situated subjects as driven by emotion, yet not determined by impersonal affective forces. Negative feelings are painful experiences of not ‘feeling at home’ and as such powerful drivers of a search for a better world. Yet, the outcome of this search is not pre-determined, and this is precisely where agency enters into the ‘old’ materialism: we are never fully determined by our social world, because it is ridden with contradictory tendencies which open up avenues for social change. Not only is materialism of the old kind capable of dealing with phenomena like affect and emotion, it also, paradoxically, better accounts for creative agency than the ‘new’ materialisms.

Second, as I shall begin exploring in more detail in the following chapter, this materialist approach offers us new and interesting perspectives on the epistemological questions which have been the focus of much recent analytic philosophy of emotion. As explained, the desire to counter the ‘Dumb View’ of emotions has led cognitivist theorists to an overintellectualized image of feelings. In response, I have offered a phenomenological view on which emotions are a matter of action, rather than cognition in a narrow sense. But the focus on action is not meant to displace epistemological questions. On the contrary, I will try to show that we can best understand the political epistemology of emotions by conceiving theory and praxis, knowledge and action, as fundamentally intertwined in line with the Marxist tradition. The next chapter will begin developing and clarifying these ideas by zooming in on anger and providing an account of this feeling’s epistemological and motivational role in fuelling critique and resistance.

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<sup>118</sup> Connolly, ‘Materialities of Experience’, 178; Wolfe, ‘Materialism New and Old’.

<sup>119</sup> Read, ‘The Affective Reproduction of Capital’, 376–77.

## Chapter 3

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# ‘The Bellwether of Oppression’: On Anger, Struggle, and Standpoint

*Here at last is the chaos I held at bay.  
Here at last is my strength.  
I am not the water—  
I am the wave,  
and rage  
is the force that moves me.*

—Susan Stryker<sup>1</sup>

This chapter will build on the understanding of negative emotions developed in the previous one by looking specifically at how experiences of anger can lead to social critique and political resistance. Anger is a good place to start because no other feeling has received more attention in the literature on political emotions. Against persistent delegitimization of the rage of the oppressed in the public sphere, feminist and anti-racist theorists have persistently and convincingly argued that anger can be fuel for emancipatory political movements.<sup>2</sup> According to Carol Gilligan, it is ‘the political emotion par excellence—the bellwether of oppression, injustice, bad treatment; the clue that something is wrong in the relational surround’.<sup>3</sup> Elsewhere, Audre Lorde nicely sums up the idea that rage might have both motivational and epistemic value: ‘Anger is loaded with *information* and

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<sup>1</sup> Stryker, ‘My Words to Victor Frankenstein’, 247.

<sup>2</sup> Cherry, *The Case for Rage*; Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 117–28, 141–72; hooks, *Killing Rage*.

<sup>3</sup> Gilligan, *Joining the Resistance*, 290.

energy'.<sup>4</sup> But how exactly are we to understand this? Why and how can anger lead to a standpoint from which one can articulate and resist one's oppression?

Dealing with these questions and engaging with the philosophical literature on political anger will help concretize the rather abstract way in which Critical Theory has talked about 'social suffering' and 'moral experience'.<sup>5</sup> The way especially Black feminist thinkers, like Lorde, bell hooks, or Myisha Cherry, have thought about the role of anger as informing anti-racist consciousness and practice has much to offer an account of critique rooted in experience. On the other hand, I will also argue that contemporary philosophy of emotion can benefit from incorporating more critical social theory to correct its sometimes voluntaristic and individualistic image of how feelings contribute to political resistance.

The approach I develop in this chapter is one that highlights that the standpoint from which one can critique and resist oppression does not follow automatically from experiencing anger at injustice. As such, I will try to counter a tendency among some philosophers of emotion to make this connection too immediate by painting anger as an inherently emancipatory feeling. An emancipatory standpoint, I argue, is a hard-won political achievement, and the point is to detail the role anger plays in coming to such a standpoint. Drawing on the phenomenological approach to emotions developed in the previous chapter and on bell hooks' reflections on rage, I will defend a very 'non-ideal' picture of anger that does not deny any of the uglier features associated with this emotion. Unlike those who see anger as a moral judgment, I see rage, in the first place, as simply a response to having one's practical aims in the world thwarted—there need be nothing moral or righteous about this feeling for it to have political potential. Second, unlike those who highlight anger's connection with love<sup>6</sup> or claims for equal dignity,<sup>7</sup> I emphasize its tendency towards aggression. Precisely because I do not bake any moral content into my conceptualization of anger, this account will enable us to explain how and why anger can *lead to* moral and political judgments. And by highlighting the aggressive nature of anger,

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<sup>4</sup> Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 121. Emphasis mine.

<sup>5</sup> Stahl, 'Immanent Critique and Particular Moral Experience'; Renault, 'A Critical Theory of Social Suffering'; Renault, *Social Suffering*.

<sup>6</sup> Cherry, 'Love, Anger, and Racial Injustice'.

<sup>7</sup> Frye, *The Politics of Reality*, 84–94; Adkins, 'We Will March Side by Side'.

it becomes clear why rage has potential to motivate radical, political action in ways that go beyond mere calls for inclusion and integration into the existing order.

The chapter proceeds as follows. First, in section 1, I discuss the standard defence of anger in the current literature, which claims that anger has a place in politics because it is a distinctly moral feeling. That view, I argue, fails to explain how anger can lead to knowledge of injustice, because it sees it either as a *result* of that knowledge, or, implausibly, as a direct perception of injustice. Section 2 then outlines my alternative, phenomenological view of anger. I highlight the role of affordances for aggressively asserting oneself against the structures of a world in which going along with business-as-usual has become intolerable. Sections 3 and 4 explain how this view can make sense of Lorde’s claim that anger ‘is loaded with information and energy’. With this non-moralized conception of anger in hand, we can see how feelings of rage reveal practical problems which call for both interpretation and action. The information and energy to resist injustice comes not directly from feeling fury but from the process of interpretation and practical problem-solving that anger ignites. Thus, the standpoint from which one can articulate and resist one’s oppression based on one’s rage is not inherent in the experience of anger; it is the outcome of political and hermeneutic work.

Before continuing, it is worth briefly clarifying some terminology. I use the words ‘anger’ and ‘rage’ interchangeably—to the extent that there is any meaningful difference between these two concepts, I take it to be that rage is a more intensely felt form of anger. This would be a difference of degree, not of kind, and not one that is important for the arguments I make here. Further, I assume that terms like ‘resentment’ and ‘indignation’ designate subtypes of anger, rather than entirely different emotions. Some authors have used these terms to designate specifically ‘moral’ versions of anger as differentiated from more ‘egoistic’ or ‘primitive’ forms.<sup>8</sup> To the extent that these authors accord such ‘moral’ angers priority over the ‘primitive’ forms, they too are targets of my critique of moralized accounts of anger: whatever the terminology, I disagree that what makes (some kinds of) anger politically interesting is their ‘moral’ nature. I do not, however, have any problem with the categorization itself—as will become clear, defining indignation or resentment

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<sup>8</sup> Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 427; Murphy and Hampton, *Forgiveness and Mercy*, 54.

as subtypes of anger which do explicitly appeal to violations of moral norms is compatible with my account as long as we do not assume that these forms of anger are somehow more valuable or ‘political’ than others.

### 1. Anger as a moral emotion

Anyone who wants to accord anger an important place in politics faces some familiar objections: anger is ‘egoistic’,<sup>9</sup> ‘primitive’,<sup>10</sup> ‘irrational’,<sup>11</sup> ‘counterproductive’,<sup>12</sup> and it skews our judgment.<sup>13</sup> Such views, while still frequently heard in public discourse, are rather unpopular in the philosophical literature where a broad consensus is emerging that anger can have an important role in emancipatory politics.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, it is worth briefly considering those critiques, because the specific strategies most contemporary authors adopt in defending anger, I believe, leads us down the wrong track.

The critique, essentially, is that anger is (or often is) a purely egoistic response. Kauppinen captures this in what he calls ‘immature anger’: a feeling characterized by ‘aggression toward someone who frustrates our goals or threatens to do so’.<sup>15</sup> Nussbaum holds a specific version of such a view on which anger is a response to a felt ‘status-injury’ and involves a wish for revenge as a way to restore one’s relative status by down-ranking the other. Thus, anger involves a narcissistic investment in penalizing those who have offended and ‘aims at restoring lost control and often achieves at least an illusion of it’.<sup>16</sup> As such, it is a feeling motivated by ‘self-interest and expediency’ which, as Rawls puts it, can be felt even by ‘a person who lacks a sense of justice’.<sup>17</sup> It is therefore not a ‘moral emotion’, and, hence, it has no place in the political deliberation of reasonable citizens.

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<sup>9</sup> Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 427.

<sup>10</sup> Murphy and Hampton, *Forgiveness and Mercy*, 54.

<sup>11</sup> Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness*.

<sup>12</sup> Paytas, ‘Aptness Isn’t Enough’, 747–48; Srinivasan, ‘The Aptness of Anger’ (for an argument against the counterproductivity critique).

<sup>13</sup> Pettigrove, ‘Meekness and “Moral” Anger’, 364.

<sup>14</sup> Even those, like Nussbaum, who are seen as critics of anger usually admit that *some kinds* of anger have a rightful place in politics. Thus, Nussbaum distinguishes between ‘garden-variety anger’, which she is against, and ‘transition-anger’, of which she is in favour. Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness*, 35–40.

<sup>15</sup> Kauppinen, ‘Valuing Anger’, 32.

<sup>16</sup> Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness*, 21.

<sup>17</sup> Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 428.

Rawls makes a distinction, though, between non-moral anger or annoyance, on one hand, and resentment and indignation, on the other. The latter *are* ‘moral feelings’ in that ‘they presuppose an explanation by reference to an acceptance of the principles of right and justice’.<sup>18</sup> As we saw in chapter 1, Honneth employs a similar distinction between feelings that lead to merely ‘technical disruptions’ and those that lead to ‘moral conflicts’ because they are the result of disappointed normative principles.<sup>19</sup> While Honneth’s category of normative principles is broader than Rawls’s principles of ‘right and justice’,<sup>20</sup> both of them make a clear distinction between negative emotions with an origin in violations of normative principles, and in merely ‘technical’ obstacles to instrumental action. As we shall see, defences of anger in the contemporary literature generally follow this Rawlsian-Honnethian strategy: they accept the distinction and the hierarchy between moral and non-moral emotions but argue that anger should be included in the former category. For a critical-theoretical approach, I shall argue, this is not a fruitful strategy.

### 1.1 *Anger as a moral claim*

Many authors simply deny that anger is an egoistic response to something that merely annoys me; rather, Elizabeth Spelman argues, it is a judgment that someone has ‘done something not just that I wish he hadn’t done, but something I think he should not have done, because it was bad, or wrong, or unfair, or uncalled for, or harmful to me or to others’.<sup>21</sup> Equally, Amia Srinivasan makes it definitional of anger, as distinct from ‘mere disappointment’, that it ‘presents its object as involving a moral violation: not just a violation of how one wishes things were, but a violation of how things ought to be’.<sup>22</sup> Thus, while anger can obviously get things wrong, by making an intelligible moral claim, ‘it has

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<sup>18</sup> Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 427.

<sup>19</sup> Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, 137.

<sup>20</sup> Note that Honneth, unlike Rawls, classifies (at least many forms of) anger as a moral feeling. For a broader account of the differences between Honneth’s and Rawls’s theories, see Honneth, *The I in the We*, chap. 3.

<sup>21</sup> Spelman, ‘Anger and Insubordination’, 266.

<sup>22</sup> Srinivasan, ‘The Aptness of Anger’, 128. In a footnote to this passage (fn21), she hedges this definition: ‘Perhaps anger presents its object as involving a *normative* violation, not necessarily a *moral* violation. After all, many of us do get angry at non-moral normative violations, e.g., violations of epistemic rationality’. Emphasis original.

at least a *prima facie* place in a rational politics'.<sup>23</sup> Another strategy is to identify specific subtypes of anger which have distinctly moral content. Myisha Cherry follows this strategy in her defence of anger's value to anti-racist politics by distinguishing specifically anti-racist anger from 'narcissistic rage',<sup>24</sup> resentment, or violent white backlash. 'Lordean rage', Cherry's term for transformative anti-racist anger, 'registers racial injustice [and] recognizes and advertises justice's worth'.<sup>25</sup> I shall call these approaches 'moral views' of anger because they secure its legitimate place in politics by pointing to its specifically moral nature.

Of course, in many cases, these are important ways of defending concrete instances of anger: people's rage often *does* respond to sound moral principles and alert us to injustice, racism, sexism, exploitation, etc. And when, for example, anti-racist protesters are accused of being 'too angry', this is exactly the line of defence that we need: let us not ask whether people should or should not be angry in public but let us ask about the injustices that made people angry in the first place.<sup>26</sup> Yet, there are problems with this approach. As Alice MacLachlan has persuasively argued, if we take anger seriously only when and because it expresses sound moral judgments, we risk 'overlooking or covering over the ethical significance of resentments without overtly moral content'.<sup>27</sup> By assuming that anger's value comes from making moral claims, it becomes easy to dismiss forms of rage that do not seem to clearly express such claims. Forms of anger that are more inchoate, inarticulate, or perhaps 'misdirected',<sup>28</sup> fall out of the picture. If, like MacLachlan, we want to leave open the possibility that these "unreasonable" resentments may contain

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<sup>23</sup> Srinivasan, 'The Aptness of Anger', 141.

<sup>24</sup> hooks, *Killing Rage*, 29.

<sup>25</sup> Cherry, *The Case for Rage*, 52.

<sup>26</sup> Srinivasan, 'The Aptness of Anger'.

<sup>27</sup> MacLachlan, 'Unreasonable Resentments', 423. While MacLachlan discusses resentment, her arguments apply equally to anger. Some authors, like Rawls, may prefer to reserve the term 'resentment' for anger that has explicit moral content—this would make MacLachlan's claim that there are non-moralized forms of resentment false by definition, but her larger point that we ought to pay attention to forms of anger that are not (yet) articulated as moral claims would be no less valid.

<sup>28</sup> On the potential political-epistemic value of misdirected anger, see chapter 5 as well as Lepoutre, 'Rage Inside the Machine', 415; Emerick and Yap, 'Betrayed Expectations'.

morally significant messages of protest, even if those messages cannot yet express moral content',<sup>29</sup> we need a different account of what makes anger a politically valuable emotion.

To express the worry in a way that is more specific to this chapter's concern: by placing anger downstream from moral principles, we sacrifice the central idea that anger can *reveal* something about what is wrong with the social world. If anger is a reaction to the violation of prior moral principles, it might be necessary in order to fully *appreciate* the moral facts<sup>30</sup> and might draw *attention* to wrongdoing,<sup>31</sup> but it tells us nothing new. Of course, one need not assume that whatever principles underlie the feeling of anger are explicitly or consciously held. Honneth stressed, for example, that negative emotions can reveal implicitly held normative principles. Nevertheless, the view still 'presupposes a certain [implicit] norm the fulfillment of, or deviation from which underlies the emotional evaluation'.<sup>32</sup> In other words, if anger simply is a moral claim, whatever it may tell us about the normative deficits of the social world is parasitic on prior norms — whether explicitly or implicitly held. Of course, I do not want to deny that anger frequently does arise when our explicitly held normative principles are violated. It is simply my claim that these are not the types of anger which reveal anything new about injustices. If we take seriously only those angers that conform to our own prior theory of justice or recognition, clearly nothing is gained. On the other hand, if we uncritically accept whatever principles are implicit in expressions of indignation, the most anger can contribute to social criticism is to serve as a starting point for a Michael Walzer style 'internal critique' 'understood as a continuation and extension of ordinary, everyday complaints by persons who share a common understanding of morality'.<sup>33</sup> Thus, a moral view of anger forces us into precisely that dichotomous choice which Critical Theory seeks to avoid: either our social criticism is based on external moral standards which everyday moral judgments may or may not conform to; or critique is based on an uncritical acceptance of people's actual moral frameworks limiting itself to a kind of hermeneutic elaboration of these.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> MacLachlan, 'Unreasonable Resentments', 437.

<sup>30</sup> Srinivasan, 'The Aptness of Anger', 141.

<sup>31</sup> Cherry, *The Case for Rage*, 31.

<sup>32</sup> Ben-Zeev, 'The Nature of Emotions', 396.

<sup>33</sup> Stahl, 'What Is Immanent Critique?', 12. See Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism*.

<sup>34</sup> See Jaeggi, *Critique of Forms of Life*, chaps 5–6; Stahl, *Immanent Critique*.

1.2 *Anger as moral perception*

But perhaps my argument here has been a bit too quick. In my dismissal of the moral view, I have so far assumed that anger as an evaluative attitude is a *response to* the identification of a normative violation. In other words, anger informs me *that I have made a judgment* that such and such a state of affairs constitutes a wrong—in which case it is the identification of the wrong, and not the emotional response, which is primary. The question is whether we should not take the claim that anger contains information about injustice more literally. Some philosophers see emotions not as reactions to but rather as perception-like states which can directly ‘inform us about evaluative properties’.<sup>35</sup> Is it not possible that anger simply constitutes some pre-conceptual *sense of injustice*? We need to consider a version of the moral view which claims that anger directly discloses to us the wrongness of a situation, like the perception of a certain wavelength of light directly discloses a specific colour.

The idea that emotions allow us to perceive or ‘apprehend’<sup>36</sup> evaluative properties has intuitive appeal. When I am afraid, say, I see the object of my fear *as dangerous*. It is hard to deny that ‘emotions (somehow) present the world to us as having certain value-laden features’.<sup>37</sup> There is no doubt that we often get angry because we perceive something as unjust. And, phenomenologically, this perception often happens in an immediate way without prior reasoning: just as I immediately perceive a bear as a danger, I may perceive police violence at a protest as an injustice (in addition to a danger). But, as Sara Ahmed reminds us, ‘the “immediacy” of the[se] reaction[s] is not itself a sign of a lack of mediation’.<sup>38</sup> If the immediacy of the angry reaction is simply the result of having internalized the norms, values, and ‘feeling rules’<sup>39</sup> we have been socialized into, then we are no further than at the end of the last section: anger may reveal that our principles are insufficiently realized or even, as Honneth stressed, that we hold some normative principles we were not fully aware of, but the normative knowledge is altogether parasitic on those prior principles. The view we need is one that explains anger’s disclosive function

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<sup>35</sup> Tappolet, *Emotions, Values, and Agency*, 39.

<sup>36</sup> de Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotion*.

<sup>37</sup> D’Arms and Jacobson, ‘The Moralistic Fallacy’, 66.

<sup>38</sup> Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 7.

<sup>39</sup> For the concept of feeling rules, see Hochschild, *The Managed Heart*, chap. 4.

in terms of a *direct* apprehension of value that can function independently of socialization. Can anger track injustice directly in a way that breaks out of ‘identity thinking’, to use Adorno’s vocabulary, and gets to the object itself?

Especially relevant in this regard is Alison Jaggar’s concept of ‘outlaw emotions’. Outlaw emotions are feeling that clash with dominant values and feeling rules: ‘for instance, people of color are more likely to experience anger than amusement when a racist joke is recounted, and women subjected to male sexual banter are less likely to be flattered than uncomfortable’.<sup>40</sup> This idea has been understood in the way that our emotions sometimes allow us to perceive evaluative properties which go against hegemonic values. Laura Silva gives the following useful example:

Raquel is a woman living under conditions of gender oppression in which the concept of sexual harassment is not available. Raquel is on a night out [when s]he feels someone squeeze part of her body and turns to see a man she has never met before. [...] Raquel believes she should be flattered by the attention she has received, as well as proud to have been the one approached, and indeed she does feel a mixture of these emotions, but she also feels uneasy and angry. Raquel forms the belief that what the man did was not ok, based on her negative emotional responses, despite this belief going against her wider set of beliefs and emotional responses.<sup>41</sup>

Should we understand this case as Raquel’s anger giving her direct evidence of the wrongness of the man’s behaviour in a way that contradicts and challenges her other beliefs and feelings? It is tempting to answer ‘yes’ and Silva does so. Emotions, she argues, can, in cases like this one, provide direct justification for normative judgments that clash with one’s other beliefs. Silva considers, and rejects, the view that Raquel’s emotion merely motivate inquiry which could lead to an understanding of the behaviour as sexist and wrong, insisting on a view that makes the epistemic value of the anger independent of ‘the potential fruits of a compromised and particularly laboursome inquiry’.<sup>42</sup>

In justifying this view, she appeals to feminist standpoint epistemology. Women, because of their social position, ‘will more reliably track the reality of society’s gender

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<sup>40</sup> Jaggar, ‘Love and Knowledge’, 166.

<sup>41</sup> Silva, ‘The Epistemic Role of Outlaw Emotions’, 665.

<sup>42</sup> Silva, ‘The Epistemic Role of Outlaw Emotions’, 673.

relations' and are 'more emotionally sensitive to particular reasons'.<sup>43</sup> Emotions, under oppressive conditions, are supposed to play an especially important epistemological role in this regard because of their relative 'encapsulation' from ideological beliefs.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, when oppressed people experience outlaw anger, it gives them a *direct* (albeit defeasible) justification for the associated normative belief that the action in question was wrong.

However, on closer inspection, it is unclear how anger could reveal a normative violation in the absence of a normative inquiry. Remember, if anger is supposed to present its object as a normative violation it must be a response not simply to 'a violation of how one wishes things were, but a violation of how things ought to be'.<sup>45</sup> *Ex hypothesi*, Raquel's mind is pervaded by patriarchal ideology and, besides her anger, she does not have *any* reason to believe that the man did anything wrong.<sup>46</sup> It is clear enough that despite *believing* that such behaviour is unproblematic, it could make her feel uncomfortable and realize that she *wishes* that such things would not happen. But this, so far, only reveals a violation of how she *wishes* things were, not how they *ought to be*. The gap between her discomfort and her beliefs that nothing wrong happened, might lead Raquel into the kind of inquiry which can lead her to change her normative beliefs; but could her anger give her any direct reason to believe that it *ought* not to happen, even *without* such inquiry? I do not see how. The distinction between 'how one wishes things were' and 'how things ought to be' cannot be placed at a preconceptual plane, let alone one that emotions give us access to independently of how we interpret them.

Nor does the standpoint epistemology that Silva draws on support this direct link between emotions and emancipatory normative beliefs. Even if anger *were* constituted by a representation of something as normatively wrong, such perceptions still arise within the context of our wider understanding of the social world and will be mediated by other beliefs. Thus, the belief that, say, a man's unwanted sexual attention is wrong does not necessarily constitute a feminist understanding of the situation. For example, the anger could be experienced in a merely personalized way ('this man happens to be rude, but that has nothing to do with sexism'), or even, if the man in question happens to be non-

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<sup>43</sup> Silva, 'The Epistemic Role of Outlaw Emotions', 683–84.

<sup>44</sup> Silva, 'The Epistemic Role of Outlaw Emotions', 684.

<sup>45</sup> Srinivasan, 'The Aptness of Anger', 128.

<sup>46</sup> I am using 'reason' in an internalist sense here.

white, in a racist way ('this man is rude to women not because of patriarchy but because of his "uncivilized" ethnic background'). To the extent that outlaw anger is experienced in a feminist way ('this man is harassing me and that is sexist'), this already presupposes a nascent feminist consciousness which cannot simply be a part of the emotion's 'evaluative content'. The idea that women's emotions automatically 'track the reality of society's gender relations' and that they are simply 'more emotionally sensitive to particular reasons' are examples of a naïve version of standpoint epistemology that theorists like Nancy Hartsock guarded against by emphasizing that a standpoint 'is achieved rather than obvious, a mediated rather than immediate understanding'.<sup>47</sup> While Silva wants a 'view that allows an immediate epistemic role of outlaw emotions, such that need for inquiry is bypassed',<sup>48</sup> such a view is hardly compatible with Hartsock's emphasis on the need for 'both science to see beneath the surface of the social relations in which all are forced to participate, and the education which can only grow from struggle to change those relations'.<sup>49</sup>

Indeed, Jaggar herself, *pace* Silva's interpretation, pointed out that outlaw emotions 'stand in a *dialectical* relation to critical social theory: at least some are necessary for developing a critical perspective on the world, but they also presuppose at least the beginnings of such a perspective'.<sup>50</sup> I will make the case in this chapter that this dialectical relationship is best understood by jettisoning the moral view of anger, and instead adopting my alternative phenomenological view which sees anger as crucially tied to action. Rather than a representation of a normative violation, anger 'embodies a distress which requires a solution'<sup>51</sup>—and, in line with Hartsock's materialist epistemology, it leads to a political standpoint only on the basis of the process of struggle and analysis spurred by that distress.

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<sup>47</sup> Hartsock, 'The Feminist Standpoint', 162. For a defence of a "naïve" version of standpoint epistemology, see Bright, 'Duboisian Leadership through Standpoint Epistemology'. For a convincing critique of such naïve views, see Milanovich, 'Distinguishing Situated Knowledge and Standpoint Theory'.

<sup>48</sup> Silva, 'The Epistemic Role of Outlaw Emotions', 673.

<sup>49</sup> Hartsock, 'The Feminist Standpoint', 159–60.

<sup>50</sup> Jaggar, 'Love and Knowledge', 167. Emphasis mine.

<sup>51</sup> Hartsock, 'The Feminist Standpoint', 174.

## 2. The phenomenology of anger

This section, then, will provide an account of anger drawing on last chapter's phenomenological account of emotions. Against the moral views of anger discussed above, I shall argue that rage can arise from any obstacle that thwarts my practical aims. Further, I will claim that what distinguishes anger from a host of other negative emotions is that it is characterized by affordances for aggressive action to overcome said obstacles—thus arguing against those who have tried to rehabilitate anger by highlighting its connection with love over aggression.

From a phenomenological perspective, the moral view appears immediately suspicious. It seems rather obvious that our immediate *experience* of anger often does not conform to it. Berkowitz, for example, summarizes some psychological evidence against the claim that 'the perception of a deliberate and controllable misdeed is necessary for anger and aggression to arise' arguing instead that people can be 'angered [even] by reasonable and socially justified frustrations'.<sup>52</sup> Haven't we all gotten angry at a completely innocent person who happens to stand in our way when we are in a hurry, or even become enraged at a computer for not working? Many theorists treat such experiences of anger as somehow derivative or defective versions of 'proper' or 'mature' anger which is moral in nature: if we get angry at inanimate objects it must mean that we are implicitly, and sillily, holding them to moral standards. This is why, upon reflection, we usually quickly dismiss such anger as a foolish and mistaken reaction. Yet, phenomenology cautions us against dismissing the experience itself so quickly. Recall Merleau-Ponty: 'It is only afterwards, when I reflect on what anger is [that I] remark that it involves a certain (negative) evaluation of another person'. If I 'turn back to the real experience of anger', however, 'I am forced to acknowledge that this anger does not lie beyond my body, directing it from without, but rather that in some inexplicable sense it is bound up with my body'.<sup>53</sup> If we see anger as an embodied way of perceiving the world, it is unclear why rage at inanimate objects or faultless bystanders should be any less 'real' than morally righteous anger.

Consider the example of 'vending machine rage'. In her discussion of this phenomenon, Nussbaum simply treats these cases as derivative of moral anger: she

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<sup>52</sup> Berkowitz, 'Frustration-Aggression Hypothesis', 64.

<sup>53</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, 64.

assumes that we get angry at vending machines only when we anthropomorphize them and ‘expect “respect” and cooperation from the inanimate objects’.<sup>54</sup> She thus dismisses it as a version of anger that is derivative of ‘real’—that is, moral—anger. But, the assumption that if someone gets angry they simply *must* (at least implicitly) have attributed moral agency to the object of their fury is plainly question-begging.<sup>55</sup> Kauppinen takes a slightly different route, seeing children’s ‘aggression toward someone who frustrates our goals’ as an embryonic version of what will later turn into fully developed ‘mature’ anger that always ‘involves the thought that somebody intentionally or negligently failed to do what they were supposed to do’.<sup>56</sup> But such a developmental teleology seems no less question-begging. Phenomenologically, I would venture, vending machine rage or the ‘immature’ anger of children are fairly good expressions of the basic structure of anger.

I suggest that we reverse Kauppinen’s model of ‘childish’ and ‘mature’ anger and empty it of its rather moralizing overtones: aggression arising from the frustration of my practical aims is what is basic to the experience of anger, and ‘righteous’ anger is anger that has been ‘cognitively sharpened’ through the lens of moral reasoning.<sup>57</sup> When a vending machine does not dispense the item that I chose and paid for, my expectations for how to go about dealing with the external world have been thwarted. This amounts (albeit at a fairly trivial level) to what I have described, in chapter 2, as a loss of opportunities for normal action in the world. My anger is the perception that I can no longer go on interacting with this vending machine in my habitual way and, instead, in my rage, new affordances appear: I can kick and shake the machine until the product falls out. Thus, vending machine rage, in its phenomenological structure, is a paradigm example of anger as I would like to describe it: a perception that the objective structures of the world block opportunities for seamless action but instead invite an aggressive reaction that may remove obstacles and restore my ability to go about my life as normal. What defines anger on this

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<sup>54</sup> Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness*, 18–19.

<sup>55</sup> MacLachlan, ‘Unreasonable Resentments’, 435. See also Shoemaker, ‘You Oughta Know’, 72–73.

<sup>56</sup> Kauppinen, ‘Valuing Anger’, 32.

<sup>57</sup> D’Arms and Jacobson, ‘The Significance of Recalcitrant Emotion’, 137. I do not mean to imply that there is a ‘raw’ feeling which exists prior to interpretation—feelings are always already conceptually mediated and cannot be accessed in any ‘pure’ form.

view is neither a judgment nor an ‘evaluative attitude’—it is the way I perceive my subjective possibilities for action in my environment.

Of course, on my theory, the first part of this description, the loss of opportunities for normal action, is something shared by negative emotions in general. Defenders of the moral view might accept this characterization of negative feelings but claim that what makes anger different from mere annoyance or disappointment is that the obstacle to my action is seen as *moral* violation. As we saw above, Srinivasan argues that anger involves a perceived ‘violation of how things *ought* to be’, whereas disappointment simply expresses that things are not ‘how one *wishes* things were’.<sup>58</sup> But it is hard to see what justifies this claim unless it is purely stipulative. I certainly have felt disappointed in people who did things that I consider moral violations; on the other hand, I frequently feel anger when things simply do not go my way. Looking at these two emotions phenomenologically, the relevant distinction appears to lie in the kinds of affordances for action that become available in experiences of disappointment and anger. Whereas disappointment includes a certain resignation to the facts, anger is the feeling that some urgent action needs to be taken to set things straight. Parents are disappointed in their children when they do wrong, but punishment nevertheless does not appear as a viable course of action (anyone who grew up with ‘not-angry-just-disappointed’ parents can attest to the fact that this disappointment often expresses a strong moral judgment!).<sup>59</sup> What differentiates anger

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<sup>58</sup> Srinivasan, ‘The Aptness of Anger’, 128. Emphasis original. A similar distinction is drawn by Adrienne Martin who sees anger and disappointment as responses to the thwarting of normative *expectations* and normative *hope*, respectively. Martin, *How We Hope*, 126ff.

<sup>59</sup> Martin believes that ‘disappointed’ parents withhold anger because they do not see their children as fully competent moral agents and therefore not as apt targets of moral judgment. While this may well be a reason to try to hide one’s resentment, however, this explanation does not track the phenomenology of anger and disappointment. After all, it is perfectly possible to feel angry at toddlers who clearly are not full moral agents, whereas disappointment is compatible with attributing full moral agency to the culprit. For example, I find it easy to imagine parents being disappointed in their adult child who commits a grave moral wrong. Here, anger may not arise precisely because their child is *too* autonomous, and hence an angry, punishing reaction does not appear as an affordance. Martin, *How We Hope*, 129.

from disappointment is an intense desire to burst free from normal social constraints<sup>60</sup> and assert oneself against a world that needs to change. Now.

What makes anger *anger*, then, is the perception that one can change the world through aggression. I understand ‘aggression’, here, rather capaciously as behaviour that aims to forcefully assert one’s will. Whereas some definitions restrict aggression to behaviour intended to harm other people,<sup>61</sup> I think aggressive behaviour can target objects as well as social structures. The defining feature is the use of force against obstacles, be they people, objects, or structures. Further, the force involved need not be physical—aggression can take the form of rude speech, yelling, or other communicative gestures, like staring someone down.<sup>62</sup> And finally, it is important to stress that anger does not always result in aggression. It is defined by *affordances* for aggressive action: the key element is the *perception* that one can forcefully assert one’s will against the structures of the world, even if one does not act on it. Despite these caveats, tying anger to aggression is a controversial move that has to be carefully explained and defended.

Many defenders of anger’s value have, for good reasons, wanted to deny that there is any essential connection between anger and aggression or violence. This is understandable, especially in the context of anti-racist anger, because racist stereotypes of Black people as aggressive and violent are so often used not only to dismiss legitimate protest, but also to justify violence against Black people.<sup>63</sup> In response, those wanting to

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<sup>60</sup> It is true, of course, that anger does not always challenge existing social norms: when the powerful get angry at the powerless, this is usually a way of reinforcing existing social norms and hierarchies against perceived threats. Nevertheless, I would claim that even in such cases, anger is a break with the normal constraints of polite and civil behaviour. Of course, in a white supremacist patriarchal society, white men’s anger, for example, tends to be more acceptable than the anger of women of colour. This simply shows that the cost of breaking with the constraints of civility is significantly higher for some than for others. At the same time, this view can explain why certain forms of assertive behaviour are often interpreted as angry when performed by some but not when performed by others: women’s assertiveness is often seen as a deviation from social expectations and therefore understood as an expression of anger, whereas men’s assertiveness is simply expected and normal. I thank James Wells for pressing me on this point.

<sup>61</sup> Allen and Anderson, ‘Aggression and Violence’.

<sup>62</sup> Martin Luther King, for example, maintained that civil disobedience can be ‘aggressive but nonviolent’. King, Jr., ‘The Role of the Behavioral Scientist’, 6.

<sup>63</sup> Burgess, ‘Race and Gender Stereotypes’; Threadcraft, ‘Intimate Injustice’, 737ff.

rehabilitate rage have tried to make it look nicer by claiming that it need not involve any wish for violence but can simply be an expression of the dignity of those who have been wronged.<sup>64</sup> Cornel West makes such a move when describing Malcolm X's rage as an expression of 'his great love for black people'; a rage that was 'not directed first and foremost at white America' but rather a way for Black people to 'affirm themselves as human beings'.<sup>65</sup> While this anger no doubt played an important function of self-affirmation, it was clearly *directed* at white America and meant to fuel aggressive action, not just self-affirmation: 'when [people] get angry', he proclaimed at a 1964 rally, 'they bring about a change. [...] If [the cracker] only understands the language of a rifle, get a rifle'.<sup>66</sup> Anger was the language to be spoken *to White America*—in the service of 'respect and recognition', yes, but also to force through real change.<sup>67</sup> Here, I agree with bell hooks that attempts, like West's, 'to explain that rage away, to temper it' are problematic.<sup>68</sup> The temptation to downplay anger's destructive and violent tendencies is understandable; yet, the sanitizing of rage stops us from fully understanding where its political potential comes from, and it may delegitimize or depoliticize expressions of anger that do not seem to fit the rosy description. There is no question that anger can be a way of expressing one's dignity and that it can be, and often is, rooted in great love for those who are wronged. Yet, if we deflect from the aggressive side of rage, we miss what makes this emotion special, what differentiates anger from sadness, disappointment, or a host of other emotions that one can feel in the face of oppression.

Importantly, once we get rid of the moral view of anger, tying it to aggression need not lead us back to Nussbaum's view of anger as a retributive emotion. Take Sartre's quip that 'the man who is angry sees on the face of his opponent the objective quality of asking for a punch in the nose'.<sup>69</sup> In the experience of anger, the wish to act aggressively arises not as a moral ought, but as a practical possibility to achieve one's aims—as an *affordance* of the object of one's rage. In an essay I shall return to in more detail below, bell hooks describes

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<sup>64</sup> Adkins, 'We Will March Side by Side'.

<sup>65</sup> West, *Race Matters*, 122. See also Cherry, 'Love, Anger, and Racial Injustice'.

<sup>66</sup> X, *Malcolm X Speaks*, 107–8.

<sup>67</sup> X, *Malcolm X Speaks*, 108.

<sup>68</sup> hooks, *Killing Rage*, 13.

<sup>69</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 163.

the intense anger she felt at a white man sitting next to her on a plane for his casual racist behaviour: ‘I felt a “killing rage.” I wanted to stab him softly, to shoot him with the gun I wished I had in my purse.’<sup>70</sup> At no point does hooks describe this feeling as a moral judgment: she does not believe that the man *deserves* to be murdered or *ought* to be maimed. She knows that lashing out violently against individual white people is both futile and wrong. Yet she does not want to deny ‘the intensity of that desire’ and insists that we can learn something by listening to it.<sup>71</sup>

What I want to claim is that anger involves perceiving the world as metaphorically ‘asking for a punch in the nose’. This account does not ground anger in disappointed normative expectations, nor in already-moral experiences of simply *seeing the world as unjust*. Rather, anger arises, in the first place, because ‘[a]ll ways are barred and nevertheless we must act’.<sup>72</sup> But if this is so, then why have various moral accounts of anger looked so plausible to so many people?

It is an additional feature of my phenomenological account, I believe, that it neatly accounts for the appeal of moral theories. First of all, anger *sometimes* does respond to violations of moral norms. The ‘obstacle’ to my practical aims that triggers anger need not be a physical object, and practical aims can themselves include moral content. If my aim is to live in a just world, and I see what I judge to be an injustice, this will likely make me angry (if, that is, I also perceive the appropriate affordances for aggressive action).<sup>73</sup> The difference between my account and a moral account of anger is that I do not see the judgment or the perception of injustice as constitutive of the anger; rather, it is the fact that this injustice stands in the way of my aim of living in a just world or a world governed by certain norms. This also makes sense of the fact that some people see and recognize

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<sup>70</sup> hooks, *Killing Rage*, 11.

<sup>71</sup> hooks, *Killing Rage*, 19. See also her essay ‘Beyond Black Rage’ in the same book: hooks, *Killing Rage*, 21–30.

<sup>72</sup> Sartre, *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions*, 39.

<sup>73</sup> This fact can also make sense of bystander anger which is obviously not the result of having one’s immediate practical aims thwarted. Another explanation of bystander anger could be that we sometimes feel anger vicariously by empathizing with others. I find it likely that some instances of bystander anger are best captured by the one explanation and some by the other. I thank an anonymous reviewer for the journal *Hypatia* for raising the question of bystanders’ anger.

injustice without feeling anger: sadly, not everyone feels strongly about making the world just.

More importantly, however, even when one's anger is not initially rooted in a moral judgment, we often reinterpret them as moral after the fact. As Merleau-Ponty points out, once we reflect on anger, it usually seems to us that it 'involves a certain (negative) evaluation of another person'.<sup>74</sup> This is because, as social beings, we are often called upon to explain and justify such emotions to others, and we learn to make sense of our own feelings in normative terms—a process which D'Arms and Jacobsen term 'cognitive sharpening'.<sup>75</sup> In the case of anger, this need for justification is especially weighty, because it often leads to violence and aggression which threaten social stability. Since such aggression is itself a violation of the norms of social intercourse, the only way to justify it is, generally, as a response to someone else's moral transgression. This is why it often seems to us, after the fact, that 'irrational' anger at vending machines or innocent bystanders must have involved some implicit or subconscious moral judgment.<sup>76</sup> Yet, while this capacity to reflect on our feelings and interpret them in moral terms certainly colours the emotional experience itself (as I have stressed, there is no such a thing as 'pure', unmediated experience), it is by no means constitutive of anger (which is why toddlers and animals can also experience rage). There is, no doubt, a distinct phenomenological quality to anger that has been filtered through moral judgment: this is what people often refer to as 'indignation' or 'resentment'.<sup>77</sup> However, indignation or resentment, thus defined, cannot reveal any new knowledge about injustice; they are the *result* of having already achieved this knowledge.

The problem is that if we only take anger seriously if and once it has been interpreted and articulated as a moral claim, not only do we fail to notice the significance of this process of articulation, but we also risk overlooking a wide range of 'pre-political' experiences of suffering which could disclose injustice despite not (yet) having found

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<sup>74</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, 64.

<sup>75</sup> D'Arms and Jacobson, 'The Significance of Recalcitrant Emotion', 137.

<sup>76</sup> In this regard, see Merleau-Ponty's discussion of the difference between perception and judgment. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 39–40.

<sup>77</sup> Walker, for instance, identifies resentment as a subtype of anger that arises in response to threats to the norms governing our common life. That would be compatible with my account of anger. Walker, *Moral Repair*, chap. 4.

articulation in a moral register.<sup>78</sup> A theory that explains anger's political value needs to account for, rather than assume, this process of articulation—this is the task I turn to in the following section.

### 3. Listening to rage

Compared to the moral view, my account of anger makes its connection to critique less immediate. If anger always already expresses a moral claim about injustice, the connection is simple: all we need to do is to assess whether the claims in question are, in fact, justified. If anger, on the other hand, is simply an expression of having one's opportunities for action blocked, more steps are needed to connect this experience to social critique. This is because the social determinants of one's anger are never immediately visible, and to go from lived experience to a political standpoint requires 'science to see beneath the surface of social relations'.<sup>79</sup> In this section, then, I will argue that coming to see one's anger as a political claim is a political achievement that requires interpreting one's experience through the lens of social-theoretic categories. *Contra* theories which see anger as always-already a moral claim, I will highlight the hermeneutic and political work—the 'science' and 'struggle', to use Hartsock's terms—that goes into constructing social and political interpretations of everyday rage.

bell hooks, in her essay 'Beyond Black Rage', discusses the case of a 'disturbed black man' who, in rage, shot and killed several white people on a train in New York.<sup>80</sup> While condemning the man's behaviour, she criticizes the mainstream media for their unwillingness to take seriously the institutionalized racism that 'drove him mad'. As hooks puts it, it is possible to 'recognize that it is ethically and morally wrong to kill folks even as we can also sympathize with mental illness that is either engendered or exacerbated by life in white supremacist capitalist patriarchy'.<sup>81</sup> Leaving aside the (potentially problematic) connection between mental illness and anger,<sup>82</sup> what I want to emphasize is that hooks

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<sup>78</sup> See MacLachlan, 'Unreasonable Resentments'.

<sup>79</sup> Hartsock, 'The Feminist Standpoint', 159.

<sup>80</sup> hooks, *Killing Rage*, 21.

<sup>81</sup> hooks, *Killing Rage*, 25.

<sup>82</sup> Connecting anger to mental illness is problematic insofar as it pathologizes an emotion that may very much be a rational, or at least intelligible, response to circumstances of oppression

shifts our attention from questions like ‘What is the normative judgment contained in this anger?’ to the question ‘What are the social conditions that produce this rage?’. In other words, she suggests what we might call a ‘sociogenic’ approach to anger meaning one that ‘links the subjective harms that racisms inflict upon individual subjects back up to the objective structures of domination, exploitation, and violence that such racisms attempt to naturalize’.<sup>83</sup>

It is precisely such a shift away from the cognitive content of the emotion and toward the objective social conditions that will help us understand how anger provides information about the wrongness of the world. This shift, it has to be emphasized, does not require that we see anger as the result of mental illness; it simply requires connecting subjective feelings to objective social processes. On this approach, the experience of anger does not reveal social injustice until it is interpreted through the lens of a social theory. This means that the normative information we can get simply from experiencing anger is less than what many other theories assume: feeling angry does not, in itself, reveal injustice or misrecognition; all it reveals is a certain frustration of our practical engagement with the world. This information cannot, standing on its own, provide a normative critique — but it prepares the ground for critique.

Anger signals: things cannot go on this way. Something must change. Yet, this something need not be the social world. If anger arises from the frustration of one’s expectations, then, as Cherry notes, not only are we likely to ‘see high degrees of anger among people who face significant levels of harm and disrespect, we are also likely to find high degrees of anger among people with significant levels of entitlement’.<sup>84</sup> Sometimes anger reveals not injustice but the loss of unfair privileges or power. But, either way, what anger always reveals is a *problem*: it reveals a gap between my embodied habitus and the social structures I must act within and says that something—either I or the world—must

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(see also next chapter’s discussion of depression in this regard). Arguably, this problem does not arise for hooks because she does not understand mental distress on the level of individual pathology, but as a response to social conditions. See her essay ‘Healing Our Wounds’ in hooks, *Killing Rage*, 133–45.

<sup>83</sup> Bufkin, ‘Fanon’s Sociogenic Approach’, 110.

<sup>84</sup> Cherry, *The Case for Rage*, 113. See also Rahel Jaeggi’s discussion of resentment in Jaeggi, ‘Modes of Regression’, esp. p. 512.

change. This problem turns into social critique once mediated by a sociogenic explanation of the emotion.

Here, some aspects of what I mean by this need for sociogenic explanation must to be carefully specified. It might seem as if I am requiring social critique *in addition to* the experience of anger, and thereby simply reducing anger to a *symptom* of injustice which the social theorist then interprets and explains.<sup>85</sup> However, seeing sociogenic explanation as something needed ‘in addition to’ the feeling itself would be misleading. No emotion ever comes to us unmediated: we are always already interpreting the meaning our own feelings. It is not a question of adding an interpretation to the brute fact of anger but of choosing between several different ways of interpreting an experience that we can never access in any unmediated form. Furthermore, in anger, we subjectively experience a situation as problematic in a way that requires explanation. It is not a symptom to be interpreted from an external point of view like, say, declining population height can be a symptom of bad nutrition. Rather, it is a subjective experience which calls for its own interpretation.

One might still worry that by explaining anger in terms of its causes, rather than the judgments it embodies, this approach takes away epistemic agency from the angry and oppressed. Srinivasan expresses this concern about

rhetorical strategies that shift the explanatory context for the subject’s anger from the space of reasons to the space of causes. The misogynist or racist explains away the woman’s or black person’s anger as a product of inferior character, treating the question ‘why is this person angry?’ as a request for a causal explanation rather than a justificatory one.<sup>86</sup>

hooks’ connection between rage and mental illness only serves to highlight this worry: are we treating people’s anger as a pathological symptom to be diagnosed by the social theorist, rather than an expression of people’s *understanding* of their own oppression? This worry evaporates once we distinguish between what it means to listen to *rage* and to listen to *the*

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<sup>85</sup> I thank Clover Reshad for pressing me on this point.

<sup>86</sup> Srinivasan, ‘The Aptness of Anger’, 128. I do not mean to imply that Srinivasan is against any form of causal explanation of anger; I simply quote her to address the potential concern that my appeal to causal explanation could be problematic in the same way as the types of causal explanation she criticizes.

*enraged*. The idea that our anger can tell us something is about the epistemological function of experiences of anger; the claim that we should listen to people who are angry is about those people's testimonial reliability. Insofar as the latter claim is that we should listen to angry people not *despite of* but, at least partly, *because of* their rage, this clearly relies on the former claim about the epistemological function of anger. Thus, I am not suggesting that we replace angry people's own understanding of their oppression with causal explanations provided by social theorists. In later chapters, I will discuss the role social theorists *can* play in contributing emancipatory explanations of people's feelings, but, in the remainder of this chapter, I am primarily concerned with how angry people come to explain *their own* emotions sociogenically. As such, the aim is to bolster the claim that we have reason to listen to those who are enraged by giving an account of how people come to such understandings of their oppression in the first place by interpreting ('listening to') their own anger.

To articulate claims about political injustice based on feelings that might initially be inchoate and vague, one precisely needs recourse to explanations which appeal to the social-structural *causes* of this anger. hooks' essay 'Killing Rage' illustrates this well. The entire piece is centred around her efforts to make sense of the seemingly excessive rage she felt towards a man's casual complicity in racism. She does not ask herself whether her feelings were proportionate to that particular incident but rather considers the series of racist incidents throughout the day, and ultimately throughout her life, that culminated in such strong affect. The rage was what motivated her 'to take pen in hand and write in the heat of the moment', but only by going beyond the particular incident and considering the social-structural causes that let this anger accumulate does she 'take that rage and move it beyond fruitless scapegoating', 'linking it instead to a passion for freedom and justice that illuminates, heals, and makes redemptive struggle possible'.<sup>87</sup>

Because subjectivity itself, as feminist Marxists have long pointed out, is an integral part of social reproduction, negative emotions do not represent evaluations of the social world by a transcendental subject standing outside of it, but contradictions immanent to the reproduction of the social order. The reason that people in subordinate social positions

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<sup>87</sup> hooks, *Killing Rage*, 20.

are better placed to experience the kind of ‘outlaw anger’ that may reveal social injustices is not because ‘[o]ccupying a particular social position makes one more emotionally sensitive to particular reasons’.<sup>88</sup> It is simply because they face the sharp edge of social contradictions in their everyday lives. As Chandra Mohanty puts it, the claim of standpoint epistemology ‘is not that all marginalized locations yield crucial knowledge about power and inequity’, but rather that certain social positions make people particularly well-placed to carry out critical inquiry. For example, she writes, ‘it is no coincidence that poor black, Native American, and Latina women provide the leadership in the fight against corporate pollution’ because

[t]hree out of five Afro-Americans and Latinos live near toxic waste sites [...] Thus, it is precisely their critical reflections on their everyday lives as poor women of color that allows the kind of analysis of the power structure that has led to the many victories in environmental racism struggles.<sup>89</sup>

Presumably, life near such waste sites creates everyday frustrations and anger. This anger is the spur for a process of analysis, but it does not provide any special insight until mediated by an understanding of ‘the structural determinants of the experiences’.<sup>90</sup> Anger is ‘the bellwether of oppression’ in the sense that it subjectively reveals contradictions, which call for analysis and critique of the social structures that give rise to these contradictions.

Silva worries that such a view makes the epistemological benefits of outlaw anger overly demanding to reap because they are ‘dependent on the potential fruits of a compromised and particularly laboursome inquiry’.<sup>91</sup> To some extent, this is simply the case: emancipatory knowledge does not fall like manna from heaven but requires ‘prolonged political struggle’ under compromised conditions.<sup>92</sup> But the point can be overstated. It is clearly not the case that every single woman, for example, needs to carry out a burdensome

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<sup>88</sup> Silva, ‘The Epistemic Role of Outlaw Emotions’, 684.

<sup>89</sup> Mohanty, “‘Under Western Eyes’ Revisited”, 511.

<sup>90</sup> Hartsock, ‘The Feminist Standpoint’, 174; Milanovich, ‘Distinguishing Situated Knowledge and Standpoint Theory’.

<sup>91</sup> Silva, ‘The Epistemic Role of Outlaw Emotions’, 673.

<sup>92</sup> Hartsock, ‘The Feminist Standpoint’, 174.

process of consciousness-raising to understand that she faces sexism. Given that concepts like ‘sexual harassment’ are now widely available (as a result of women’s past hermeneutic struggles), everyone can help themselves to these interpretive tools in making sense of their experience. Clearly, those whose rage motivates them to critique and protest racism, sexism, and capitalism already *do* have an understanding of the oppressive structures that have produced their anger—but this understanding is a political *achievement*, rather than an inherent feature of anger. My point is that when we assume that feelings like anger somehow automatically reveal oppression we are, in fact, erasing the hermeneutical work that has already happened and made it possible for people to interpret their rage as political claims. Like a standpoint, then, righteous anger against oppression represents an achievement.

Importantly, feminist standpoint theory also highlights the connection between theory and praxis: the sociogenic analysis, ultimately, ‘can only grow from struggle’.<sup>93</sup> Let us turn, therefore, to anger’s role in political struggle and how this aspect interacts with its disclosive function.

#### 4. Anger and action

As we shall see in the next chapter, the epistemological role of anger is one that is, by and large, shared with depression and other negative emotions insofar as they reveal practical obstacles to action which can be given a sociogenic explanation. What distinguishes anger from other negative feelings, as pointed out above, is the tendency towards assertive, aggressive action. And this is also where anger differs from many other feelings in terms of its potential for motivating political resistance. It is commonplace to point out that anger sometimes motivates people to join social movements, to protest injustice, or even to take up armed resistance.<sup>94</sup> One part of the explanation is that anger, as I have argued, reveals certain affordances for action—or, as some psychological theories describe it, anger is associated with ‘approach motivation’, that is, ‘a propensity to move toward an object rather than away from it’.<sup>95</sup> Rage, as discussed above, leads to a sensation of bursting with energy,

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<sup>93</sup> Hartsock, ‘The Feminist Standpoint’, 160.

<sup>94</sup> Jasper, ‘Constructing Indignation’; Jasper, ‘Motivation and Emotion’.

<sup>95</sup> Cherry, *The Case for Rage*, 67; Harmon-Jones, ‘Anger and the Behavioral Approach System’.

of not letting oneself be constrained any longer. If anger were simply an evaluative judgment, there would be no way of explaining why rage moves us in ways that dispassionate arguments do not—but anger’s association with aggression makes it clear why it can be such a strong motivator for decisive action.

It is sometimes argued that feeling anger under conditions of oppression is already in itself an act of political resistance. Cherry, for instance, writes that merely experiencing rage in the face of racism is a form of resistance because ‘[i]f domination also includes the psychological sphere, resisting it in one’s own mind is [...] a radical act’.<sup>96</sup> Cherry can make such claims, however, only because she is talking about a specific type of anger, Lordean rage, that is already assumed to be informed by a specifically political, emancipatory perspective. Thus, just as moral views of anger cannot account for how ‘righteous’ anger is an epistemological *achievement*, understanding anti-racist rage as always-already a type of resistance ignores that this rage is an *outcome* of political work. Cherry herself quotes Martin Luther King’s comment that he saw his work ‘as a way to transmute the inchoate rage of the ghetto into a constructive and creative channel’.<sup>97</sup> This should not, I believe, be interpreted as simply giving a productive political outlet to already politically virtuous anti-racist anger. Rather, political organizing often transforms the anger itself by transforming the affordances available to people. Note King’s reference to ‘*inchoate*’ anger: a rage that has not (yet) found its proper object, a rage that is, in fact, not yet part of anti-racist politics. Anger does inherently motivate action but, in order to motivate *political* action, people first need to recognize the obstacles they face as political obstacles that can potentially be overcome through collective action.

What accounts for anger’s motivational function is the way certain affordances become available through the experience of rage. In the experience of anger, I see my environment as no longer supporting my normal, habitual way of interacting with it; instead, I perceive myself as having the power to break with the social constraints of my environment by aggressively bending the world to my will. Yet, the precise affordances for aggressive action that become available through the experience of rage still depend on the environment and my place in it. If my hands and feet are bound, my anger may find an outlet in screaming

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<sup>96</sup> Cherry, *The Case for Rage*, 115.

<sup>97</sup> King, Jr., ‘We Need an Economic Bill of Rights’; Cherry, *The Case for Rage*, 89.

and verbal threats; if I am physically unconstrained and have a baseball bat in my hand, physical violence is much more likely to become an option. Social constraints function analogously: everything else being equal, angry men will be more likely than angry women to see physical violence as a way forward because men, more than women, are socialized into seeing violence as a socially acceptable response to frustration. What all this goes to show is that the affordances that become available in anger depend both on the physical and social environment, as well as the subject and their place in this environment.

Thus, it should be clear that, while anger always reveals *some* possibilities for action, these affordances are not necessarily or automatically emancipatory: sometimes, in anger, we simply lash out. We ought to ask, then, what is required for political action to be among the possibilities for action that appear in the experience of anger. The first step, of course, is to perceive the obstacles in one's way as a political problem—this is what I dealt with above as the epistemological aspect of anger. In addition to this, however, political resistance needs to be perceived as a viable response to this oppression. As Honneth puts it, 'only if the means of articulation of a social movement are available can the experience of disrespect become a source of motivation for acts of political resistance'.<sup>98</sup> This is not automatically the case whenever people see themselves as victims of injustice.

bell hooks' work is, once again, helpful for understanding this. On one hand, there is the already discussed 'pathological' expressions of Black rage in random acts of violence (note that hooks calls the *expression* pathological; she insists that the rage itself is 'an appropriate response to injustice'<sup>99</sup>). These can be understood as forms of 'lashing out' in anger when no affordances for meaningful political action seem available. On the other hand, hooks also discusses the 'narcissistic rage' of privileged Black elites who are enraged by the fact that, despite 'acquiescing to white power', 'they are not exempt from racist assault'.<sup>100</sup> Narcissistic rage, to be sure, *is* caused by real injustice; Black elites *do* face real racism, and their anger may well rely on a good understanding of the structural racism and white supremacy that holds them back. What hooks takes issue with is that people who feel narcissistic anger do not channel their rage into militant resistance against the

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<sup>98</sup> Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, 139.

<sup>99</sup> hooks, *Killing Rage*, 26.

<sup>100</sup> hooks, *Killing Rage*, 27.

collective oppression of all Black people: ‘they are not interested in fundamentally challenging and changing white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. They simply want equal access to privilege within the existing structure’.<sup>101</sup> The difference between ‘narcissistic rage’ and what hooks terms ‘militant rage’ can be explained in terms of affordances. Part of the explanation for the nature of elite anger is that privileged people have options available to them which the less privileged do not: narcissistic rage requires that sharing in the spoils of capitalist patriarchy seems like an achievable option. On the other hand, however, elites may lack certain possibilities that are available to other classes. Particularly, privileged Black people are more likely to move in spaces that are dominated by whites and people who have vested interests in maintaining the status quo. This makes it harder to see organized, collective resistance as a viable expression of one’s rage. The latter requires that one is surrounded by people who share one’s anger and who can be mobilized for collective political action—something that is lacking in elite-dominated spaces.

Herein lies a crucial point: whether anger motivates people to take emancipatory political action depends, in large part, on whether or not the social context is one that makes collective, organized resistance seem viable. To take a fairly obvious example, atomized gig workers may feel anger at the exploitation they face, and they may have an excellent theoretical understanding of that exploitation, yet they may not channel their anger into political action because their isolation from other workers prevents them from organizing politically. As empirical research shows, anger among gig workers is associated with political mobilization and support for unions only when combined with greater communication among workers.<sup>102</sup> Crucially, I am not just making the obvious claim that people do not take political action based on their anger where the conditions necessary for such political action are missing. I am making the stronger claim that the presence or absence of these conditions transforms the experience of anger itself. On a phenomenological understanding of anger, seeing ‘the objective quality of asking for a punch in the nose’ on my opponent’s face is an inherent part of my emotion—if my hands are bound, or if I have a baseball bat in my hand, this will change the quality of my

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<sup>101</sup> hooks, *Killing Rage*, 29.

<sup>102</sup> Wood et al., ‘Dynamics of Contention in the Gig Economy’.

experience. In the same way, opportunities for collective, political action change the experience of anger at oppression or exploitation. It is not only that my interpretation of my anger changes the options I see for action, but also that the affordances available shape my interpretation—this is why the possibility of coming to an emancipatory standpoint is tied to political struggle.

A worry might arise here that I have all but severed the connection between anger and political resistance. Anger, I am saying, does not inherently motivate us to resist injustice: sure, it provides some motivation for action, but which actions we take ultimately depends on other factors. To some extent I *do* want to weaken the connection between anger and resistance: it is all too obviously true that not all angry people become political activists. And simply stipulating that there are certain types of anger, like Lordean rage, which lead to political action, while other types do not is to beg the question: what makes progressive activism an available outlet to some angry people, while not to others? This being said, I do want to insist that the connection between anger and political action is more than incidental. This is because the way in which feeling rage is connected to a wish to break free from social (or physical) constraints gives it a radical, disruptive potential.

Let me elaborate. In section 2 above, I described the feeling of anger as the feeling of being ‘fixed’ by the strictures of the world, of no longer being able to continue one’s habitual form of action and instead wanting to aggressively break free of the usual social constraints in order to put the world in its place. Other negative emotions, like depression, involve the same feeling of no longer being able to go along with things as they are, but, whereas the characteristic response of the depressed person is withdrawal from the world, rage is associated with assertive action. Thus, anger involves a tendency to disrupt the status quo; it is politically useful partly because it motivates us to break free from the habitual reproduction of existing social structures. In the words of María Lugones, rage ‘recognizes this world’s walls. It pushes against them rather than making claims within them’.<sup>103</sup> There is a reason that agonistic thinkers, like Jacques Rancière, associate the political itself with a ruptural moment that evades the ‘police order’.<sup>104</sup> Yet, we do not need to buy into Rancière’s ontological understanding of ‘the political’ in order to see the value of

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<sup>103</sup> Lugones, ‘Hard-to-Handle Anger’, 12.

<sup>104</sup> Rancière, *Disagreement*.

disrupting social structures. In fact, focusing on affective experiences like anger is one way of giving sociological determinacy to the otherwise ‘socially weightless’ notion of rupture.<sup>105</sup>

Whereas agonists usually struggle to explain where the disruption of politics-as-usual comes from, sometimes referring to vague notions of ‘the passions’ as a driving force,<sup>106</sup> a materialist account of emotion shows us that the motivation to disrupt embodied, habitual structures of action comes not from a mysterious, extra-social place of radical agency but from contradictions within the social order itself. The experience of anger is the subjective disclosure of the inadequacy of the usual procedures for resolving problems and it tends to reveal possibilities for action that radically disrupt politics-as-usual (hence anger’s association with incivility<sup>107</sup>). It is paramount, however, to keep in mind that it is not disruption for disruption’s sake which makes anger politically valuable. The tendency towards disruptive action becomes valuable when it is combined with a theoretical understanding of the structures that cause one’s anger (as argued above) and especially when channelled into collective, organized political activity.<sup>108</sup>

So far, I have discussed the epistemological and the motivational functions of anger under separate headings, but that has simply been a convenient way of structuring the discussion. In reality, these two functions are highly intertwined, and, in the vein of the Marxist tradition, I do not subscribe to any strict separation between theory and praxis. In

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<sup>105</sup> McNay, *The Misguided Search for the Political*, chap. 4.

<sup>106</sup> Mouffe, *Politics and Passions*.

<sup>107</sup> As Berenstain argues, ‘calls for civility [...] in response to expressions of anger, particularly those aimed at the structures of oppression that birthed them, [...] form part of an epistemology of domination whose function is to structurally gaslight oppressed and marginalized groups aiming to fight back against the pervasive violence they experience’. Berenstain, “‘Civility’ and the Civilizing Project’, 331.

<sup>108</sup> For anger to lead to political knowledge and resistance, it is not strictly required that it takes on a ‘collective’ or ‘organized’ aspect. It is certainly possible to come to a political understanding of one’s anger on one’s own—and acts of resistance can be carried out by singular individuals. Nevertheless, it is usually through the discovery that one’s misery is not contingent and individual, but structurally determined and collectively shared, that one comes to interpret one’s own problems as political. This may involve literally coming together in a group to collectively discuss shared experiences, but the ‘collective’ aspect can also simply mean reading accounts of others’ experiences or availing oneself of shared hermeneutic resources produced through a history of political struggle.

fact, I hope that my account of anger highlights exactly how inseparable knowledge and action are. The experience of anger reveals an embodied distress that constitutes a practical problem, an inability to go along with the normal course of things, calling for both interpretation and action at the same time—and the interpretation of the problem stands in a dialectical relationship with the practical possibilities for solving it. It is obvious that one's interpretation of anger conditions the kinds of actions that will seem like viable paths forward—I need to see the problem as political before I can see the solution as political. But this is also, less obviously, true the other way around. For a cognitivist, anger is simply a judgment that something is wrong, and action follows in a separate second step; but I have argued that we should see affordances for action as an inherent part of the experience of anger. This means that the practical opportunities for action that we perceive condition the way we feel rage and therefore also the way we interpret our anger. Again, the possibility of unionizing with my co-workers shapes the anger that I feel about my working conditions: by making available certain courses of action, it also makes certain interpretations of my anger more salient. If collective, organized action is not on the horizon of possibility, I am much more likely to perceive my own discontent as a reaction to specific circumstances, bad customers, or unfair bosses, rather than a fundamentally exploitative economic structure. The political *articulation* of anger is not separate from the political *organization* of anger.

## 5. Conclusion

Audre Lorde's claim that anger 'is loaded with information and energy'<sup>109</sup> is best understood in conjunction with Nancy Hartsock's that a political standpoint 'represents an achievement both of science (analysis) and of political struggle on the basis of which this analysis can be conducted'.<sup>110</sup> To put things much too linearly: anger provides the energy that fuels the struggle which both requires and enables the analysis that deciphers the information encoded in anger. The need for analysis and practical problem-solving arises, in the first place, from the experience of having one's practical aims thwarted: my

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<sup>109</sup> Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 121.

<sup>110</sup> Hartsock, 'The Feminist Standpoint', 162.

habitual engagement with the world is somehow blocked but instead affordances for aggressively asserting myself against the obstacles in my way appear.

This account, I have argued, can explain anger's political and epistemological value in non-circular terms. Many argue that anger is politically valuable *because* it expresses claims about injustice—but if we want to make sense of this claim, it will not do to simply bake our conclusion into the definition of anger (or 'resentment' or 'Lordean rage' or whatever subtype of anger one might prefer). Defining anger as a response to injustice and then claiming that it therefore alerts us to injustice is circular. However, if we understand anger as simply a response to practical obstacles, we can see how this initial emotional reaction can be the spur for a process that ultimately leads to new knowledge about what is wrong with the world.

When we treat feminist and anti-racist anger as always-already a form of critique or resistance, then, we miss the real significance of anger for political knowledge and action—and we elide the important political work of interpretation and organization that goes into politicizing rage. When angry people get together to interpret their feelings collectively and organize actions based on it, we can see this as a collective process of practical problem solving. Herein lies the political function of anger: it subjectively reveals a problem that calls for interpretation and practical solutions in a way that has the potential to spur on a dialectical process of political articulation and organized action. If anger is the 'political emotion par excellence',<sup>111</sup> it is because its expansive and assertive tendencies might uniquely motivate us to break free of normal social constraints and question the status quo. We need not straitjacket these emotions within a monist theory of recognition to see their normative force. Nor do we need to appeal to the high court of a Theory of Justice to distinguish relevant moral from non-moral feelings. The normative force of negative emotions comes from the fact that they reveal practical problems—when mediated by social theory, such a practical problem can turn into social critique.

'Rage', writes Susan Stryker in the poem that forms this chapter's epigraph, 'is the force that moves me'.<sup>112</sup> I have tried to highlight that anger is not just a judgment or a perception, but essentially tied to action and movement; and critique must be thought of as the

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<sup>111</sup> Gilligan, *Joining the Resistance*, 290.

<sup>112</sup> Stryker, 'My Words to Victor Frankenstein', 247.

cognitive moment in that movement. Stryker's poem is part of an article in which she uses the metaphor of Frankenstein's monster to describe the anger she feels as a trans woman: 'my exclusion from human community fuels a deep and abiding rage in me that I, like the monster, direct against the conditions in which I must struggle to exist'.<sup>113</sup> Thus, like the monster, this anger turns against its own creator: the society which called it forth yet denies it a place. Such feelings, the subjective living-through of social contradictions, must, through analysis as well as struggle, be turned against the conditions of their creation.

For the purposes of critical theory, this discussion has revealed a number of crucial points which I will go on to develop further in the remaining chapters of this thesis. First, the question of grounding critique in experiences of suffering is not primarily a theoretical question: feminists have highlighted that, in practice, articulating feelings into critique has always been an important part of political organizing. Reducing this complex work to a mere expression of a psychological need for recognition significantly misrepresents social reality. What is more, I have argued that the political articulation of emotions is not strictly separable from their political organization thus bringing back the Marxist insight about the inseparability of theory and praxis into a critical theory of social suffering. A critical theory that wants to base critique on experiences of suffering needs to see itself as continuous with existing political practices of articulating and organizing around negative emotions.

This, however, should not lead us to naïvely overestimate the agency of the oppressed. Nor should we fetishize negative feelings as something that *automatically* drives radical resistance. This chapter has focused on an emotion that lends itself fairly straightforwardly to political organizing—namely, anger in the context of racism and sexism—but the following two chapters will serve to complicate this picture. They will ask what happens when our emotions in the face of suffering are misguided: first, in the case of depression where blame is turned inward towards the self, and, second, in the case of scapegoating anger where innocent others, like migrants or minorities, are blamed for social ills. Thinking through those more complicated cases will further refine our understanding of negative emotions and their connections to resistance and critique. The next chapter,

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<sup>113</sup> Stryker, 'My Words to Victor Frankenstein', 238.

## CHAPTER 3

then, asks what happens when the social contradictions we live through are not experienced as a 'force', a 'wave', a 'furious flow',<sup>114</sup> but as a drowning out of all possibilities for action.

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<sup>114</sup> Stryker, 'My Words to Victor Frankenstein', 247.

## Chapter 4

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# ‘Walled off from the Lifeworld’: On Depression, Consciousness, and Political Therapy

*He had to retreat to a point of inner security if only because the world outside had become a place of agonizing decay; he had to ignore the itch, the desire to intervene, for the purpose and significance of action were being corroded away by its thoroughgoing lack of significance; he had to distance himself because the only valid response of a sound mind to this process was to protest against it, or indeed to withdraw, to cut all contact with it and retain one's distance...*

—László Krasznahorkai<sup>1</sup>

As the last chapter hopefully demonstrated, thinking about anger was a helpful way to concretize the idea that both knowledge and resistance can spring from the experience of suffering and oppression; that pain, as Adorno put it, can be ‘the moving force[] of dialectical thinking’.<sup>2</sup> While I highlighted that anger by no means automatically leads to emancipatory action, I also explained why it lends itself particularly well to organized forms of resistance. Yet, experiences of social contradiction far from always produce the feelings of aggressive agency that accompany rage. At other times, experiences of oppression produce not furious resistance, but attitudes of depression, hopelessness, and resignation. The ‘consciousness of the degradation of the world’ may produce not active

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<sup>1</sup> Krasznahorkai, *The Melancholy of Resistance*, 191.

<sup>2</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 202.

resistance but withdrawal from the world. A theory that aims to ground critique in experiences of suffering needs to have something to say about the types of feelings, like depression, which are *not* usually associated with critique and resistance. This chapter, then, will address the question of whether and how experiences of depression can disclose social wrongs.

Of course, one view has it that depression reveals nothing at all except a chemical imbalance in someone's brain. Recently, though, we have seen significant backlash against such biomedical models of depression and the individualization and medicalization of social suffering—not least in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>3</sup> While evidence is mounting about the limitations of biochemical explanations of depression,<sup>4</sup> calls are growing to address the 'social determinants of mental health'.<sup>5</sup> Increasingly, arguments are made that reducing depression to a medical issue 'obscures the relation between our moods and our circumstances. [...] Instead, we need to listen carefully to the message that people's emotional reactions convey, and endeavour to create a society in which all people can flourish'.<sup>6</sup>

However, it is not so clear what it would mean to listen to the 'messages' conveyed by depression. While anger often involves a clear sense of an external obstacle or object of blame, depression is characterized by internalized blame and guilt—and surely, listening to depression should not mean accepting these 'messages' at face value. Frequently used metaphors likening the experience of depression to seeing the world through a 'heavy fog' or a 'dark cloud' highlight some of the difficulties of this question: while perhaps it discloses that something is wrong with the world, it usually does not present us with a clear image of what this wrongness consists in. Depression may be 'nature's attempt to show us that something in our lives isn't working out'<sup>7</sup>—but how do we know what it is that is going wrong? And if depression, as Mark Fisher claims, is a 'form[] of captured discontent [which] can and must be channeled outwards, directed towards its real cause', how do we

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<sup>3</sup> Rose, 'Against "Mental Health"'.  
<sup>4</sup> Healy, 'Serotonin and Depression'; Moncrieff et al., 'The Serotonin Theory of Depression'.  
<sup>5</sup> Allen et al., 'Social Determinants of Mental Health'; Marmot, 'Social Justice, Epidemiology and Health Inequalities'; Marmot, *Fair Society, Healthy Lives*.  
<sup>6</sup> Read and Moncrieff, 'Depression', 1407.  
<sup>7</sup> Garson, 'The Helpful Delusion'.

know the real cause and set this discontent free turning it ‘from medicalized conditions into effective antagonisms’?<sup>8</sup>

Considering the link between depression and resistance, then, raises a number of more general questions for an account of critique grounded in negative emotions. It raises the question of whether these feelings can be politicized and lead to critique, even when they are initially experienced as self-blame and hopelessness. But, as the discussion will show, this also raises wider questions about the connection between theory and practice. Precisely because depression is often experienced as a loss of possibilities for action, I will argue, it can tell us something about the need to sometimes retreat from the sphere of practice into thought.

As in other chapters, I begin, in section 1, by considering the existing literature, which has treated depression variously as a symptom of, judgment about, or protest against injustice. While each perspective captures something important, each also has significant shortcomings. In section 2, I therefore go on to develop my own account of depression. On my phenomenological and materialist approach to negative emotions, I argue, depression is best understood as consciousness of one’s alienation. This approach highlights that, while depression is characterized by hopelessness, it is not a state of pure resignation: section 3 explains how the depressive is usually painfully aware that something is wrong leading to intensive rumination on the causes of their own misery in a way that *can* lead to a better understanding of the causes of their alienation. In section 4, I use the example of feminist consciousness-raising groups to show that, under the right social conditions, feelings of depression can be politicized and lead to knowledge about oppression. Finally, in section 5, I reflect on what the chapter’s discussion of depression can tell us about the relationship between theory and action, making reference to Adorno’s critique of ‘pseudo-activity’. While depressive experiences highlight the way we sometimes need to withdraw from action in order to reconsider our framework for interpreting the world, I also argue that such cognitive work is best carried out collectively. Nevertheless, critical theory can play an important role in such processes of politicizing and interpreting

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<sup>8</sup> Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 84.

feelings by providing a kind of ‘political therapy’—a term I take from Carol Hanisch’s writings on consciousness-raising.<sup>9</sup>

### 1. Depression as symptom, judgment, or protest

The preceding chapter dealt with the epistemological and political roles of anger, and other authors have asked similar questions about a host of other negative emotions, like fear,<sup>10</sup> shame,<sup>11</sup> and disgust.<sup>12</sup> But there is barely any philosophical work on whether and how depression can similarly lead to knowledge about injustice.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, we can reconstruct some approaches which are at least implicitly present in various writings on depression and adjacent phenomena.

One of the reasons, perhaps, for the relative neglect is that depression sits uneasily between a number of different problematics usually addressed under the themes of illness, emotion, and madness, respectively—with depression being a somewhat marginal member of each category. Seen as an illness, depression can be a *symptom* of social ills; as an emotion it can be a *judgment* about the world; as a form of madness it can be seen as a *refusal* to participate in a corrupt social order. Each of these perspectives captures something relevant about depression, but none of them, I will argue, adequately captures its potential to disclose social wrongs.

#### 1.1 Depression as symptom

The first, and perhaps most obvious, way to think of depression as disclosive of injustice is as an illness which may be a symptom of social ills. On this view depression is not considered a meaningful response to depressing realities but simply a biomedical issue, like cancer or diabetes. As the growing interest in ‘social determinants of health’ makes

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<sup>9</sup> Hanisch, ‘The Personal Is Political’.

<sup>10</sup> Degerman, *Political Agency*, chap. 5; McAfee, *Fear of Breakdown*; Tietjen, ‘The Affects of Populism’; Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, chap. 3; Shklar, ‘The Liberalism of Fear’.

<sup>11</sup> Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, chap. 5; Fischer, ‘Gender and the Politics of Shame’ (see also the further contributions to this special issue); Calhoun, ‘An Apology for Moral Shame’; Webster, ‘Making Sense of Shame’.

<sup>12</sup> Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, chap. 4; Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity*; Kim, ‘Racial Emotions’, 452–61.

<sup>13</sup> For two exceptions, see Graham, ‘Melancholic Epistemology’; Martin, ‘Depression’.

clear, however, treating something as a biomedical problem does not preclude *also* treating it as a political problem.<sup>14</sup> As Mark Fisher put it, even if ‘depression is constituted by low serotonin levels, what still needs to be explained is why particular individuals have low levels of serotonin. This requires a social and political explanation’.<sup>15</sup> Here, the critical theorist becomes a social epidemiologist. An early example of this approach is Engels’ *Conditions of the Working-Class* in which he analyses the way capitalism produces various health conditions in workers and ‘undermines the vital force of these workers gradually, little by little, and so hurries them to the grave before their time’.<sup>16</sup> With Adler-Bolton and Vierkant, we can term this a ‘social-symptomatic model’ of illness; symptoms, on this model, ‘present not only a challenge to the survival of “the patients” but also represent a call to arms’.<sup>17</sup> Fabian Freyenhagen, too, argues that Critical Theory should be understood in just this way: the point of critique is to make causal claims establishing, say, that it is ‘the capitalist organization of society that produces recognizable patterns of stressful life events that lead to depression’.<sup>18</sup>

In the previous chapter, I argued for including this type of sociogenic causal explanation in our understanding of anger—and it is certainly also relevant in the case of depression. Yet, entirely reducing depression to the status of a symptom goes too far in that it elides the subjective element and the fact that depression, no matter how maladaptive, is still an intelligible reaction to the world. Depression, like anger, should be ‘thought of as the emotional response of a whole human being [that] cannot be properly understood without identifying the context or circumstances that it is a *response to*’—not just a consequence of.<sup>19</sup> In other words, if some philosophical accounts of anger go too far in

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<sup>14</sup> Critics of the biomedical view sometimes conflate medicalization with individualization. For example, Read and Moncrieff write that ‘[c]lassifying anxiety, depression and other emotional reactions as mental diseases or disorders obscures the relation between our moods and our circumstances [and] leads society to believe that social structures are unchangeable’. If this rings true, it is because, as a matter of fact, we tend to individualize medical problems, not because there is any fundamental incompatibility between seeing something as a medical *and* social-structural problem. Read and Moncrieff, ‘Depression’, 1407.

<sup>15</sup> Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 41.

<sup>16</sup> Engels, *The Conditions of the Working-Class*, 122.

<sup>17</sup> Adler-Bolton and Vierkant, *Health Communism*, 150.

<sup>18</sup> Freyenhagen, ‘Critical Theory and Social Pathology’, 418; see also Sik, *Empty Suffering*, chap. 4.

<sup>19</sup> Moncrieff, ‘It Was the Brain Tumor’, 179. Emphasis mine. See also Read and Moncrieff, ‘Depression’.

excluding causal explanation, the way we think about depression tends to go wrong in the opposite direction.

The World Health Organization describes ‘depressive disorders’ as ‘characterized by sadness, loss of interest or pleasure, feelings of guilt or low self-worth, disturbed sleep or appetite, feelings of tiredness, and poor concentration’,<sup>20</sup> and, to be diagnosed with ‘mild’ or ‘minor’ depression, it is sufficient to exhibit persistent depressed mood and daily thoughts of worthlessness for two weeks.<sup>21</sup> The idea that once these otherwise ‘normal’ feelings reach a certain threshold of intensity or duration we should no longer see them as meaningful reactions to one’s environment but rather as dysfunctions is arbitrary. While some instances of depression may have mainly physical aetiologies (brain tumours can cause depressive symptoms, for instance), in general, depression is best seen as “‘normal’ human emotion, albeit sometimes extreme and disproportionate—that is as a meaningful reaction to depressing events and circumstances’.<sup>22</sup>

To be clear, I do not wish to intervene in debates about whether depression is or is not an illness or disorder. These debates hinge on one’s definition of ‘illness’ or ‘disorder’ and, as Robert Chapman has pointed out, critiques of the notion of mental illness often rely on problematically naturalizing assumptions about physical illness.<sup>23</sup> Insisting that depression is a meaningful response to one’s circumstances is not to deny that it is harrowing, nor that providing relief from it through pharmaceutical or therapeutic means is important. What I want to deny is that we can draw a neat line between ‘normal’ forms of suffering, which may be misguided or maladaptive but still meaningful, and ‘clinical’ depression as something that cannot be understood as a meaningful reaction to one’s world but must be left to medical diagnosis. In the following, I assume that these two perspectives are compatible: we can see depression as continuous with ‘normal’ moods and emotions without denying that they can reach a threshold where medical treatment is an appropriate option.

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<sup>20</sup> World Health Organization, ‘Depression’, 2.

<sup>21</sup> Benazzi, ‘Various Forms of Depression’.

<sup>22</sup> Read and Moncrieff, ‘Depression’, 1402.

<sup>23</sup> Chapman, ‘A Critique of Critical Psychiatry’. For a defence of the concept of mental illness in phenomenological terms, see also Chappell, ‘In Defence of the Concept of Mental Illness’.

### 1.2 *Depression as judgment*

What, then, could it mean to treat depression as a meaningful emotional response to one's circumstances? Some have suggested that depression, like other emotions, should be seen simply as an evaluative judgment about the world—and, as such, it can be 'a source of moral insight'.<sup>24</sup> This would be in line with influential cognitive theories of mood disorders which see depression as constituted by pessimistic cognition.<sup>25</sup> Psychologists usually see this as a *disordered* form of cognition, and some argue that, to be depressed, one's cognitions, necessarily, must 'not [be] an appropriate or proportionate response to antecedent events in her environment'.<sup>26</sup> Others, however, argue that depression can be a perfectly rational apprehension of depressing circumstances.<sup>27</sup> One influential theory, termed 'depressive realism', even posits that depressed individuals make more pessimistic judgments because they are *free* of certain cognitive biases: non-depressed people tend to distort their image of the world in order to maintain a positive self-image and hope for the future, whereas the depressed are supposedly 'sadder but wiser'.<sup>28</sup> On this view, depression discloses injustice simply by revealing the world in all its depravity: the depressed does not see the world unclearly through a dark cloud, but rather has taken off the rose-tinted glasses.

Apart from the reasons I have already given in previous chapters for rejecting cognitivist theories of emotion,<sup>29</sup> I think we have additional cause to be wary of views that impute any special clarity to experiences of depression, especially if we want to place them in a political context. It may well be true that depressed people perform better on laboratory tasks about assessment of agency in a controlled setting,<sup>30</sup> but this tells us very little about depressive people's general understanding of the world. For example, depression is not only characterized by pessimistic predictions about the future, but also associated with

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<sup>24</sup> Martin, 'Depression', 271. See also Graham, 'Melancholic Epistemology'; Cavedon-Taylor, 'Must Depression Be Irrational?'

<sup>25</sup> Beck et al., *Cognitive Therapy of Depression*.

<sup>26</sup> Davies, 'Externalist Psychiatry', 293.

<sup>27</sup> Cavedon-Taylor, 'Must Depression Be Irrational?'

<sup>28</sup> Alloy and Abrahamson, 'Judgment of Contingency in Depressed and Nondepressed Students'.

<sup>29</sup> For arguments against cognitive theories of depression in particular, see also Ratcliffe, *Experiences of Depression*, 71–74.

<sup>30</sup> Although it should be noted that the evidence, even in laboratory experiments, is conflicting and could be interpreted differently. Allan et al., 'The Sad Truth'.

guilt, self-blame, and feelings of worthlessness.<sup>31</sup> Prima facie, this would suggest that depression is not particularly likely to reveal knowledge of injustice since the blame for suffering is often directed towards oneself rather than the world. Thus, unlike anger, which many argue can reveal injustice precisely because it ‘implies a claim to domain’,<sup>32</sup> depression may often be the result of having internalized society’s denial of one’s worth. It is very possible that such internalization of stigmatization leads to more realistic predictions about one’s future prospects in an oppressive world—but it would be perverse to confuse this with having a ‘correct’ understanding of one’s worth.

In short, unless we take the Schopenhauerian view that ‘everything is as it should be, in a world where each of us pays the penalty of existence’,<sup>33</sup> we should not attribute any particular clarity to experiences of depression. Claiming that depression is an *intelligible* response to depressing circumstances—e.g., feeling worthless in the face of persistent marginalization—is not the same as saying that it represents a *correct* understanding of these circumstances.

### 1.3 *Depression as protest*

We can identify a third perspective on depression that treats it neither as a passive state of illness, nor as a judgment about the world, but rather as a strategy for engaging with the world under difficult circumstances.<sup>34</sup> Here, the focus is not on beliefs or judgments about the world, but on the way the depressed person perceives subjective possibilities for engaging with the world (i.e., affordances), or, crucially, the lack thereof.

Recall, for example, Sartre’s description of the feeling of ‘melancholy’. When the world no longer furnishes the conditions for my usual agency (e.g., through the loss of a job, money, or the support of a loved one), and I lose ‘both the ability and the will to carry out the projects I formerly entertained, I behave in such a manner that the universe requires nothing more from me’.<sup>35</sup> A very similar perspective is adopted by more recent Darwinian

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<sup>31</sup> These are included as standard diagnostic criteria for depression in the DSM. American Psychiatric Association, *DSM-5*, 161.

<sup>32</sup> Frye, *The Politics of Reality*, 87.

<sup>33</sup> Schopenhauer, *Studies in Pessimism*, 28.

<sup>34</sup> For a general overview of how accounts of mental illness have historically oscillated between explanations in terms of dysfunction and in terms of strategy, see Garson, *Madness*.

<sup>35</sup> Sartre, *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions*, 44.

theories of depression which see it as an adaptive trait: ‘as difficulties continue and grow and our life’s energies are progressively wasted, this emotion helps to disengage us from a hopeless enterprise’.<sup>36</sup> Some theories even highlight the connection between depression and anger in this regard: when facing frustrations of our engagement with the world, we initially tend to respond aggressively trying to restore our agency; but, if this strategy consistently fails, the world starts looking increasingly incaltrant leading to withdrawal and depression.<sup>37</sup>

Some people identify in these features of depression a latent protest against the unjust structures of the world qua refusal to participate. Depression, John Andrews writes, ‘can overflow into [...] collective political sentiments, and an individual incapacity (to feel, to get out of bed, to work) becomes a capacity to refuse or to ask for more of this life’.<sup>38</sup> Johanna Hedva similarly suggest that ‘once we are all ill and confined to the bed, [...] and there is no one left to go to work, perhaps then, finally, capitalism will screech to its much needed, long-overdue, and motherfucking glorious halt’.<sup>39</sup> The depressive’s flight from the world, then, can be interpreted as an implicit rejection of capitalism.

This line of reasoning is more familiar from debates about madness, and especially schizophrenia. From this perspective, associated, among others, with R. D. Laing, and Deleuze and Guattari, madness ‘no longer consists in an infantile flight from the pain of rejection; it is a refusal to participate in a corrupt social order’.<sup>40</sup> Anti-psychiatrists, like David Cooper, claimed that ‘all madmen are political dissidents’, and that the mania of the manic-depressive is an ‘expression of a protest against the capitalist ethos’.<sup>41</sup> In a similar way, feminists have often read women’s pathologized behaviour as submerged forms of protest against patriarchy. A famous example is Freud’s Dora case: several feminists have analysed Dora’s alleged hysteria as an unconscious ‘rebellion’, ‘a silent revolt against male power’.<sup>42</sup> For Hélène Cixous, ‘this girl [...] deprived of the possibility of saying directly what she perceived [...] still had the strength to make it known. It is the nuclear example

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<sup>36</sup> Nesse and Williams cited in Garson, *Madness*, 257–58.

<sup>37</sup> Klinger, ‘Consequences of Commitment to and Disengagement from Incentives’.

<sup>38</sup> Andrews, ‘Depression Today’, 172.

<sup>39</sup> Hedva, ‘Sick Woman Theory’.

<sup>40</sup> Garson, *Madness*, 221.

<sup>41</sup> Cooper, *The Language of Madness*, 23, 38.

<sup>42</sup> Ramas, ‘Freud’s Dora’, 152; Moi, ‘Representation of Patriarchy’, 60.

of women's power to protest.<sup>43</sup> The hysteric, the schizophrenic, or the depressive all reveal the injustices of the world through their 'silent revolts' which the social theorist then translates into words.

These forms of explanation—both in the case of depression, and madness in general—are highly questionable. It is always easy and comfortable for the social critic to simply impute their own claims to the oppressed and suffering. The social theorist claims to simply say out loud what Dora, deprived of her own voice, could not herself say. Gayatri Spivak calls this the 'ventriloquism of the speaking subaltern'.<sup>44</sup> In reality, however, the withdrawal of the depressive or the mad is rarely experienced or intended as an act of political protest on the level of the individual—attributing such political intentions to people is not only theoretically questionable but also risks romanticizing and fetishizing experiences which are actually harrowing and debilitating.

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Ultimately, then, none of the three perspectives—depression as illness, judgment, or protest—gives us a satisfactory account of what it means to 'listen to depression'. Nevertheless, each does capture some crucial aspects of the depressive experience which ought to be kept in mind. The illness perspective highlights both the importance of considering social causation and the fact that depression is a debilitating experience (with the latter guarding against any tendency to romanticize or sanitize depression). The judgment perspective emphasizes that depression may be both an intelligible and an apt response to depressing circumstances. Finally, seeing depression as a strategic withdrawal from the world highlights that this response is not merely a cognitive judgment but rather an embodied way of engaging with, or disengaging from, one's environment.

## 2. The phenomenology of depression

Keeping in mind the above points, I now turn to consider the phenomenology of depression in more detail in order to develop an account of depression's potential to spur

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<sup>43</sup> Cixous and Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, 154.

<sup>44</sup> Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', 27.

critique. At this point, it is worth noting that the term depression can cover a wide range of experiences,<sup>45</sup> and I am not concerned here with providing anything like a definition that captures all of them. Nevertheless, recent phenomenological investigations of depressive experiences have uncovered a number of typical features.<sup>46</sup> Since my aim here is to discuss whether experiences of depression have the potential to disclose social injustice, I selectively focus on those aspects of the depressive experience which have usually been taken to *preclude* such critical consciousness, chief among them the loss of hope and agency.<sup>47</sup>

Consider, to begin with, the following autobiographical descriptions of depression experiences by Ann Cvetkovich, Mark Fisher, and an anonymous survey participant:

I would wake up, but I would be unable to make the next move, as though I were literally paralyzed and the only physical difference between being awake and being asleep was that my eyes were open. My state of immobility seemed aimless and unmotivated, not something I could change in any way. I couldn't even really recognize what possessed me as dread or anxiety.<sup>48</sup>

The depressive experiences himself as walled off from the lifeworld [...] For the depressive, the habits of the former lifeworld now seem to be, precisely, a mode of playacting, a series of pantomime gestures [...], which they are both no longer capable of performing and which they no longer wish to perform—there's no point, everything is a sham.<sup>49</sup>

Whilst depressed, [...] I feel hopeless and useless, and my self-confidence drops so low that sometimes I cannot even leave the house to buy food as I don't feel worthy to be taking up any space and time.<sup>50</sup>

Note how these accounts make it clear that depression is much more than merely a judgment that the world is depressing; they highlight how the depressive's whole relation to the world has undergone a change: one feels physically 'paralyzed' and 'walled off' from

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<sup>45</sup> Stanghellini, 'The Heterogeneity of Depression'; Chentsova-Dutton and Tsai, 'Understanding Depression across Cultures'.

<sup>46</sup> Fusar-Poli et al., 'The Lived Experience of Depression'.

<sup>47</sup> Huber, 'Hope from Despair', 96–97.

<sup>48</sup> Cvetkovich, *Depression*, 44.

<sup>49</sup> Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*, 59.

<sup>50</sup> Cited in Ratcliffe, *Experiences of Depression*, 113.

the world. Depression, then, is not to be located in a disembodied mind but, rather, is a change in subjects' embodied relation to world and others.<sup>51</sup> Accounts of lacking agency, paralysis, and of being cut off from the world in a way that erodes the significance of action are some of the most pervasive themes in first-person accounts of depression.<sup>52</sup> To put this in the phenomenological language I have been using, one no longer experiences the world as offering up meaningful affordances for action ('everything is a sham').

The phenomenology of depression may initially seem to fit uneasily with the account of negative emotions I have developed so far. As outlined in chapter 2, I conceive of them as the consciousness of a clash between one's embodied expectations and the objective structures of the world. It is this discrepancy between expectation and reality that reveals a 'desiring negation'<sup>53</sup> which potentially leads to social critique and political action. Yet, depression, it could seem, involves such a 'totalizing experience of personal incompetence and helplessness' that any element of desire in the negation is lost.<sup>54</sup> In experiencing everything as mere pantomime and feeling unworthy of even taking up space, it seems I have resigned all expectations that things could be otherwise. If the angry person sees a world that calls for aggressive intervention, the depressive sees no opportunities for action whatsoever, and if anger, consequently, is the 'political emotion par excellence',<sup>55</sup> depression may look like an *anti*-political emotion par excellence.<sup>56</sup> As Matthew Ratcliffe usefully puts it, in such experiences of depression '[a] style of anticipation is absent; nothing is practically significant anymore, nothing beckons activities, and so nothing offers the possibility of meaningful change'.<sup>57</sup> Thus, it could seem that depression is a state of resignation to the existing state of affairs from which no resistance can spring. What is more, it could be added that this is the very *function* of depression: it protects against the pain of disappointment through resignation to the state of the world.

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<sup>51</sup> Fuchs, for example, describes depression as a 'disorder of intercorporeality and interaffectivity'. Fuchs, 'Depression, Intercorporeality, and Interaffectivity', 219; see also Fuchs and Schlimme, 'Embodiment and Psychopathology'; Doerr-Zegers et al., 'Disturbances of Embodiment as Core Phenomena of Depression'.

<sup>52</sup> See Ratcliffe, *Experiences of Depression*.

<sup>53</sup> Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 6.

<sup>54</sup> Sik, *Empty Suffering*, 98.

<sup>55</sup> Gilligan, *Joining the Resistance*, 290.

<sup>56</sup> See Huber, 'Hope from Despair', 97.

<sup>57</sup> Ratcliffe, *Experiences of Depression*, 111. Emphasis mine.

There is some truth to such a view, but I want to challenge the claim that depression is a ‘totalizing’ experience leaving the individual without even the desire for change. Feeling unworthy of taking up space and unable to even imagine feeling pleasure certainly suggests that there is no longer any disappointment when one is, in fact, denied space, time, and possibilities for fulfilment. Yet, while depression is usually a state of hopelessness, I would argue that it is *not* a state of resignation. We can see why by noting, first of all, that if depression were a ‘strategy’ for avoiding the pain of disappointment, it would be a rather counter-productive one: depression is usually more painful than even a very serious experience of disappointment. If depression were simply about giving up hope in the sense of resigning oneself to the way things are, it is not clear why the experience of depression would be painful. It is true that in depression we may resign ourselves to a great many things that were previously intolerable: specific experiences of disrespect or rejection may be experienced as normal or deserved to the point where they produce no anger or other strong affect. Yet, the depressed person is not resigned to their situation in the world *as such*—suicidal thoughts being the most extreme expression of this fact. In depression, the ‘loss of hope is not just the absence of something’, rather, it involves ‘a painful awareness of loss’.<sup>58</sup>

In other words, depression is not merely the loss of hope and meaning but the conscious experience of this loss where ‘the absence of hope, practical significance, and interpersonal connection is painfully felt’.<sup>59</sup> Following Ratcliffe’s work on the phenomenology of depression, we can explain this as follows: while many specific practical expectations have been extinguished, the more general expectation of finding meaningful possibilities in the world may remain. ‘Even if one no longer anticipates *p*, the anticipation of anticipating *p* can remain, and be disappointed when one does not anticipate *p*’.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, if one were simply born without the ability to find meaningful possibilities in the world, it is hard to imagine how one could be depressed by this lack. The painful loss of meaning and hope *requires* that meaning and hope were once present. Depression, then, *does* embody a ‘desiring negation’: it is the basic desire to find practical

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<sup>58</sup> Ratcliffe, *Experiences of Depression*, 102. Emphasis mine.

<sup>59</sup> Ratcliffe, *Experiences of Depression*, 54.

<sup>60</sup> Ratcliffe, *Experiences of Depression*, 48.

significance in one's environment crashing against a world that denies one all meaning and hope.

We can describe depression, then, as the consciousness of lacking a meaningful relation to the world. Such a loss of meaning and relation is, of course, what critical theorists often try to capture with the concept of 'alienation', and I would like to suggest that depression is fruitfully understood as the conscious experience of one's alienation from the world. Quoting Rahel Jaeggi, alienation is here understood as

the inability to establish a relation to other human beings, to things, to social institutions and thereby also—so the fundamental intuition of the theory of alienation—to oneself. An alienated world presents itself to individuals as insignificant and meaningless.<sup>61</sup>

Yet, I differ from Jaeggi in the way I conceive of the normative significance of this experience. As discussed in chapter 1, for Jaeggi the experience of alienation can ground an immanent critique of society because it reveals 'discrepancies between the ideal of control or command and actual impotence with respect to (self-created) relations'.<sup>62</sup> Depression, however, is not the experience of having any explicitly or implicitly held ideal of autonomy disappointed (it could occur in the absence of such ideals<sup>63</sup>), but rather a clash between an embodied expectation of encountering meaningful possibilities for action and a world that leaves one alienated. The normativity, just like in the case of anger, comes from the subjective experience of a social contradiction, which reveals a *practical* problem—the problem of finding meaning in the world. This, in turn, spurs the process of interpretation and problem-solving that may lead to social critique. That, in any case, is what I shall go on to argue in the following.

Before going on to consider what this process of interpretation looks like, it is worth including a further aside on the concept of alienation. I describe depression as

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<sup>61</sup> Jaeggi, *Alienation*, 3.

<sup>62</sup> Jaeggi, *Alienation*, 41.

<sup>63</sup> I agree with Ehrenberg and others that the neoliberal promotion of ideals of self-entrepreneurship is likely to foster high levels of depression, but this is a contingent, not a necessary relationship. High levels of feelings of individual responsibility will make people fall into depression more easily when their real experiences of powerlessness clash with these expectations, yet this is not the *only* cause of depression. Ehrenberg, *The Weariness of the Self*. See also Honneth, 'Organized Self-Realization'.

‘*consciousness of alienation*’ rather than ‘*alienation*’ simpliciter. This raises the obvious question of whether it is possible to be alienated without being conscious of one’s alienation. Is it possible to be unable to find meaningful relations in one’s world without subjectively missing anything? I very much doubt that it is empirically possible to be fully alienated from the world in this sense without subjectively feeling a painful lack—ultimately, this is a question of human psychology—but it is certainly conceptually conceivable, and one can, it would seem, be more or less aware of one’s alienation. Depression is clearly felt more acutely at some moments while fading into the background at others, and some people may be more sensitive to this loss of meaning than others. Hence it is conceptually important to distinguish between alienation and the consciousness thereof. Note, though, that I am not here appealing to the Hegelian distinction between objective and subjective alienation.<sup>64</sup> It is not that there is a fact of the matter about whether or not the objective world is alienating which one can subjectively register or not. Alienation is about how one subjectively perceives the world, yet because subjectivity is very much a part of the material reproduction of society (as explained in chapter 2), the state of alienation is also a fact about the material world: alienation is subjective *and* objective. On my view, subjective and objective alienation do not come apart, yet one can always be more or less conscious of the objectively alienated state of one’s own subjectivity.

### 3. Depression as a crisis of problem-solving

I have said that depression reveals a practical problem in the form of a world that lacks meaning for the subject. In this section, I will flesh out what it means to consider depression as an attempt at problem-solving.

Anger, though it also comes in more and less choate forms, usually presents itself as a response to a concrete problem. When getting angry, one often has a sense of a concrete obstacle as well as new affordances for tackling this obstacle (whether it be physical or social) through some form of aggressive response. In depression, however, we do not usually perceive specific problems, let alone possible solutions. To the depressive, the

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<sup>64</sup> Hardimon, *Hegel’s Social Philosophy*, 120–21.

world as a whole seems problematic, but no practical solutions appear; they are ‘walled off from the lifeworld’ with its ‘pantomime gestures [...], which they no longer wish to perform’.<sup>65</sup> If anger presents itself as the solution to a problem, we can understand depression as a kind of ‘crisis of problem-solving’. Consider Rahel Jaeggi’s descriptions of different levels of problems as they can appear on the level of forms of life:

a sudden period of drought or an unmanageable change in climate is an (empirical) problem that stems from the world; for forms of life it creates a problem with the world. But when [...] such a problem arises as a form-of-life problem, that is, as a shortcoming of the cultural mechanisms for dealing with such problems, then it is a conceptual problem.<sup>66</sup>

The latter Jaeggi describes as a ‘crisis of problem-solving’, or a problem with ‘the interpretive framework of a form of life’.<sup>67</sup> Analogously, consider how anger subjectively reveals an empirical problem, a problem with the world that calls for action, whereas depression reveals a problem with one’s mechanisms for dealing with problems. One feels the loss of a global interpretative framework that makes action in the world seem meaningful at all.

The passivity and withdrawal associated with depression are the result of this loss of a meaningful framework for action—but it would be entirely wrong to construe this a passive state of resignation. A state of depression *is* subjectively perceived as a problem, but not one that can be dealt with through immediate action; rather, it reveals a shortcoming in the subject’s relation to the world. It thereby reveals a *conceptual* problem, and calls for a fundamental change in one’s interpretation of the world. Rather than passivity, depression is often characterized by intense mental activity in an attempt to make sense of one’s situation. People with depression often report constant rumination on the meanings of their negative feelings and the sources of their problems.<sup>68</sup> This search, of course, also does manifest itself in practical actions sometimes—for example, in seeking out help, therapy,

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<sup>65</sup> Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*, 59.

<sup>66</sup> Jaeggi, *Critique of Forms of Life*, 169.

<sup>67</sup> Jaeggi, *Critique of Forms of Life*, 190.

<sup>68</sup> This is also termed ‘recyclic negative thinking’ in the psychological literature. Papageorgiou and Wells, *Depressive Rumination*; Nolen-Hoeksema et al., ‘Rethinking Rumination’.

or resources for self-help or, tragically, in suicide as a final ‘effort to escape from self and world’ if the search for meaning fails.<sup>69</sup>

Most of the time the constant negative rumination on one’s problems is maladaptive on the individual level—Fuchs describes this as ‘pathological hyperreflexivity’.<sup>70</sup> Yet, it *can* produce positive changes in some circumstances. While psychologists usually consider it a distorted cognitive pattern, there is no reason to assume a priori that it cannot produce accurate knowledge of the sources of one’s suffering.<sup>71</sup> John Stuart Mill, in his autobiography, described how a period of depression had a transformative impact on his view of life. For Mill, the rumination on the causes of his own distress produced insight: it led him to reject the coolly calculative attitude of his father’s Benthamite utilitarianism in favour of a view that recognizes the value of aesthetic experience and the ‘cultivation of the feelings’.<sup>72</sup> In Mill’s case the loss of meaning in the world came from his own overly analytical worldview: ‘the habit of analysis has a tendency to wear away the feelings’.<sup>73</sup> Once he saw that the source of his alienation was his own worldview, he was able to adjust it accordingly and re-established a meaningful relation to the world.

It is important here to be precise about the epistemological role that depression plays in such cases. Graham, for example, uses Mill as an example to illustrate his argument that depression can constitute an apt judgment about the world<sup>74</sup>—however, this interpretation rests on a subtle conflation between the judgment Mill ultimately arrives at, namely that his former worldview was lacking, and the depression itself. The depression was in no way constituted by that judgment: Mill was not depressed *about* his hyper-rationalist worldview; rather, the world simply appeared depressing and hopeless to him. Depression is the painful perception of a problem calling for a solution—this search for answers may produce knowledge, but depression in itself does not constitute knowledge or judgments. Graham further argues that depression can offer insight *only* when we are depressed *about* something specific, but that it does not even make sense to ask about the

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<sup>69</sup> Baumeister, ‘Suicide as Escape From Self’, 90.

<sup>70</sup> Fuchs, ‘The Psychopathology of Hyperreflexivity’.

<sup>71</sup> Graham, ‘Melancholic Epistemology’; Martin, ‘Depression’.

<sup>72</sup> Mill, *Autobiography*, 143.

<sup>73</sup> Mill, *Autobiography*, 137.

<sup>74</sup> Graham, ‘Melancholic Epistemology’.

epistemic value of ‘non-intentional’ depression.<sup>75</sup> But the very example of Mill, which Graham cites, shows the opposite. It is an entirely non-intentional and diffuse feeling of dejection—‘A drowsy, stifled, unimpassioned grief<sup>76</sup>—that leads Mill towards his new understanding of life. This underscores a general point about negative emotions that I began making in the previous chapter on anger: their epistemological, and ultimately also political, value comes not from them embodying evaluative judgments about the world but from the fact that they reveal a problem. Such problems can come in the form of very concrete obstacles to be removed or as a highly diffuse sense that things are just not right.

Depression, then, is the perception that something is fundamentally wrong with how one finds oneself in the world. Rather than passive resignation to this state, depression is characterized by an often-desperate search for understanding of, and a way out of, this alienated state. The example of Mill showed how experiences of depression sometimes *can* lead to an understanding of what was wrong with one’s life. However, what we can learn from Mill is limited by the fact that his is a highly individualized case. At least on his own description, his depression was entirely caused by his own worldview and not by any problem in the world (the world, of course, offered someone in Mill’s social position every conceivable comfort). What, then, if the problem is not in me but in the social world I inhabit? The question remains if depression, with its tendency towards inwardness, can disclose anything about the external world and its injustices.

#### 4. Depression and consciousness-raising

Marilyn Friedman suggests an affirmative answer to that question in a brief passage of her essay ‘Autonomy and the Split-Level Self’:

A woman who has been taught that a “woman’s place is in the home” may be driven to question this maxim precisely in light of her persistent dissatisfactions [...] Her frustration, grief, and depression, and the motivations to change her life which spring from these sources, may be her only reliable guides.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Graham, ‘Melancholic Epistemology’, 406. See also Martin, ‘Depression’, 280.

<sup>76</sup> These are words from a Coleridge poem which Mill cites to describe his feelings. Mill, *Autobiography*, 134.

<sup>77</sup> Friedman, ‘Autonomy and the Split-Level Self’, 31.

Depression, in such a case, in presenting a ‘conceptual problem’, i.e., a problem with one’s overall interpretative framework, can be a motivation to question existing higher-level ideals and schemas for understanding the world, such as ‘notions of “appropriate” sex roles, duties to others and the importance of self-sacrifice as an ideal of femininity’.<sup>78</sup> This, however, is not an easy hermeneutical achievement, and is most likely to happen through collective, rather than individual, processes of making sense of shared structures of experience. In this section, I will discuss the practice of feminist consciousness-raising (CR) as an example of how a collective process of interpretation of personal feelings like depression can yield knowledge about oppression.<sup>79</sup>

Some psychologists in the 1970s and 80s started arguing that the radical feminist practice of CR could have beneficial therapeutic effects for those with depression.<sup>80</sup> One empirical research paper from 1982 argues that, by analysing ‘shared problems in the women’s lives as social, rather than personal, problems’, CR groups could provide ‘new external attributions of blame [that] may serve to alleviate the feelings of self-reproach that characterize depression’.<sup>81</sup> This suggests that empirically some women *were* using their experiences of depression as a spur to make sense of their problems in new, politicized ways.

Radical feminists, though, were staunchly critical of the idea that CR was therapeutic in the sense of making individuals feel better.<sup>82</sup> For them, the idea that CR was a way of dealing with individual psychological problems or making ‘lifestyle’ changes was a way of depoliticizing the movement: ‘There are no personal solutions at this time. There is only collective action’.<sup>83</sup> However, feminists like Carol Hanisch were happy to admit that CR constituted a kind of ‘political’, rather than individual, form of therapy precisely because

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<sup>78</sup> Friedman, ‘Autonomy and the Split-Level Self’, 31.

<sup>79</sup> For a broader discussion of the political epistemology of CR, see Haslanger, ‘Political Epistemology and Social Critique’. Haslanger, in my view, neglects the role of feelings in this process which is something feminist organizers of CR groups emphasized.

<sup>80</sup> Weitz, ‘Feminist Consciousness Raising’; Warren, ‘The Therapeutic Status of Consciousness-Raising Groups’. Cf. also hooks, *Feminism Is for Everybody*, 7–8: ‘On a basic level many hurt and exploited women used the consciousness-raising group therapeutically. It was the site where they uncovered and openly revealed the depths of their intimate wounds.’

<sup>81</sup> Weitz, ‘Feminist Consciousness Raising’, 235.

<sup>82</sup> Rosenthal, ‘Consciousness Raising’.

<sup>83</sup> Hanisch, ‘The Personal Is Political’, 76.

it externalizes blame: ‘Can you imagine what would happen if women, blacks, and workers [...] would stop blaming ourselves for our sad situations? It seems to me the whole country needs that kind of political therapy’.<sup>84</sup> The disagreement, thus, is not about whether CR has the effect of allowing people to externalize blame for problems they face in their lives; rather, the reason feminists resisted the label of ‘therapy’ is because it implies that the aim is *personal* transformation when, they insisted, the aim is actually collective resistance against oppression. This is an important point. Externalizing blame for personal problems is not important primarily because it makes people feel better, but because this is a way of generating political knowledge: ‘Our feelings will lead us to our theory, our theory to our action’.<sup>85</sup>

It is not clear how many participants in CR groups had feelings that are aptly described as ‘depression’, but it seems that at least some did. Let us reconstruct how the process of transforming feelings of depression into feminist theory might paradigmatically look from a subjective, phenomenological point of view. Encountering isolated difficulties and obstacles in one’s life, as I have explained, typically leads to anger if one has the feeling that obstacles can be removed through some form of assertive action. Yet, if such problems prove intractable, and especially if one’s anger about issues is persistently dismissed, as women’s anger often is,<sup>86</sup> one might start feeling hopeless and depressed: the world is no longer perceived as affording meaningful possibilities for action, things no longer seem to be under one’s control. This leads to a painful feeling that one’s relation to the world is somehow ‘wrong’ and concomitantly not a desire for practical solutions to individual problems but a way ‘out’. Sharing such experiences and collectively analysing them through a feminist lens can lead to significant shifts in one’s interpretative framework: rather, say, than seeing unsatisfying interactions between men and women as the expression of individual persons and their faults, one sees them as an expression of an underlying patriarchal system that interlinks with capitalist and racist oppression.

Such a shift in one’s perception of the world can help reduce self-blame, but it does not in itself provide solutions to underlying problems nor does it *necessarily* make people

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<sup>84</sup> Hanisch, ‘The Personal Is Political’, 76.

<sup>85</sup> Sarachild, ‘A Program for Feminist “Consciousness Raising”’, 78.

<sup>86</sup> Frye, *The Politics of Reality*, 84–94.

feel better. What it can do, however, is provide new affordances and, since I have argued that affordances are a crucial element of emotions, transform one's feelings. One participant recounted that '[CR] helped me discover that I was [angry]. I had told myself I felt depressed. Now I have some sense of being angry and can begin to ask myself what I'm angry about and work on the problems'.<sup>87</sup> This is a particularly interesting comment because it highlights how depression might relate to anger. The development of a new, explicitly political, interpretative framework leads to perceptions of new possibilities for collective action. Though, to be clear, mere knowledge is not enough: as discussed in the last chapter, for these affordances for collective action to appear viable, the existence of organized social movements that make such action possible is also required. Forming part of a group that understands itself as oppressed by a given social structure not only transforms people's understanding of the causes of their suffering but also changes their embodied relationship to their environment and other people through revealing new affordances for collective action.

While personal problems do not become any less intractable, conceiving them as part of structural injustices at least makes it possible to begin thinking about organized responses to this oppression. To the extent that this involves a transformation of one's perception of the world from one where no meaningful affordances exist to one where aggressive collective action seems possible, this is a transformation of depression into something more akin to anger. As bell hooks puts it, CR could be a 'healing ritual' that provided women with 'the strength to challenge patriarchal forces at work and at home'.<sup>88</sup> Naturally, such consciousness can also lead to new frustrations: collective organizing can be hugely draining and often disappointing, producing exhaustion and burnout.<sup>89</sup> This is precisely why early organizers of feminist CR groups were so keen to emphasize that CR's primary aim is not to make people feel better but to generate political knowledge.

It may seem as if I have now described the process of consciousness-raising in such a way that depression plays no valuable epistemological role at all: anger is what reveals injustice and motivates action whereas depression is merely a hindrance to be overcome.

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<sup>87</sup> Cited in Warren, 'The Therapeutic Status of Consciousness-Raising Groups', 4.

<sup>88</sup> hooks, *Feminism Is for Everybody*, 8.

<sup>89</sup> Proctor, *Burnout*.

This, however, would ignore the important role that depression plays in revealing the need for a new interpretative framework through which to understand one's relation to the world. In order to bring this point home, let us reconsider the previously mentioned Darwinian theories of depression as an adaptive form of disengagement from the world. Such theories, recall, claim that when our attempts at overcoming obstacles to our goals repeatedly prove futile, depression 'helps to disengage us from a hopeless enterprise so that we can consider alternatives'.<sup>90</sup> If this is interpreted as resigning oneself to not bettering one's position, depression clearly plays a purely conservative role—but as I have argued depression is not really a state of resignation. Instead, we can see depression as a 'way of wrenching ourselves from the established values of our world' as Robert Solomon puts it:<sup>91</sup> for example, one could withdraw from the project of being a 'good woman', a 'good housewife', a 'good employee', or a 'good citizen' in the face of persistent failure. If anger reveals concrete problems in the world that need to be overcome, depression, as argued, reveals a 'conceptual problem'; depression tells us to take a step back from the world and reconsider our most basic understanding of our own place in it.

As I did with anger in the previous chapter, it is extremely important to stress that coming to an emancipatory political standpoint is by no means a necessary or typical outcome of depression. It is probably fair to say that the vast majority of people who go through depression gain no political insights—and, of course, not every case of depression is the result of oppression in the first place (Mill's being a case in point). What I am highlighting is the *possibility* of coming to a political standpoint on the basis of experiences of depression. This is, of course, less likely the more severe a case of depression is—but the possibility of consciousness-raising in some cases means that even where depression is severe, therapeutic efforts can work in tandem with political ones to help people reach a point where it becomes possible for them to externalize blame for their suffering.<sup>92</sup>

Actually arriving at a political understanding of one's own misery is a hard-won political achievement—and one that is never accomplished by singular individuals but always

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<sup>90</sup> Nesse and Williams cited in Garson, *Madness*, 257–58. See also Klinger, 'Consequences of Commitment to and Disengagement from Incentives'.

<sup>91</sup> Solomon, *The Passions*, 237.

<sup>92</sup> On the complementarity of political and therapeutic approaches to mental illness, see Dyson, 'From Critical Theory to Critical Therapy'; Cattien, 'Neurotic Situations'.

through collective processes of analysis and meaning-making. Such processes can literally involve getting together in groups to share experiences and collectively come to new interpretations of them as in feminist CR—but, as I will go on to discuss in the next section, they are not confined to this setting.

## 5. Depression, critical theory, and political action

Some may still think, at this point, that my focus on activism and resistance sits uneasily with depression which, after all, is not necessarily an emotion that is likely to motivate people to join a consciousness-raising group in the first place. At the same time, the focus on action and collective organizing (both in this and the preceding chapter) could also be thought to sit uneasily with elements of Adorno's thought.<sup>93</sup> He was, after all, known for criticizing the 'pure activism'<sup>94</sup> of, for example, the students movements of his day, and when he said that suffering was the moving force of dialectical thinking, he hardly had feminist CR groups in mind. It is therefore worth stopping and reflecting in more detail on what the discussion about depression so far might tell us about the relationship between critique and practice. It reveals, I will argue, both the central role of reflection and theory as components of political activity, and, on the other hand, the need for theoretical activity to remain tethered to the feelings and needs of social agents.

### 5.1 *From pseudo-activity to collective theorizing*

At one point, Adorno articulated his opposition to 'pure activism' or 'pseudo-activity' as follows:

a practice that simply frees itself from the shackles of theory and rejects thought as such [...] leads to the production of people who like organizing things and who imagine that once you have organized something, [...] you have achieved something of importance, without pondering for a moment whether such activities have any chance at all of effectively impinging on reality.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> I thank an anonymous reviewer for the journal *Constellations* for drawing my attention to this.

<sup>94</sup> Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, 47.

<sup>95</sup> Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, 6.

Action without theory, for Adorno, is more likely than not simply to reproduce social reality as it is. Hence, it is necessary sometimes to ‘retreat from the dominant realm of practical activity in order to think about something essential’.<sup>96</sup> This could be said to be exactly the epistemological and political role played by depression: it is the subjective experience of the futility of one’s action which reveals a conceptual problem and forces a retreat into thought. It is thus not a far stretch to say that the mood that characterizes Adorno’s writing is one of depression—not just in the sense of being gloomy, but in the more precise sense of being a persistent rumination on the seeming meaninglessness of action and the lack of hope for improvement. However, as Jütten argues, it is precisely in this rumination on the catastrophic state of the world that we find a kind of ‘radical hope’ that things could be different.<sup>97</sup>

Yet, while there are clear resonances between my discussion of depression and Adorno’s views on critique and action, the foregoing discussion of CR should also lead us to rethink some of what Adorno said on this topic. First, he unduly individualizes the process of critical reflection, neglecting collective forms of theorizing; and, second, he employs a rather undialectical distinction between the subjective and objective elements of resistance. Let me elaborate on these two points in turn.

Adorno famously had lost hope in the revolutionary agency of the proletariat which, as he saw it, had become fully incorporated into post-war capitalist societies pacified by consumerism and the culture industry. He therefore saw resistance as springing not from the collective self-activity of the working class, but from the power of certain individuals to ‘disrupt the familiar thought patterns and opinions of citizens qua bearers of the status quo’.<sup>98</sup> Within an administered society strongly tending towards fascist catastrophe, the only real source of resistance Adorno was able to locate was ‘the power of reflection, of self-determination, of not cooperating’.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, 7.

<sup>97</sup> Jütten, ‘Adorno on Hope’. Jütten takes the concept of ‘radical hope’ from Lear, *Radical Hope*.

<sup>98</sup> Pickford, ‘Adorno and the Categories of Resistance’, 132.

<sup>99</sup> Adorno, *Critical Models*, 195.

The emphasis on reflection over revolutionary activity has earned Adorno much criticism for being ‘critical in theory, conformist in practice’,<sup>100</sup> an ‘apolitical aesthete’<sup>101</sup> whose ‘daily contemplation of the abyss between excellent meals or artistic entertainments, can only heighten the enjoyment of the subtle comforts’.<sup>102</sup> These accusations are importantly right in criticizing Adorno’s lack of interest in the emancipatory political movements of his time and his refusal to stand in solidarity with those fighting actively against the misery he deplors. But the discussion of CR above shows that his mistake does not lie in the emphasis on ‘reflection’, ‘self-determination’, and ‘not cooperating’. Critical reflection which allows us to distance ourselves from internalized, hegemonic ideals and modes of action form a crucial part of effective attempts to resist oppression—here, his critique of practice ‘freed from the shackles of theory’ is cogent enough. Adorno’s mistake, rather, was to imagine critical thought as the prerogative of those ‘few critical individuals’ whose superior intellectual powers allow them to heroically negate the hold of ideology over their minds.<sup>103</sup> Had he, for example, looked to the feminist CR practices of the 1960s, Adorno would have found that critical reflection can be a collective activity forming an integral part of organized political activity.<sup>104</sup>

A related problem in some of Adorno’s writings on this topic is a rather undialectical dichotomy between objective and subjective factors in social change. In a 1966 radio talk, ‘Education after Auschwitz’, for example, he claims that ‘the possibility of changing the

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<sup>100</sup> This accusation comes from a leaflet distributed by socialist students in 1968. Quoted in Freyenhagen, ‘Adorno’s Politics’, 868.

<sup>101</sup> Pickford, ‘Adorno and the Categories of Resistance’, 134.

<sup>102</sup> Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 22.

<sup>103</sup> Freyenhagen, *Adorno’s Practical Philosophy*, 249. Cf. Adorno and Becker, ‘Education for Maturity and Responsibility’, 21: It is the task of ‘each *individual* to make full use of *his* reasoning power’ (emphasis mine). Also Adorno et al., *The Positivist Dispute*, 43: ‘Opposition to the repressive total tendency can be reserved for small minorities who even have to suffer being castigated for an elitist stance’.

<sup>104</sup> Another mistake in Adorno’s analysis was that he conflated the integration of one part of the working class (white male workers) with the integration of the working class as such. He seems to have entirely overlooked the critical consciousness of what Marcuse called the ‘the substratum of the outcasts and outsiders, the exploited and persecuted of other races and other colors, the unemployed and the unemployable’. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 260. No doubt, Adorno could have learned much about what it means to form critical consciousness by paying attention to the feminist and anti-racist activism of his time—including the work of his own former student Angela Davis.

objective—namely societal and political—conditions is extremely limited today’, and, hence, ‘attempts to work against the repetition of Auschwitz are necessarily restricted to the subjective dimension’.<sup>105</sup> He therefore recommends mass education programmes to equip a wider section of the population with the kind of critical consciousness that immunizes them against fascism. What he, curiously, seems to miss is that a large-scale state-led programme of emancipatory education would itself require *first* changing the objective social conditions. If fascism, as the Frankfurt School was otherwise keen to point out, is not an aberration from but an integral part of ‘liberal’ capitalist societies, then we can hardly trust the capitalist state education system to produce anti-fascist subjectivities. Rather, it is in the self-organization of the oppressed trying to understand and resist their own alienation that emancipatory forms of education can be found: from feminist CR groups to the Black Panther Party’s Liberation Schools. In such movements, the subjective and objective dimensions of social change are always intertwined—not just because the goal of education is objective social change, but also because it already presupposes interventions into people’s material circumstances in the form of alternative structures of education, therapy, and community support. Since our feelings are importantly shaped by the affordances available to us, reflection, or any intervention ‘restricted to the subjective dimension’, only gets us so far. It is largely by providing new possibilities for collective intervention into material circumstances that social movements can transform negative social experiences into ‘effective antagonisms’ (to use Mark Fisher’s expression<sup>106</sup>).

## 5.2 *Critical theory as political therapy*

None of this is to say that critical intellectuals cannot play significant roles in such processes—it is only to say that critical consciousness cannot be ‘deposited’ into the minds of the oppressed by vanguardist intellectuals, but is always an achievement of a collective ‘dialogical’ process in which intellectuals can take part (here, I am borrowing terms from Paulo Freire’s critical pedagogy<sup>107</sup>).

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<sup>105</sup> Adorno, *Critical Models*, 192.

<sup>106</sup> Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 84.

<sup>107</sup> Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

In fact, the discussion of depression can serve to highlight precisely where and how interventions by critical theorists *could* play a useful function as ‘political therapy’. After all, while participation in CR groups may help people reinterpret their depression as caused by oppression, depression may also be just what stops them from partaking in CR in the first place. The point of discussing feminist CR above was not that such groups are the only or even a typical way that people come to understand their suffering as political. Rather, I focused on CR because it provides an especially clear example of how this process *can* take place. In reality, a CR group is simply a more organized and declaredly political microcosm of the kind of processes of interpretation of our experience that take place constantly. Any act of interpretation of one’s feelings is already in a sense collective because reliant on collective hermeneutic resources—what is special about CR groups is that they intervene in these interpretative processes in a reflexive and explicitly emancipatory way. Here, I want to suggest, there can be room for Adorno’s critical intellectual to intervene in how we interpret our own negative emotions by supplying frameworks for making sense of experiences like depression with an emancipatory aim—but it will only be useful and effective if offered in a dialogic spirit that finds uptake among its addressees.

Depression serves to make particularly clear something which is true of all emotions: our feelings are not immediately accessible to us in any raw form but always rely on the mediation of shared interpretative resources. Depression makes this especially obvious because it is generally experienced as a diffuse feeling that is hard to articulate and to understand. Hence the great demand for resources, from self-help literature to psychotherapy, that help people to interpret their feelings of depression. (If other feelings, like anger, often seem much more immediately transparent to us, this is not, in fact, because they rely any less on shared interpretative frameworks but simply because they rely on such frameworks in a non-reflexive way—but, as I will explore further in the next chapter, even in such cases, the resources we draw on to interpret our own anger are always in principle open to being questioned, thematized, and ultimately revised.) Given the subjectively felt need for interpretative resources that can help us better understand our own feelings of depression, this seems like a good opportunity for critical theorists to

intervene and offer relevant hermeneutical tools to complement those of psychiatry and psychoanalysis.

If critical theory, in Adorno's words, is to 'lend a voice to suffering',<sup>108</sup> it should ideally play the part of a kind of 'political therapy' in Carol Hanisch's sense.<sup>109</sup> This means that theory, like CR, should take the shape of a *dialogic* process where negative social experiences are interpreted, analysed, and ultimately transformed into sources of resistance. 'Dialogic' in this case means that the perspectives of the addressees of the theory need to feed into the theoretical work, but also that, in order to be successful, the theory actually needs to gain *uptake* among those whose experiences it purports to explain.

On this approach, suffering plays three distinct roles in critical theory (which are not usually disambiguated in the existing literature):

1. Suffering constitutes the motivation for critical reflection and the *raison d'être* of critical theory: 'Normative reflection arises from hearing a cry of suffering or distress, or feeling distress oneself.'<sup>110</sup>
2. Suffering constitutes an important part of the subject matter of critical theory. Our theories need to make visible and offer causal explanations for widespread experiences of distress.<sup>111</sup>
3. Suffering constitutes the motivation for subjects to engage with critical theory and give it uptake. For critical theory to have any effect, someone must actually make use of it to interpret their own social experiences, and the reason for people to do so is presumably that they feel discontent and the accompanying desire to make sense of what it is that is wrong with their world.

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<sup>108</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 17.

<sup>109</sup> Hanisch, 'The Personal Is Political', 76.

<sup>110</sup> Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 5. In discussions of critical theory and suffering, it is often assumed that it is someone else who suffers, but Young's addition that the suffering could be felt by the theorist themselves is important. Ann Cvetkovich's work on depression, which combines autobiography with critical social theorizing, is an excellent example. Cvetkovich, *Depression*.

<sup>111</sup> Freyenhagen, 'Critical Theory and Social Pathology'; Renault, 'A Critical Theory of Social Suffering'; Sik, *Empty Suffering*.

While the first two roles of suffering have been noted many times, the third is generally ignored<sup>112</sup>—but is a key condition if critical theory is to be more than an ineffectual, monological description of the social. The popularity of various types of therapy as well as self-help literature shows that there is clearly a felt need among people with depression for resources that help make sense of a harrowing and frequently disorienting experience. In this context, there is a real opportunity for critical theorists to make interventions into the public discourse on depression and provide meaningful alternatives to existing individualizing and depoliticizing narratives. To some extent, this is already being done: examples include Ann Cvetkovich’s partly autobiographical, partly theoretical book *Depression: A Public Feeling*,<sup>113</sup> some of the late Mark Fisher’s writings on depression which received wide uptake,<sup>114</sup> as well as Micha Frazer-Carroll’s recent book on the politics of mental health.<sup>115</sup> While these three authors differ considerably in their style and theoretical approaches, they all try to make public interventions into the way personal experiences of distress are interpreted. As such, they provide models for what a critical theory as a kind of ‘political therapy’ can look like.

The next two chapters will go on to develop a fuller picture of critical theory’s role in politicizing suffering. One important question that I have not yet touched on is how we can decide which interpretations of emotions are better or worse. This question will be explored in detail in the following chapter in the context of ‘misdirected’ feelings of anger. However, one important takeaway from the discussion in this chapter is that depression makes it intuitively clear that we are not always the best interpreters of our own feelings (at least not on our own): I take it to be relatively uncontroversial that the extreme feelings of self-blame and worthlessness that accompany depression are somehow misguided. As such, we cannot assume that the subject of feelings has any absolute epistemological privilege when it comes to understanding them. Our own feelings are never fully ‘our own’

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<sup>112</sup> One exception is Robin Celikates who includes some cursory discussion of this in his discussion of the parallels between critical theory and psychoanalysis, for example quoting Freud that the ‘primary motive force in the therapy is the patient’s suffering and the wish to be cured that arises from it’. Celikates, *Critique as Social Practice*, 151.

<sup>113</sup> Cvetkovich, *Depression*.

<sup>114</sup> Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*; Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*; Fisher, ‘Why Mental Health Is a Political Issue’.

<sup>115</sup> Frazer-Carroll, *Mad World*.

in the sense of being totally and objectively knowable through introspection alone; as Lauren Berlant puts it, ‘psychic pain experienced by subordinated populations’ does not contain any ‘prelapsarian knowledge or a condensed comprehensive social theory’.<sup>116</sup> As I have repeatedly emphasized, arriving at political knowledge on the basis of emotions is a collective political *achievement*—and it is one that critical theory should aim to contribute to.

## 6. Conclusion

The quote from László Krasznahorkai’s novel *The Melancholy of Resistance*, with which I began this chapter, functions equally well to encapsulate the experience of depression and (read with a dose of irony) Adorno’s approach to critique. When the world becomes ‘a place of agonizing decay’, one has to ‘ignore the itch, the desire to intervene, for the purpose and significance of action [is] being corroded away by its thoroughgoing lack of significance’. The ‘only valid response of a sound mind’ to this world is ‘to withdraw, to cut all contact with it and retain one’s distance’. But depression itself also embodies a yearning to rediscover significance—far from mere resignation to the state of things, it is a painfully felt longing to inhabit a meaningful world. Political therapy, by enabling an understanding of the social and political sources of one’s alienation and the externalization of blame, can be one way to reestablish a purpose for action. To be clear, political consciousness is not going to cure depression. While it can be cathartic to come to an understanding of the political sources of one’s oppression,<sup>117</sup> this alone will not remove the sources of alienation and suffering. Nevertheless, understanding one’s suffering as a political problem can provide relief from internalized blame and feelings of insufficiency while being a first step towards action that helps abolish the sources of depression and other mental health issues. This is why, to quote Carol Hanisch’s words again, we may all ‘need[ a] kind of political therapy’.<sup>118</sup> By way of conclusion, it is worth briefly recapping this account of depression and how it relates to the theory of anger developed in the previous chapter.

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<sup>116</sup> Berlant, ‘The Subject of True Feeling’, 127; see also Fraser and Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition?*, 204.

<sup>117</sup> Cattien, ‘Neurotic Situations’.

<sup>118</sup> Hanisch, ‘The Personal Is Political’, 76.

I have been arguing that negative emotions are characterized by the possibilities for action that one perceives. In anger, I perceive that my habitual way of going about the world has been blocked, and instead new affordances appear for aggressively removing obstacles in my way. Depression is also characterized by the opportunities for action that my surroundings seem to afford, but, in this case, it is specifically the lack of any meaningful options that defines this feeling. Anger presents me with an ‘empirical problem’ that calls for action; depression presents itself as a conceptual problem: a problem with my relation to the world *as such*. The relationship between these two feelings becomes especially clear when we consider how anger, over time, may turn into a state of depression. If my attempts at dealing with empirical problems in my life repeatedly fail, my actions will come to seem increasingly futile. Eventually, my anger may become extinguished: once, I no longer see any meaningful way of dealing with obstacles that arise what I am feeling is no longer anger, but more likely depression.

I have argued that both anger and depression can be the starting point for critique. Both reveal a practical problem that calls for interpretation in a way that can lead to an understanding of the political nature of one’s unhappiness. If anger and depression are similar in their relation to political knowledge, however, they have different relations to political *action*. Anger is likely to reveal concrete political injustices and motivate collective action to resist oppression here and now. This is not to say that it is always an impulsive emotion—anger can also fuel serious reflection and long-term strategic work—but it usually presents concrete problems which may be intractable but at least appear tangible. Depression, on the other hand, reveals problems that, in a sense, run deeper.<sup>119</sup> It calls not for action, for action has proven futile, but for a fundamental change in one’s relation to the world. In the best case, we can find such a change through a kind of ‘paradigm shift’ in our understanding of the social world.<sup>120</sup> I may realize, for example, that my attempts to find fulfilment by being a successful employee were never going to lead anywhere because wage labour is inherently exploitative and alienating, and I may instead find new opportunities for meaningful action by organizing with my co-workers in a union.

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<sup>119</sup> This is not meant to imply that depression tends to reveal injustices that are graver than those revealed by anger—just that the problem resides on a different level conceptually.

<sup>120</sup> See Haslanger, ‘Political Epistemology and Social Critique’, 43.

## CHAPTER 4

In this case, if the possibility for meaningful action to deal with my problems has been restored but my dissatisfaction with the world remains, my depression has turned back into anger. If critical theorists want to deliver on their promise of 'lending a voice to suffering', then engaging concretely with experiences like depression and providing the hermeneutical resources to reinterpret them as political problems in this way would be a promising start.

A paradigmatic emotional cycle has emerged from this discussion where anger, if repeatedly proven futile, can turn into depression, and depression, if a new meaningful framework for action is found, can turn back into anger. In the previous chapter on anger, I assumed, in a way, that we are already at the third moment of this cycle: I discussed anger that, if often initially inchoate, lends itself fairly straightforwardly to political articulation and organization. Now, in the next chapter, I move further back along this emotional arch and consider the kind of anger that is likely to prove politically futile: anger that relies on a misguided interpretation of the social world and is therefore likely to be 'misdirected'.

## Chapter 5

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# ‘Like an Undetonated Device’: On Misdirected Anger

*The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question. Man must prove the truth, i.e., the reality and power, the this-worldliness of his thinking in practice.*

— Karl Marx<sup>1</sup>

W. E. B. Du Bois, in *Black Reconstruction*, famously described the efforts of freed Black slaves in the American South to construct a new worker-led social order as ‘one of the most extraordinary experiments in Marxism that the world, before the Russian revolution, had seen’.<sup>2</sup> Yet, this extraordinary attempt at creating a ‘dictatorship of labor’ ultimately failed, he argued, because the propertied classes managed to divide the Southern working class along racial lines. In this regard, Du Bois’ account of the ‘psychological wages’ of whiteness is well known: apart from their chains, white workers also stood to lose their superior racial status by abolishing racial capitalism.<sup>3</sup> Another aspect of his analysis, less remarked upon by scholars, is the way white workers’ own dissatisfaction and anger over their dismal conditions was channelled into violence against Black people. White labour, Du Bois writes, ‘transferred all the dislike and hatred which [they] had for the whole slave system’ onto its victims<sup>4</sup>—with the result that this system ‘was held stable and intact by the poor

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<sup>1</sup> Marx, ‘Theses on Feuerbach’, in Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology* (1998), 569.

<sup>2</sup> Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 358.

<sup>3</sup> Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 700; Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness*.

<sup>4</sup> Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 12.

white[s]’ despite the fact that it ‘degraded them equally with the black slave’.<sup>5</sup> White workers, then, channelled their anger in ways that actively went counter to their own class interest. ‘Could one imagine’, asks Du Bois, ‘anything more paradoxical than this whole situation?’<sup>6</sup>

Negative emotions can provide both insight into and motivation to fight against injustice. But we also need to reckon with the fact that some people channel their dissatisfaction in ways that reinforce, rather than challenge, structures of oppression. Last chapter dealt with the case of depression, where blame is (mis)directed inwards towards the self; but even where blame is externalized there is, of course, no guarantee that it is channelled in emancipatory ways. This raises difficult normative questions for an account of critique grounded in emotions, and tricky practical questions for the corresponding account of political action. Normatively: what does it mean to say that an emotion is aimed at the ‘wrong’ target? How, and from what point of view, do we identify the ‘right’ one? Practically: under what conditions do people misdirect their anger? What would it take to redirect such ire in emancipatory directions?

This chapter will address these questions through a discussion of the phenomenon of misdirected anger. Du Bois’s analysis is hardly unique. It is a widespread idea in contemporary political discourse that reactionary movements are, in part, fuelled by anger which is ‘justified, but just misdirected’<sup>7</sup>—as Barack Obama, for example, once said about the feelings driving many working-class Trump voters. And the idea of displaced hostility also played a key explanatory role already in the Frankfurt School’s analysis of 20<sup>th</sup> century fascism and antisemitism. A major part of the Institute’s research programme was to figure out why the European working classes had not channelled their dissatisfaction into a socialist movement but instead turned to fascism and made Jews and other scapegoats the targets of their ire.

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<sup>5</sup> Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 29. We should not take the ‘equally’ in this sentence to mean that white workers literally faced degradation at the same level as slaves. On top of the fact that wage labour is less degrading than slavery, Du Bois’ analysis of the wages of whiteness also highlights that white workers were treated with more respect than (even free) Black people.

<sup>6</sup> Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 29.

<sup>7</sup> Cited in Bailey, ‘Why Obama Must Reach Out to Angry Whites’.

Despite the ubiquity of this analysis, though, there has been surprisingly little explicit philosophical analysis of what it means for a feeling, like anger, to be misdirected.<sup>8</sup> This is all the more surprising given the large amount of recent philosophical work on political anger more generally. Philosophers have pointed out that emotions, like anger, can go wrong in several distinct ways: for example, by being unfitting, inappropriate,<sup>9</sup> disproportionate,<sup>10</sup> or ‘anti-political’.<sup>11</sup> The argument of this chapter is that being misdirected is a distinct way in which emotions can go wrong not fully captured by any of those terms. For example, while all racist expressions of anger are wrong, not all of them are meaningfully described as ‘misdirected’. I will argue that misdirection implies that people interpret and express their own emotion in a way that actively goes against *their own* interests and thus perpetuates the source of their own disaffection. As such, misdirected anger should be understood as anger that gets its target wrong *by its own standards*.

Through the discussion of misdirection, then, this chapter will make the case that standards for how best to direct expressions of emotion can be located immanently within the experience of those feelings. The experience of anger registers a problem, and whether it is aimed in the right direction depends on whether any given expression of rage helps overcome the problem it registered. For an account of how to derive social critique and resistance from emotion this is a crucial argument. As we have seen, negative feelings contain no ‘prelapsarian knowledge’,<sup>12</sup> no kernel of pristine truth below the layers of interpretation in which they are wrapped up. We are therefore faced with the task of choosing between different, competing interpretations of any given feeling. Naturally, this can be done by appealing to some external standards. We can, say, distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate expressions of emotion based on whether ‘they are

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<sup>8</sup> I know of only two examples of sustained analysis of the phenomenon, both of which I shall argue get some crucial things wrong: Emerick and Yap, ‘Betrayed Expectations’; Jaeggi, ‘Modes of Regression’.

<sup>9</sup> For the distinction between unfittingness and inappropriateness, see D’Arms and Jacobson, ‘The Moralistic Fallacy’.

<sup>10</sup> Srinivasan, ‘The Aptness of Anger’, 130; Cherry, *The Case for Rage*, 48–52.

<sup>11</sup> Vargas González, ‘Political and Antipolitical Anger’.

<sup>12</sup> Berlant, ‘The Subject of True Feeling’, 127.

characteristic of a society in which all humans [...] thrive'.<sup>13</sup> But, as I have been arguing, if we take only those feelings seriously that conform to a pre-established conception of right or wrong, we can no longer claim to have derived our critique *from those emotions*. The ability to distinguish between better or worse targets of emotion from an immanent point of view is therefore a necessary component of the account of critique I am developing. At the same time, I will argue, the account is also of practical import. If critique is to have practical force, it needs to be anchored in people's actual feelings, and this suggests that attempts to redirect reactionary anger in more emancipatory directions will be more likely to succeed if it proceeds immanently from those feelings rather than counter-posing a merely external, moralizing point of view to the misdirected rage.

Before getting into the substance of the argument, I begin, in section 1 below, by discussing a few examples of misdirected anger in order to motivate the basic intuition that these are cases of anger that goes wrong *by its own standard*. Section 2 then begins to ask how we should theorize these types of rage. Rejecting explanations which see them as outcomes of different psychological processes involving some form of repression, I argue that political anger, whether aimed at the right or the wrong targets, is equally the outcome of embodied frustrations which become channelled through political organization. But if there is no psychological difference, then how do we distinguish correctly targeted from misdirected emotions? Section 2 takes up this normative question. I first reject the too simplistic view that this is simply a matter of one's anger being a fitting representation of the world, before developing my alternative account: anger is an attempt at problem-solving and hence is misdirected when it does not contribute to the solution of the problems it registered. Finally, section 6 discusses the relations between misdirected anger, ideology, and political action.

### 1. Honing in on misdirected anger

In this section, I discuss a few examples of misdirected anger. The purpose of this is to get a sense of what these examples have in common, but also to deliberately broaden our view

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<sup>13</sup> Jaggar, 'Love and Knowledge', 168. For a paradigmatic attempt at distinguishing 'virtuous' from 'vicious' anger in such a way, see Bommarito, 'Virtuous and Vicious Anger'.

beyond the standard example of the angry working-class Trump voter who often dominates discussions.

Let us begin with that standard example, though. ‘[M]any poor, rural white Americans were right to be angry’, write Emerick and Yap, but ‘their anger was misdirected away from the economic systems that exploit and marginalize them, and toward immigrants and people of color who are also just trying to survive under capitalism’.<sup>14</sup> These poor, white, working-class, rural Trump voters—so the story goes—have genuine reasons to be angry due to declining living standards, cultural marginalization, and capitalist exploitation, but mistakenly turn their ire towards immigrants, welfare recipients, sexual minorities, or ‘woke’ liberals. While written before Trump’s entry into politics, Arlie Hochschild’s ethnographic study of Louisiana Tea Party supporters is often taken as an example of this kind of misdirected anger.<sup>15</sup> Hochschild vividly describes the emotional lives of mostly rural and white Louisianans who see the American Dream becoming ever less accessible to themselves and those around them. They do not, as those on the left would hope, blame the large companies extracting hugely valuable resources from the state while squeezing wages, polluting public waters, and outsourcing jobs. Instead, they largely blame the government and the supposedly undeserving ‘line-cutters’: ‘Blacks, women, immigrants, refugees’.<sup>16</sup>

The analysis of right-wing populism as driven by such misdirected anger is contested. Robin Celikates, for instance, argues that the rage ‘experienced by the historically dominant, and their sense of “aggrieved power” in the face of “lost entitlement” are not the same [...] as anger and outrage at unjust and undemocratic forms of exploitation, exclusion, and domination’.<sup>17</sup> He points out that there is a difference between anger at the threat of losing one’s privileges and anger at oppression, and the former cannot simply be ‘redirected’ into emancipatory movements. Moreover, as Gurminder Bhambra has stressed, it is a dangerous sleight of hand performed by some political commentators to analyse ‘white majority political action as the action of a more narrowly defined white

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<sup>14</sup> Emerick and Yap, ‘Betrayed Expectations’, 353.

<sup>15</sup> Lepoutre, ‘Rage Inside the Machine’, 415.

<sup>16</sup> Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land*, 139.

<sup>17</sup> Celikates, ‘De-, Hyper-, or Pseudopoliticization?’, 147.

*working class*'.<sup>18</sup> It is certainly true that Trump's voters, for example, are not primarily poor white workers.<sup>19</sup> However, we should not commit the opposite mistake either and assume that right-wing populists garner their support exclusively from aggrieved and privileged white men. Far-right movements, once on the fringes of politics, now appeal to extremely broad sections of the population, including large sections of the working-class and significant numbers of non-whites and women.<sup>20</sup> Right-wing movements would not have such broad appeal if they did not convince sizeable sections of the (white and non-white) working class that they will genuinely address the problems they face in their everyday lives—the focus on rising prices of food in Trump's second campaign being a case in point. It is therefore plausible to assume that *some* of these right-wing voters fit the analysis described above: they face genuine frustrations due to poverty, exploitation, or marginalization, and have become convinced by right-wing talking points that blame migrants and corrupt liberal governments for this misery. We cannot reduce a movement like Trump's to this kind of 'misdirected' anger, because it is also very significantly driven by elites and committed racists; but this chapter is interested in the large sections of the population who end up supporting reactionary political movements against their own best interests.

The phenomenon of misdirected anger is not restricted to contemporary right-wing movements, though. I began this chapter with Du Bois's analysis of how the white working class in post-Civil War Era America misdirected their anger at Black people thereby holding intact the system that exploited them. Similarly, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno describe antisemitism as a bourgeois ideology that conceals economic exploitation by displacing anger at capitalism onto Jews so that 'the economic injustice of the whole class is attributed to [them]'.<sup>21</sup> On a more general level, in *The Authoritarian Personality*, Adorno and his co-authors describe the process of 'scapegoating' as follows:

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<sup>18</sup> Bhabra, 'Brexit, Trump, and "Methodological Whiteness"', 214. Emphasis original.

<sup>19</sup> In 2024, Trump won most clearly among middle class voters, while the poorest and the richest favoured Kamala Harris. Thelitz, 'US Election-Night Patterns'.

<sup>20</sup> Thelitz, 'US Election-Night Patterns'.

<sup>21</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 142. See also Moishe Postone's influential theory of antisemitism as the personification of 'the abstract domination of capital' in the Jew. Postone, 'Anti-Semitism and National Socialism'.

the individual's aggression is aroused by frustration, usually of his economic needs; and then, being unable due to intellectual confusion to tell the real causes of his difficulty, he lashes out about him, as it were, venting his fury upon whatever object is available and not too likely to strike back.<sup>22</sup>

And Audre Lorde describes much the same process when she recounts having witnessed

situations where white women hear a racist remark, resent what has been said, become filled with fury, and remain silent because they are afraid. That unexpressed anger lies within them like an undetonated device, usually to be hurled at the first woman of Color who talks about racism.<sup>23</sup>

In all these cases, rage is deflected away from powerful systems of oppression onto those who are in even more subordinate positions. As Tessman argues, under conditions of oppression, there is a general risk of misdirecting one's anger because the 'proper' target, the oppressor, tends to be insulated from rage in various ways, including the internalization of sexist and racist values or the danger of directing one's ire at powerful subjects.<sup>24</sup> As Emerick and Yap explain, this is 'an important way in which certain ideologies maintain themselves—namely, by directing people's anger or resentment away from the ideology, often toward a more vulnerable target'.<sup>25</sup> The mistargeting of rage is unfortunate not *only* because of the resulting violence against racialized groups, but also because it helps stabilize the exploitative system that caused the anger in the first place. Such misdirected anger usually serves to protect some limited amount of privilege that white subjects possess—this is the phenomenon Du Bois captures in the concept of the 'public and psychological wage' of whiteness.<sup>26</sup> But the implication, in these analyses, is that it ultimately goes against the real interests of white women or white labour to hurl their anger at more vulnerable people, because it serves to entrench the very structures of patriarchy, racism, and capitalism that exploit them.

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<sup>22</sup> Adorno et al., *The Authoritarian Personality*, 233.

<sup>23</sup> Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 120.

<sup>24</sup> Tessman, *Burdened Virtues*, 122.

<sup>25</sup> Emerick and Yap, 'Betrayed Expectations', 361.

<sup>26</sup> Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 700.

Of course, all the cases discussed include expressions of rage which are somehow inappropriate and misguided. And, indeed, some authors simply use the term ‘misdirected’ as a synonym for ‘inappropriate’ emotions.<sup>27</sup> I think it is worth using the term in a more precise way, however, that captures what makes the above analyses different from the mere claim that those expressions of anger are morally inappropriate. Think, for example, of a landlord who reacts with fury to his tenants organizing in a tenant union: we may think that this anger is normatively wrong and reactionary, but it is hardly *misdirected*. Given the landlord’s aims and interest in extracting as much rent from their tenants as possible, and the tenant’s interest in frustrating just that aim, the tenant union is precisely the right target for the landlord’s ire. Equally, Du Bois does not allege that white slaveholder’s anger at rebelling Black slaves was misdirected—it was equally racist and reactionary, but the diagnosis of *misdirection* seems appropriate only to white labour. Anger can be inappropriate in many ways, but the analysis of misdirected anger captures a specific kind of failure.

I would suggest that when we call anger ‘misdirected’ we mean that it somehow—in a sense that is to be specified—gets its target wrong *by its own standards*. The landlord or the slaveholder has a set of material interests that puts them fundamentally at odds with tenants and slaves, and their anger might be inappropriate by external normative standards but not by their own subjective standards. The analysis of white labour’s racist or xenophobic anger as misdirected implies that they get the real meaning of their own anger wrong: *by their own standards*, they ought to realize that their real enemy is, say, capital. In the vocabulary of Critical Theory, telling someone their anger is misdirected is thus an *immanent*, rather than *external*, form of critique.<sup>28</sup> It is hard to imagine a case of misdirected anger that is not *also* normatively inappropriate by external standards—especially insofar as it involves taking out one’s rage on innocent scapegoats—but these are still separate judgments. And, importantly, misdirected anger is not normatively wrong *because* it is misdirected by its own standards: that judgment only follows if and when we

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<sup>27</sup> E.g.: Greenspan, ‘Craving the Right’, 52–54.

<sup>28</sup> I am here speaking of critique being ‘immanent’ or ‘external’ specifically in relation to someone’s anger. An external judgment about someone’s anger can still be immanent in various other senses: for example, by relying on ideals or contradictions immanent to social practices. I discuss the relation between negative emotions and immanent critique in this more general sense in the next chapter.

endorse whatever immanent standard it goes wrong by. Of course, specifying in what sense anger can get its target wrong by its own immanent standards is not entirely simple—this will be the task of the rest of the present chapter.

## 2. Misdirected anger: repressed or sedimented?

Let me first consider one explanation of this type of reactionary anger that has figured prominently in Critical Theory since the first generation and recently enjoyed something of a revival: anger becomes misdirected through a psychological process of repression. I will reject this repression model in favour of one that understands misdirected anger as sedimented feelings of aggression which become channelled in the wrong direction when interpreted through the wrong social-theoretical framework. Both emancipatory and misdirected anger are equally outcomes of political work to interpret initially inchoate dissatisfactions as responses to real or supposed injustices.

### 2.1 *The repression model*

Critical theorists, in explaining the rage that drives reactionary movements, have often appealed to psychological and even pathologizing explanations. Drawing on Freud and Nietzsche, many have understood the anger of those who support right-wing populist movements as a form of *ressentiment* resulting from the repression of anger. While such accounts may have some truth to them in particular cases, I argue that, as explanations of misdirected anger in general, they are implausible and often problematically pathologizing.

Psychoanalysts usually assume that we can have ‘unconscious’ emotions that manifest themselves consciously in distorted shapes. As Freud explains: ‘By the repression of its proper presentation [the emotion] is forced to become connected with another idea, and is now interpreted by consciousness as the expression of this other idea’.<sup>29</sup> The subject cannot consciously acknowledge the original stimulus as the emotion’s target; yet, on a subconscious level, the connection between the feeling and the ‘correct’ target persists. It is then the role of the analyst to help the subject reconnect their feelings to the original

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<sup>29</sup> Freud, ‘The Unconscious’, 110.

target. We can know whether this process has been successful because the subject will experience a kind of catharsis which is experienced ‘not by the mere expression of feeling, but by the expression of feeling directed onto the right object’.<sup>30</sup> Thus, once the subject’s psychological defence mechanisms have been successfully overcome, they themselves will recognize that their previous emotion was mistargeted and should have all along been directed at the proper object now revealed.

This account has, in various ways, been applied to political feelings. Adorno suggests, at one point, that some instances of antisemitism can be explained as subjects’ displaced anger against their fathers.<sup>31</sup> And another study of antisemitism, published in the same series as *The Authoritarian Personality*, describes a Black woman who

was filled with animosity against the white culture, [but] to admit her hostility against all whites was realistically too dangerous, particularly since she was being advised by a white psychiatric social worker. She, therefore, displaced her hostility onto the Jews.<sup>32</sup>

Likewise, Rahel Jaeggi has recently given an account of reactionary *ressentiment* as a result of repression. Right-wing rage against immigrants and sexual minorities, she suggests, should be understood as a form of scapegoating anger that arises because anger at the ‘real’ target, capitalist exploitation, cannot be expressed due to various ideological defences.<sup>33</sup> The resulting feeling is not simply anger that happens to be based on mistaken beliefs, but a psychologically different phenomenon which Jaeggi designates *ressentiment*:

To put it simply: the (judgmental, affective) indignation based on lack and (perceived) injustice produces indignation and feelings of revenge. Ressentiment in the proper sense then arises as a response to the fact that one must refuse these feelings of revenge, that one is powerless to express them.<sup>34</sup>

Quoting Max Scheler, she describes this feeling as the ‘self-poisoning of the mind through the repression of affect’.<sup>35</sup> While Jaeggi does not refer to Freud’s theory of unconscious

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<sup>30</sup> Lear, *Love and Its Place in Nature*, 46.

<sup>31</sup> Adorno et al., *The Authoritarian Personality*, 692.

<sup>32</sup> Ackerman and Jahoda, *Anti-Semitism and Emotional Disorder*, 66.

<sup>33</sup> Jaeggi, ‘Modes of Regression’, 516–17.

<sup>34</sup> Jaeggi, ‘Modes of Regression’, 508.

<sup>35</sup> Jaeggi, ‘Modes of Regression’, 508; Scheler, *Ressentiment*, 29.

emotion, her account follows the structure of the psychoanalytic model: ideological beliefs prevent people from recognizing the real causes of their rage leading them to repress this affect which then finds expression in distorted and pathological ways.

Conversely, Jana Cattien has recently argued that, achieving ‘political consciousness regarding the true source of one’s oppression’ leads to the kind of catharsis psychoanalysis seeks to bring about through ‘the unification of one’s emotions with their proper objects’.<sup>36</sup> The assumption of these accounts is that there is an emotional difference between identifying the true causes of one’s oppression or blaming scapegoats. In other words, the difference between emancipatory and reactionary anger is a difference, not just of content, but also of *form*: one is a healthy psychological process leading to catharsis, the other is a ‘self-poisoning of mind’.

While I do not want to question the utility of the Freudian account in the therapeutic context, I think it is problematic as an explanation of the *political* phenomena that get labelled ‘misdirected anger’. It is inadequate, as I shall go on to explain, for two reasons: first, it is implausible empirically as an explanation of most cases of politically misdirected rage; and, second, it is problematic from a political and strategic perspective because pathologizing our political opponents is unlikely to be a helpful strategy.

First, the explanatory inadequacy. I do not find it unlikely that we sometimes repress and misdirect our emotions in the way Freud suggested. Nor do I deny that this can explain some of the politically relevant cases of misdirected anger I outlined above. Perhaps it is a good explanation of some of the cases described by Lorde, where white women are angered by racism but, somehow feeling unable to express this feeling directly, instead end up hurling their anger at women of colour. Yet, most cases are not plausibly explained this way because there is no moment of suppression of an original affect. Take the kind of white rage that Jaeggi describes as *ressentiment*. As she explains, insofar as the ‘real’ target of the white working class’s ire are the abstract dynamics of capital, scapegoating anger involves not merely misattributing responsibility but also ‘*personalizing*, where the assumption of personal responsibility in fact is out of place’.<sup>37</sup> Yet, precisely the fact that the presumed source of anger is *not* any concrete agent but the abstract dynamics of capital

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<sup>36</sup> Cattien, ‘Neurotic Situations’, 16.

<sup>37</sup> Jaeggi, ‘Modes of Regression’, 517. Emphasis original.

means that the psychoanalytic explanation loses its plausibility. If the dynamics of capital's 'mute compulsion' are hard to grasp even on the level of conscious cognition, why assume that our unconscious somehow grasps it? The psychoanalytic model would seem to imply that the 'correct' target is somehow 'there' all along in my unconscious: i.e., we would have to assume that the right-wing voters who are angry at immigrants actually had a theory of capitalist exploitation all along but simply repressed it.

Without such an assumption, it is not clear why there would be a psychological difference between blaming capitalism or blaming migrants for one's poverty. It is true that structural and impersonal forms of domination can lead to diffuse forms of frustration that are hard to express; but this does not help us distinguish between reactionary and emancipatory expressions of anger. Why would discovering the 'true source' of oppression lead to catharsis any more than identifying a mistaken target? Unless the true source of the rage had been simmering in the subconscious all along, catharsis here cannot be a result of reuniting one's feelings with a thought that was repressed. Undoubtedly, finding political explanations for one's everyday frustrations can feel empowering and cathartic — but this feeling does not depend on that explanation being *true* and, consequently, need not constitute a unification of one's feelings with their *proper* targets. In fact, the lure of 'misdirected', reactionary interpretations of people's rage is precisely that they often *do* feel cathartic. As such, the repression model cannot explain the difference between misdirected and properly targeted anger (at least not in a political context).

In addition to this explanatory inadequacy, there are also good political and strategic reasons for staying clear of pathologizing explanations of misdirected rage. As Nancy Fraser, for example, has been keen to point out, the left 'will need to drop the comforting but false myth that they lost to a "basket of deplorables"' and instead 'reach out to the mass of Trump voters who are neither racists nor committed rightists, but casualties of a "rigged system," who can and must be recruited to the anti-neoliberal project of a rejuvenated Left'.<sup>38</sup> Explaining ideological differences in pathologizing language is hardly conducive to such coalition building.

We can see these pathologizing tendencies in many recent analyses of right-wing populism by critical theorists informed by psychoanalysis. Amy Allen and Noëlle McAfee,

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<sup>38</sup> Fraser, 'Progressive Neoliberalism versus Reactionary Populism', 284.

for instance, have turned to Kleinian psychoanalysis to explain how right-wing populism ‘emanates from a paranoid-schizoid mentality’.<sup>39</sup> And Wendy Brown follows such a pathologizing analysis to its most extreme conclusion when she claims that this ‘aggrieved, reactive creature’ simply ‘cannot be appealed to by reason, facts, or sustained argument because it does not want to know, and it is unmotivated by consistency or depth in its values or by belief in truth’.<sup>40</sup> Such ‘tacit dehumanization’ of one’s political opponents, as Martin Jay laments, leaves ‘little possibility of taking any of their grievances seriously, reasoning with them about the means to address them, and persuading them to change’.<sup>41</sup> There are, then, both theoretical and strategic reasons to reject the repression model.

## 2.2 *The sedimentation of rage*

So, let me begin to provide an alternative account of how anger gets misdirected. Audre Lorde’s metaphor of latent rage as an ‘undetonated device’ is a suggestive starting point. It implies that anger is something explosive that ‘lies within’ the subject waiting for the right (or wrong) moment to unleash its force.<sup>42</sup> This could, of course, be read to suggest a psychoanalytic understanding where the undetonated device is anger that has been previously repressed. I want to suggest a different reading, however. Drawing on Martin Luther King and Frantz Fanon, I will argue that feelings of anger and frustration can accumulate over time and become ‘sedimented’ in ways that do not necessarily involve repression. These feelings seek release through aggression, but since their cause is often far from obvious, that aggression can easily be misdirected.

So far, I have described anger as the experience that one’s habitual action is blocked and the perception of new affordances for aggressive action. In a direct interpersonal context, these two elements often appear simultaneously: someone offends you and you immediately see, on that person’s face, ‘the objective quality of asking for a punch in the nose’.<sup>43</sup> But, in a political context, the connection is rarely ever that immediate. Political

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<sup>39</sup> McAfee, ‘Beyond “Populism”’, 191. See also Allen, *Critique on the Couch*; McAfee, *Fear of Breakdown*; McAfee, ‘Racists, Fascists, and Other Dejects’.

<sup>40</sup> Brown, ‘Neoliberalism’s Frankenstein’, 75.

<sup>41</sup> Jay, ‘*The Authoritarian Personality*’, 140.

<sup>42</sup> Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 120.

<sup>43</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 163.

injustice, after all, always involves a structural dimension which is not immediately present to experience. The possibility of directing one's anger at structures like capitalism, patriarchy, or racism—structures without a face that can ask for punching—presupposes that the frustrations we encounter in everyday life can be 'stored' over time and redirected towards such more abstract targets. This cumulative and temporal aspect of how anger is embodied needs to be made explicit in order to understand how it can also be *misdirected*.

Consider Martin Luther King Jr.'s comments about the need to 'transmute the inchoate rage of the ghetto into a constructive and creative channel':

The discontent is so deep, the anger so ingrained, the despair, the restlessness so wide, that something has to be brought into being to serve as a channel through which these deep emotional feelings, these deep angry feelings, can be funneled.<sup>44</sup>

King, here, explains how the persistent poverty and economic neglect of Black and working-class communities over time leads to rage that is both 'ingrained' and 'inchoate'. That is, people face persistent frustrations in everyday life making the anger ingrained, but they see no immediate and obvious target for their rage making it appear inchoate. While many experiences of racism involve visible racist behaviour, structural forms of racism that function through economic neglect involve persistent frustrating experiences often without overt racist behaviour. For example, African American households in the US are more likely to live in so-called 'food deserts' where they are 'forced to pay more money for lower-quality food, in large part because of the absence of supermarkets in their neighborhoods'.<sup>45</sup> Not being able to afford food of decent quality may be intensely frustrating, but the low-wage workers in the available local shops, or even the owners of said shops, are hardly the right targets for the resulting rage. The actual culprits are supermarket chains that abandoned low-income areas in search of higher profits and imposed anti-competition covenants blocking others from operating supermarkets on the premises when they sold them off<sup>46</sup>—and even these are, of course, only the most

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<sup>44</sup> King, Jr., 'We Need an Economic Bill of Rights'.

<sup>45</sup> Leslie, 'Food Deserts, Racism, and Antitrust Law', 1732.

<sup>46</sup> Leslie, 'Food Deserts, Racism, and Antitrust Law'.

immediately identifiable agents in what is actually a complex structural dynamic involving the whole history of racism in the US.

The example of structural racism calls into question the idea that misdirected anger is a result of repressed feelings. In fact, it suggests that in some cases, initially suppressing feelings of rage is actually a condition for emancipatory anger. When one's everyday life is intensely frustrating due to structural factors, the immediately available targets are usually not the right ones. It produces an 'inchoate rage' without an obvious outlet. This initial rage needs to be sublimated into a form of anger that is politically productive, through the means of a social movement, for example.

For Martin Luther King, this meant funnelling these 'deep angry feelings' into non-violent resistance. But lest the above should be taken to imply that violent rage is always or mostly misdirected, consider how King's description of the transmutation of rage shares significant similarities with Fanon's discussion of liberatory violence in *Wretched of the Earth*.<sup>47</sup> Fanon describes how, in the colonial world, violence already suffuses everything down to the bodies of the colonized. Aggressiveness, he writes, is 'sedimented in [the colonized subject's] muscles'.<sup>48</sup> This 'muscular tension' finds outlet in various ways, including 'bloody fighting between tribes', and rituals, like dance.<sup>49</sup> In the liberation struggle, however, all this aggressiveness becomes redirected into anti-colonial resistance: 'Whereas it once reveled in myths and contrived ways to commit collective suicide, a fresh set of circumstances will now enable it to change direction'.<sup>50</sup> To the extent that we see aggressiveness as partly constitutive of anger, as I have suggested we should, this can be read as an account of misdirected rage.<sup>51</sup> The anger of the colonized is initially misdirected into tribal warfare and rituals and finds its proper target only in the liberation struggle.

In his preface to Fanon's book, Sartre describes Fanon's account in terms that sound very much like the repression model discussed above. Inter-tribal violence, Sartre claims, is the result of a rage that has been 'repressed' because the colonized 'cannot confront the

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<sup>47</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, chap. 1.

<sup>48</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 15.

<sup>49</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 17, 19.

<sup>50</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 21.

<sup>51</sup> Fanon does not speak about 'anger' or 'rage' in this section of *Wretched of the Earth*, but later in the book he writes that '[t]he national struggle appears to have channeled all this anger and nationalized every affective and emotional reaction'. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 230.

real enemy'.<sup>52</sup> Fanon, however, never speaks of anger, rage, or any other emotion being 'repressed'.<sup>53</sup> This difference is subtle but important.<sup>54</sup> Calling the rage 'repressed' implies that an original anger at the colonizers was suppressed and relegated to the unconscious. But for Fanon, no original feeling has been repressed; rather, there is simply the constant frustration and violence of life in the colonial world which leads to—now using King's words—'anger so ingrained' and 'restlessness so wide' that 'there has to be an outlet'.<sup>55</sup> This outlet could be progressive or reactionary political action, depending on the interpretations of their frustration available to agents—or it could be more or less random acts of violence in cases where no political outlet is available. But in none of these cases are we speaking of rage that has been repressed and then misdirected.

While Fanon's is, of course, a specific account of violence in the colonial context, features of his conceptualization of violence which can illuminate the phenomenon of misdirected anger more generally. To the extent that we think of misdirected anger as an 'undetonated device', we should think of the explosiveness being sedimented in the body—not in the unconscious. The explosive in question is not an already formed, but suppressed, emotion in the form of 'anger-at-X-for-Y' which can be directed at not-X only insofar as some form of psychological transference is involved. Rather, the explosive device is an embodied aggressiveness that, in the first place, simply seeks any outlet.

However, like all metaphors, the idea of the 'undetonated device' also has its limits, and we should be careful not to take it too literally. As I stressed in chapter 3, there is no raw, unmediated form of anger which then becomes the object of interpretation—an emotion, like anger, is always already mediated and meaningful, and any new interpretation is thus always a *re*interpretation. In other words, it is not the case that there is literally some affective 'device' which we carry around in our bodies until it explodes. Our embodied experience, including the vaguest feelings of frustration or depression, are

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<sup>52</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, lii–liii.

<sup>53</sup> Interestingly, he does, in one instance, mention that the 'need for this change [i.e., decolonization]' exists in a 'repressed' state in the 'consciousness of colonized men and women'. This does not imply, however, that the *rage* of the colonized is repressed. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 1.

<sup>54</sup> For a wider discussion of how Sartre's preface diverges from Fanon's own account, see Butler, 'Violence, Non-Violence'.

<sup>55</sup> King, Jr., 'We Need an Economic Bill of Rights'.

always meaningful and conceptually mediated. Thus, expressing anger is never a question of trying to interpret something that exists in an unmediated form within oneself, but rather of choosing between several possible ways of interpreting an experience that is, in part, constituted by this interpretation and thus never accessible in any pre-mediated form.

This discussion gives us a descriptive account of the mechanisms at play when anger is misdirected. Inspired by Fanon and King, we can say that misdirected anger involves targeting one's sedimented feelings of aggression towards the 'wrong' targets (assuming, for the moment, that we have a meaningful way of distinguishing between right and wrong targets). Going back to the example of reactionary white working-class rage, we can describe it as follows. Poor working-class people face numerous frustrations of their practical aims and hopes in their everyday lives which leads to pent-up aggression that seeks an outlet. Given that the 'proper' target of blame is usually not obvious—e.g., it is not immediately clear, from an experiential point of view, who is responsible for stagnating wages in the way that it *is* clear who is responsible for punching you in the face—a variety of different interpretations could serve to make sense of these feelings and provide them with an outlet. Very schematically, we can say that antisemitism mislocates the culprit in the sphere of circulation with the Jew representing the merchant class, whereas contemporary anti-immigrant rhetoric finds its enemy in the sphere of intra-worker competition for jobs or welfare; both leave the 'real' culprit, the capitalist, unscathed in their hidden abode of production. Any of these interpretations of people's everyday frustrations constitutes a *political achievement*, as I stressed in chapter 3. This is true of reactionary political interpretations as much as progressive ones. We should simply see reactionary mobilizations of rage, as Stuart Hall already put it in his analysis of the authoritarian populism of the 1980s, as successful articulations building a 'bridge, between the real material sources of popular discontent, and their [reactionary] representation, through specific ideological forces and campaigns'.<sup>56</sup>

As I have discussed previously, the way one's emotions are targeted has much to do with the objective possibilities for action available and the affordances one perceives. This explains another aspect of misdirected anger: namely, that it tends to target those who appear most vulnerable (and, correlatively, that those who have some limited amount of

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<sup>56</sup> Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal*, 137.

privilege within an exploitative system are more likely to misdirect their anger). The ‘real’ enemy, capital, may not come into view as a possible target of anger, because of its relatively abstract nature, because of internalized ideological beliefs, and because no concrete avenues for challenging it seem available. Instead, scapegoats for the frustrations produced by capitalist exploitation are often groups who can be seen as *concrete* targets, who are already marked as less worthy by dominant discourses, and who seem like viable targets for action (whether that be political repression or direct vigilante violence).

Thus, theorists like Jaeggi are partly right when they say that misdirected rage often grows out of feelings which ‘one is powerless to express’.<sup>57</sup> But only in the sense that experiencing the effects of structural injustice always involves frustrations which cannot immediately be vented, because the culprit operates ‘behind our backs’, as it were. It leads to ingrained inchoate anger which can accumulate, sediment over time, and seeks an outlet—but, in contradistinction to the repression model, I have argued that whether that outlet is emancipatory or reactionary makes no difference on a psychological level. Any political expression of anger involves the reinterpretation of everyday experiences of frustration through the lens of some (even rudimentary) social-theoretical framework. We cannot locate the difference between ‘misdirected’ and ‘correctly directed’ anger in the head in the way the psychoanalytically inspired critical theorists have often done.

This, of course, raises the question of how we *can* distinguish between better and worse targets of anger. The psychoanalytic model gave a neat answer to the question of what it means for anger to be misdirected by its own standards: once repression is undone, the subject themselves will realize that they were, all along, angry at X and not Y. But if we cannot appeal to the psychological form of the anger, then we need some other way of making this distinction.

### 3. Misdirected anger: unfitting or unfit?

In this section, then, I move on to consider the normative question of how exactly we can distinguish the right from the wrong targets when it comes to anger. First, I consider what

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<sup>57</sup> Jaeggi, ‘Modes of Regression’, 508.

I call the unfittingness model and point out its shortcomings. Then I outline my own preferred pragmatico-political account.

### 3.1 *The unfittingness model*

There is a deceptively simple account of what it means to get anger's target right which needs to be considered but ultimately rejected. Horkheimer and Adorno invoke it when they say that the workers, not realizing that their employers are stealing from them, instead 'shout: "Stop thief!" —and point at the Jew'.<sup>58</sup> It is a case of mistaken identity. Misdirected anger, we might say, simply represents the wrong agent as culpable for the cause of the anger and thus, since the anger is meant to be directed at the responsible party, gets things wrong by its own standards. Once this mistaken representation of the world is corrected, the anger would find its correct target.

In contemporary philosophy of emotion, a distinction is standardly made between emotions being *inappropriate* and *unfitting*: 'there is a crucial distinction', write D'Arms and Jacobson, 'between the question of whether some emotion is the right way to feel, and whether that feeling gets it right'.<sup>59</sup> Anger can be a fitting representation of the world while being normatively *inappropriate*: for example, in the example above where a landlord correctly sees a tenant union as obstructing their interests but is still normatively wrong in getting angry.<sup>60</sup> Anger is *unfitting*, however, when it gets things wrong about the world: if the landlord mistakenly targets a tenant who actually did not join the union, they are getting things wrong.

Misdirected anger, then, could be understood as a species of unfitting anger. Lepoutre, for example, explains that misdirected anger 'correctly represent[s] a situation as involving injustice while representing the wrong group as blameworthy for this injustice'.<sup>61</sup> False beliefs about the cause of a specific wrong clearly *is* one possible source of misdirection:

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<sup>58</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 142.

<sup>59</sup> D'Arms and Jacobson, 'The Moralistic Fallacy', 66.

<sup>60</sup> As discussed in chapter 3, many philosophers believe that anger represents its object as a moral violation. On those accounts, which I have rejected, being angry is only fitting when the target is indeed a moral violation, and thus the landlord's anger in this case would also be unfitting.

<sup>61</sup> Lepoutre, 'Rage Inside the Machine', 415. Another example of this view can be found in Vargas González: 'Mistargeted anger is anger that wrongly blames individuals or collectives as responsible for some wrongdoing or injustice'. Vargas González, 'Political and Antipolitical Anger', 12.

if I am angry at A for stealing my wallet, but in fact the thief was B, my ire is in a very straightforward sense directed at the wrong person. Moreover, we can even say that it is misdirected *by my own standards* insofar as I mean to aim my anger at the agent responsible for stealing my wallet.

Nevertheless, this explanation is too simplistic to account for most of the cases we are interested in when discussing misdirected rage as a political phenomenon. Many of the examples we might like our theory to account for simply do not involve a ‘correct’ representation of the injustice which putatively caused the anger. Lepoutre himself mentions the anger of Hochschild’s Tea Party-supporters as an example. However, claiming that they ‘correctly’ represent economic injustices as the problem, but simply misattribute blame, is already to smuggle our own analysis of economic exploitation into the rage of people who do not share it. Hochschild, for example, gives an account of what she terms the ‘deep story’ that underlies the feelings of many on the American right: they feel that they have been patiently waiting in line for their share of the American Dream, but suddenly a number of people—immigrants, women, minorities, people of colour—start cutting in line encouraged by liberal elites.<sup>62</sup> Insofar as this is the representation underlying much reactionary white rage, it is hard to see how it ‘correctly represent[s] a situation as involving injustice’.<sup>63</sup> As Rahel Jaeggi puts it, these expressions of resentment involve

a wrong answer to a problem that is *already framed in an inadequate way*, a problem that is already wrongly perceived—which is why the strategy, defended by some (some of them: former) leftists, to only redirect the answer (in order to arrive at an emancipatory solution) is misleading.<sup>64</sup>

The disagreement between the left’s and the right’s explanations of the plight of the rural working class is not best understood as a disagreement about whom to blame for such-and-such injustice; rather, it is a clash between fundamentally different interpretations of the social world (different ‘deep stories’ in Hochschild’s vocabulary). If we want to account for

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<sup>62</sup> Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land*, chap. 9.

<sup>63</sup> Lepoutre, ‘Rage Inside the Machine’, 415.

<sup>64</sup> Jaeggi, ‘Modes of Regression’, 518. Emphasis mine.

cases of misdirected anger that involve not just misattribution of blame, but a misinterpretation of the whole situation, then we need a more refined account.

Emerick and Yap have recently developed a slightly different account on which misdirected anger is an emotion that ‘arise[s] in response to some actual wrong’, but is not directed at ‘the *responsible* person or system’.<sup>65</sup> Thus, they do not assume that the anger in question correctly represents a given wrong but only that it ‘responds’ to it. The question is what it means for anger to ‘respond to’ a genuine injustice if this does not involve actually being angry *about* that injustice at a conscious level. Emerick and Yap are not clear on this point, but the most plausible explanation would seem to be in terms of causation.<sup>66</sup> Perhaps the *cause* of the white working class’s rage is capitalism, and, when they turn their ire against immigrants or Jews, they misrepresent the causes of their own anger. This also seems to be the implication of the passage of *The Authoritarian Personality* quoted above, where scapegoating anger is understood as a result of the inability ‘due to intellectual confusion to tell the real causes of frustration’.<sup>67</sup> This way, one could defend a more sophisticated version of the model of misdirected anger unfitting: anger is misdirected when it incorrectly represents its own causes.

This explanation, though, will not do either. This is because any instance of anger is overdetermined and can be explained causally at several different levels. In fact, the targets of misdirected anger often (though not always) *are* the proximate causes of people’s rage. Emerick and Yap, for instance, give the example of Elliot Rodger, a self-described ‘incel’ who shot and killed 6 people as supposed ‘retribution’ against women for romantic and sexual rejection. Emerick and Yap diagnose this ‘as a reaction against norms of masculinity from someone who clearly did not live up to such norms’.<sup>68</sup> They thus suggest that the real

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<sup>65</sup> Emerick and Yap, ‘Betrayed Expectations’, 365. Emphasis mine.

<sup>66</sup> Emerick and Yap use the language of misdirected anger being ‘grounded in’ or ‘responding to’ genuine injustice interchangeably without ever defining either term (except circularly when they explicate ‘appropriately grounded’ anger in terms of ‘responding to’ injustice (p. 365)). At times, they do suggest that grounding/responding is meant to imply causation, however: for example, when they say that they are ‘considering anger that is grounded in *or is the result of* unjust and oppressive systems’ (p. 352-353), or that anger is mistargeted when ‘misdirected away from its appropriate *causes*’ (p. 365, emphasis added to both quotes). Elsewhere, Fakhoury also says that ‘anger *responds to* an injustice when it is caused by it’. Fakhoury, ‘Oppositional Anger’, 115.

<sup>67</sup> Adorno et al., *The Authoritarian Personality*, 233.

<sup>68</sup> Emerick and Yap, ‘Betrayed Expectations’, 363.

cause of his anger, and its appropriate target, were patriarchal norms of masculinity. But the problem is that it is *also* true that Rodger's anger really *was* caused by women rejecting him—if they had given him the attention he desired, he would, plausibly, not have been angry. Rodger is not, strictly speaking, wrong about the causes of his anger—but he may be locating the causes at the wrong level: instead of blaming individual women who deny him affection, he *ought* to blame the patriarchal capitalist society that denies him (and most of us) the care and affection all humans need.

Thus, given causal overdetermination, we need a way of deciding *which* of various causes is the proper target of anger. Here it becomes tempting instead to see misdirection as a species of *inappropriateness*: individual women who rejected Rodger are not blameworthy, but patriarchal norms of masculinity are—the latter is an *appropriate* target of anger, the former is not.<sup>69</sup> Yet, this would mean appealing to external, rather than internal, standards for what it means for an emotion to be properly directed. The problem with this is that we would no longer be able to make sense of the intuition that not all inappropriate anger is misdirected.

As I argued above, the diagnosis of misdirected anger means more than that the anger in question is normatively wrong, and, if that is true, we need to be able to distinguish between inappropriate anger that is misdirected and inappropriate anger that is not. Take Du Bois's analysis again: while both white labour's and white slaveholders' anger at Black slaves was racist and inappropriate, he only diagnosed the former's as being misdirected—if anger is misdirected whenever targeted at those who do not merit blame, then the slaveholder's rage would be as misdirected as white labour's, and we would lose the specificity of the diagnosis of misdirection. The diagnosis of misdirected anger, then, is not reducible to either unfittingness or inappropriateness.

### 3.2 *A pragmatic-political account of misdirected anger*

Anger consists, I have argued, in the perception of the world as problematic and of affordances for overcoming the obstacles in one's way through aggressive action. It is an

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<sup>69</sup> Emerick and Yap, in some places, suggest this account. For example, when they write that mistargeted anger 'is justified but misdirected away from its *appropriate* causes'. Emerick and Yap, 'Betrayed Expectations', 365. Emphasis mine.

‘embodied and active engagement with the world’,<sup>70</sup> an attempt at problem-solving. My argument in this section will be that negative emotions’ character as problem-consciousness is the key to understanding what it means for them to be correctly directed. It is not a question of correctly attributing moral responsibility. Nor is it a question of undoing repression. Rather, it is a question of whether a given expression of rage contributes to solving the problem: does it further the abolition of the social conditions that brought it into being? Thus, the question of whether it is targeted correctly can ultimately only be determined through praxis. As Fanon puts it, in the colonial context there is a ‘need for [...] change [that] exists in a raw [...] state in the lives and consciousness of colonized men and women’. Ultimately, though, the ‘proof of success lies in a social fabric that has been changed inside out’.<sup>71</sup> I will argue that we need to think about political anger in the same way. In the embodied experience of anger, or other negative emotions, there is a ‘need for change’, a perception of a problem calling for a solution. What the correct interpretation of this need is, and exactly what solution it is calling for, can, in the last instance, only be determined in the realm of praxis.

Here my understanding of the normative dimension of misdirected anger is very close to Jaeggi’s in her account of *ressentiment*. She writes that ‘[w]hat is wrong with resentment is [...] the fact that it conceals and undermines rather than enables collective (emancipatory) action’.<sup>72</sup> Drawing on her own pragmatist conception of problem-solving,<sup>73</sup> she conceives of *ressentiment* as ‘an inadequate and misleading reaction to a crisis’ that ‘not only fails to solve the problems in question; it even fails to specify and articulate them in an appropriate manner’.<sup>74</sup> That is, repression of the original affect is normatively bad *because* it is a bad form of problem-solving. I have already questioned whether repressing one’s original anger at everyday frustrations is actually more likely to lead to reactionary expressions of anger; but the normative criterion can be applied without adopting the repression model. Any given interpretation of one’s anger can be more or less likely to ‘specify and articulate’ the problem in question in a way that allows one to solve it.

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<sup>70</sup> Solomon, ‘Emotions in Phenomenology and Existentialism’, 300.

<sup>71</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 1.

<sup>72</sup> Jaeggi, ‘Modes of Regression’, 520.

<sup>73</sup> Jaeggi, *Critique of Forms of Life*.

<sup>74</sup> Jaeggi, ‘Modes of Regression’, 520.

There is still more to say about the difference between my account and Jaeggi's, however. For, once we consider her account of *ressentiment* in the context of her wider theory of critique, we can see that is no accident that she wants to distinguish between successful and unsuccessful forms of anger on the level of *form* rather than their likely *outcome*. In *Critique of Forms of Life* and her latest book *Fortschritt und Regression*, she argues that, on a social level, we can distinguish between progressive and reactionary social changes by appealing to their *form* rather than their *substance*.<sup>75</sup> The critical theorist, she argues, ought to critique social developments based on 'the *how* of the process, not the *what* of what is to be realized in it'.<sup>76</sup> It is not hard to see that this account of critique informs Jaeggi's account of *ressentiment*: it is an affective phenomenon which is deficient as a process because it involves a blockage of learning, qua repression, and can thus be critiqued on the level of *how*, not *what*.

Now, it may seem counterintuitive that we need to criticize problem-solving processes on this formal level, rather than simply based on whether they actually solve the problem. But Jaeggi has good reasons to make this move. She worries that a critique on the level of substance will end up being either external or internal in ways that blunt the practical force of the critique. If I criticize a Trump-voter's anger at immigrants from an external point of view—say, for being racist—they are quite unlikely to care (which does not make my critique invalid or untrue but means that it will have no practical authority for them<sup>77</sup>). If, instead, I want to convince them that, from their own point of view, they ought to redirect their anger, like Du Bois argued that white labour of the reconstruction era should have done, then I face another problem: from their internal point of view, immigrant *are* the problem. As explained above, it is not simply that they mistakenly blame immigrants for capitalism and could be convinced by evidence that they misattributed blame—rather, they have an entirely different interpretation of the problem which may include false beliefs but goes much deeper and involves value-laden interpretive schemas like 'the nation', 'desert', 'the American dream', etc. Therefore, Jaeggi argues, we need a point of

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<sup>75</sup> Jaeggi, *Critique of Forms of Life*, 29, 216–17, 284; Jaeggi, *Fortschritt Und Regression*, chap. 5; see also Jaeggi, *Alienation*, 33–34.

<sup>76</sup> Jaeggi, *Critique of Forms of Life*, 284. Emphasis original.

<sup>77</sup> On the notion of critique's practical authority, see Fraser, 'The Limits of Immanent Critique', 98.

view that is neither purely internal nor external, and she finds this in the criteria of a well-formed learning process. If I can show that someone's interpretation of the world is the result of a deficient process involving repression or other blockages, then I may be able to radically critique their worldview without having to arbitrarily impose an external normative standard. But, as I argued above, it is dubious whether reactionary expressions of anger really can be criticized on the level of form without reference to their content—and even if they could, the practical force of this critique would be seriously blunted by its pathologizing tone.

On the other hand, what I have tried to show in this chapter is that the notion of misdirection actually *does* provide us with an immanent point of view *without* retreating to the level of form. An emotion is never uninterpreted but also cannot be reduced to any given interpretation of it. As the subjective experience of a social contradiction, it registers an objective moment of distress which calls for some kind of solution. If one's anger is the result of pent-up frustrations faced in an everyday life of poverty and exploitation, then we can ask whether a given interpretation of these emotions has any prospect of addressing the problems giving rise to those frustrations. If I tell someone that their anger is misdirected because their interpretation of the social world is such that it channels their frustrations in a way that reinforces the structures causing their misery, I am adopting an immanent point of view that is, however, not internal to their worldview. Naturally, I am not suggesting that it is easy to convince someone that their view is misguided. Hochschild's concept of 'deep stories' is apt, because it captures how certain narratives become deeply ingrained in people's worldview and structure their interpretations of the social world. But challenging as it may be to convince people to shift their interpretive schemas (and the next section will discuss how such endeavours might succeed), it seems both more realistic and less paternalistic to convince people they are simply wrong than to tell them they are experiencing some psychological blockage.

At this point, the question may arise of how we can possibly know which interpretation of anger is more likely to be emancipatory. If the answer is ultimately only given by practical success, does that mean we need to withhold judgment until we have seen the outcome of various social 'experiments' (as Honneth sometimes seems to imply with his

recent conception of ‘historical experimentalism’<sup>78</sup>)? This would obviously make it hard to take a principled stance against those expressing misdirected anger: why should they be deprived of ‘testing out’ their ideas? Fortunately, however, we are able to make predictions about which expressions of anger point in an emancipatory direction, and which ones do not. This is exactly what we are doing, for example, in arguing that capitalism is the ultimate cause of the manifold frustrations experienced by the working class, and that no solution that does not directly challenge capitalism will overcome the sources of their anger. Such judgments, like all political judgments, are fallible. But when we are talking about social change, we always need to make highly uncertain predictions about the future and that is hardly a reason to simply stay quiet. My point is that when we argue about whether anger is misdirected or not, we are making forward-looking arguments about emancipatory social change, rather than backward-looking arguments about the cause of people’s anger.

Misdirected anger, in short, is anger that subjectively reveals a problem in the world—qua embodied experience of frustration—yet is interpreted in a way that does not help us overcome that problem or, worse yet, further entrenches it. Some of the examples I have been discussing make this fairly obvious: cases such as Eliot Rodger’s are clearly desperate acts of frustration carried out by subjects who see no productive way out of their situation. Few people would disagree with the claim that such rage is counterproductive and therefore misdirected. In other cases, such as the reactionary working class, it is, of course, more debatable whether their anger, by their own standards, is going to solve their problems—some people, like David Miller, *do* defend the view that restricting immigration in European countries benefits domestic working classes by protecting welfare states against the erosive influence of outsiders.<sup>79</sup> We could accept Miller’s empirical claim while maintaining that it is still racist or otherwise wrong to hoard resources in the Global North while keeping out ‘strangers’.<sup>80</sup> If we *do* accept that xenophobia is an effective way of protecting the livelihoods of the white working class, it follows, on my account, that their anger is *not* misdirected. It is still *wrong* because it is

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<sup>78</sup> Honneth, *The Idea of Socialism*, chap. 3.

<sup>79</sup> Miller, *Strangers in Our Midst*.

<sup>80</sup> Finlayson, ‘If This Isn’t Racism’.

racist—but, as I have stressed, judgments about anger’s appropriateness are separate from the question of misdirection. Judging their anger wrong because it is racist would come at the cost of the critique’s practical authority for the addressees—but this is entirely in line with the fundamental assumption of Marxist-inspired critical theory that the agents of social change will be those who have a material interest in such change. If it is true that the white part of the working class has no interest in overcoming racial capitalism, then we simply need to rely on the agency of all those who *do* have that interest.

However, when Du Bois, the Frankfurt School, or contemporary analysts diagnose the rage of the disaffected white working class as ‘misdirected’, they are not simply claiming that it is racist or otherwise inappropriate. They are precisely disagreeing with Miller’s empirical claim: their argument is that by directing their ire at racialized scapegoats, the white working classes are actively *hindering* their own emancipation because it serves to uphold capitalist exploitation.<sup>81</sup> Du Bois, for example, makes a clear distinction between white elites who have no interest in abolishing capitalism and can therefore not be recruited for the revolution, and white workers who ‘paradoxically’ maintain the very system that exploits them. It is true that the white working class have more than their chains to lose in abolishing a racist capitalist order—they also have the wages of whiteness. But Du Bois is clear that, overall, it would have been in the interest of the white working class to join the Black Reconstruction’s ‘extraordinary experiment in Marxism’. The fact that they did not was a tragedy for the working class across colour lines. Or in the words of Angela Davis: ‘It is essential that white workers become conscious that historically, through their acquiescence in the capitalist-inspired oppression of Blacks, they have only rendered themselves more vulnerable to attack’.<sup>82</sup>

Of course, I cannot here hope to settle the empirical question about whether the white working class’s anger is, in fact, misdirected (although it should be clear enough that my sympathies lie with Du Bois *et al.*). My aim has been to clarify what it means to say that anger is misdirected, and this analysis does not depend on that empirical claim. The point is that, once we conceive of anger as a practical engagement with the world aimed at overcoming frustrations, we have a non-arbitrary and immanent way of evaluating different

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<sup>81</sup> On this point, see also Emerick and Yap, ‘Betrayed Expectations’.

<sup>82</sup> Davis, ‘Political Prisoners, Prisons and Black Liberation’, 36–37.

ways of interpreting it. The way rage subjectively reveals ‘a need for change’, to use Fanon’s words, gives us an immanent standard for assessing various articulations of anger.

#### 4. Ideology and practice

Now, if the reactionary forms of anger I have discussed are not just normatively wrong, but also actively go against the interests of those expressing this rage, the question arises: why are they so pervasive? This, of course, gets us straight to what Deleuze and Guattari once called the ‘fundamental problem of political philosophy’: ‘Why do men fight for their servitude as stubbornly as though it were their salvation?’<sup>83</sup> And, relatedly, what would it take for people to redirect their anger in more emancipatory directions? Indeed, the fact that the working classes of Europe in the 20<sup>th</sup> century did not—as Marxists had predicted—throw off the yoke of capital, but instead supported fascist reaction, is the exact reason that the early Frankfurt School turned to psychoanalysis (and, one might add, its very *raison d’être*). In this way, the question of misdirected rage has been sitting right at the heart of Critical Theory all along. Why did the workers of Europe throw their rage behind fascist and imperialist aggression instead of channelling it into the fight against capitalist exploitation?

Accounts that treat misdirected anger as a simple epistemological mistake or as a form of repression arguably both provide answers that rely on cognitivist understandings of ideology as deficient processes of belief formation.<sup>84</sup> On the unfittingness model, the problem is one of empirically mistaken beliefs, and the source is thus presumably found in misinformation and propaganda. The solution, in turn, would be to provide better information, or, more pointedly put, for someone from ‘a privileged objective standpoint, [to] just swoop[] in and tell[] the ignorant masses what they ought to believe’.<sup>85</sup> On the psychoanalytic model, the problem lies in how processes of reasoning have been misshapen by ‘unconscious psychological “mechanisms”’ which stand in the way of

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<sup>83</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 29.

<sup>84</sup> For critiques of ‘cognitivist’ theories of ideological belief formation, see Haslanger, ‘Racism, Ideology, and Social Movements’; Bufkin, ‘Racism, Epistemic Injustice, and Ideology Critique’.

<sup>85</sup> Haslanger, ‘Racism, Ideology, and Social Movements’, 5; see also Celikates, *Critique as Social Practice*, pt. 1.

people recognizing their own oppression.<sup>86</sup> The solution, then, would appear to be a therapeutic one: as briefly mentioned in the previous chapter, Adorno advocated a kind of mass educational-therapeutic project aimed at undoing regressive psychological tendencies and ‘dissuad[ing] people from striking outward without reflecting upon themselves’.<sup>87</sup> Robin Celikates, too, sees the task of critical theory partly as helping people overcome such psychological blockages and thereby working towards ‘a dialogical transformation of the addressees’ self-understanding’.<sup>88</sup>

My theory, on the contrary, suggests a much more materialist account of how ideology works in cases of misdirected anger. Emotions are defined by the affordances for action that they reveal, and these, in turn, are constituted by the subject’s relation to their material environment.<sup>89</sup> This means that the way people interpret their anger is shaped by the possibilities for action that they see around them. Recall the idea that the angry person ‘sees on the face of his opponent the objective quality of asking for a punch in the nose’.<sup>90</sup> The affordance of punching, here, relies not only on my interpretation of the person in question as an obstacle or opponent, but also on my body and the environment: it requires that I have an arm to punch with and that my opponent is within reach. In the same way, different political articulations of anger become more or less salient depending on the material possibilities for action afforded by the environment. The presence of organized labour unions will, for example, make certain articulations of frustrations in the workplace more likely because it makes certain forms of action, like strikes, available. Empirical research on workers in the gig economy, for instance, shows that anger is more likely to be channelled towards customers the more isolated workers are from each other, whereas closer interaction between workers, makes it more likely that their anger finds outlet in organized workplace resistance.<sup>91</sup> Rage seeks an outlet and therefore the available possibilities for action are an important factor in how it is interpreted—if capitalist enterprises seem like available targets of my ire, rather than unchangeable eternal

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<sup>86</sup> Celikates, *Critique as Social Practice*, 178.

<sup>87</sup> Adorno, *Critical Models*, 193.

<sup>88</sup> Celikates, *Critique as Social Practice*, 152.

<sup>89</sup> Gibson, *The Ecological Approach*, 119.

<sup>90</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 163.

<sup>91</sup> Wood et al., ‘Dynamics of Contention in the Gig Economy’.

structures, I am more likely to channel my rage that way. This is not simply a matter of belief, but also of the actual material possibilities afforded by my environment.

This helps us see that misdirected anger is not simply a result of mistaken beliefs which can be corrected through better information. Rather, we need to understand it in the context of a *materialist* approach to ideology.<sup>92</sup> We are likely to see misdirected emotions whenever possibilities for emancipatory action appear unavailable. If we want to understand the misdirected rage fuelling contemporary right-populists, then, we should not look primarily to the dynamics of misinformation or our alleged ‘post-truth’ era; nor should we look to the way neoliberalism supposedly deforms our psyches ‘keeping [us] stupid’.<sup>93</sup> Rather, we should look towards changes in the material conditions, such as the declining power and presence of unions which can channel inchoate rage into emancipatory political action. Emancipatory expressions of anger are blocked not, as Jaeggi suggests, on a psychological level because ‘direct feelings of revenge against those who possess the coveted goods are ruled out’,<sup>94</sup> but rather at a material level. The blockages are not in the head but in the world.

None of this, of course, should be understood deterministically: our feelings are shaped, but not entirely determined, by the material situation we find ourselves in, because there is always also a moment of interpretation involved. This is where theorists can intervene by providing more emancipatory explanations of people’s everyday experiences of suffering and frustration. Even under the most hostile conditions, it is always possible for at least some people to come to understand the forces that oppress them. A much more likely way for people to redirect their anger, however, is when new possibilities for action appear in their environment.

To illustrate, consider the way successful labour strikes have been organized in Trump-voting regions among the very people Brown believes ‘cannot be appealed to by reason, facts, or sustained argument’.<sup>95</sup> In 2018-19, a wave of strikes among public education workers took place in deeply republican states as part of a movement known as ‘Red for Ed’. As Eric Blanc describes in his account of the movement, many of the educators taking

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<sup>92</sup> See, for example, Hall, ‘The Problem of Ideology’.

<sup>93</sup> Brown, ‘Neoliberalism’s Frankenstein’, 75.

<sup>94</sup> Jaeggi, ‘Modes of Regression’, 511.

<sup>95</sup> Brown, ‘Neoliberalism’s Frankenstein’, 75.

part were deeply conservative republicans. But through the experience of organizing against state governments that were bleeding their schools for funding, many came to see that they share a material interest with working-class people, including immigrants, and not with business-friendly Republican elites. As Blanc puts it,

A redirection of popular anger upward, against the ruling rich, has profound anti-racist implications. Though the process is uneven and far from automatic, scapegoating marginalized groups tends to lose its political traction when a viable class-based alternative is presented.<sup>96</sup>

It is not that these people first became convinced that state governments were the real targets of their anger, and *therefore* they joined the Red for Ed strikes. Rather, one might say, they joined the strikes, and therefore they became convinced that governments were the proper target. Once teachers started organizing workplaces, new affordances for action became salient and this transformed how people understood their own rage.

When it comes to the potential for redirecting mistargeted anger in emancipatory ways, then, I strike a cautious note somewhere between optimism and pessimism. Whereas some epistemic theories of misdirected anger might suggest that the solution is rather simple — just correct people’s mistaken beliefs about the causes of their misery — my theory makes it clear that feelings are not changed that easily: our emotions respond to real material possibilities for action afforded by the environment and as such are often recalcitrant to change through mere argumentation. Yet, it is fortunately not true that neoliberal capitalism has fashioned a paranoid-schizoid subject that ‘cannot be reached or transformed’.<sup>97</sup> Anger responds to people’s everyday frustrations and hardships: it is a feeling that registers real problems and seeks solutions. When no effective forms of resistance against oppression seem feasible, these ‘solutions’ can take desperate forms of lashing out and scapegoating. If we want to avoid that, returning to the words of Martin Luther King, ‘*something* has to be brought into being to serve as a channel through which [...] these deep angry feelings, can be funneled’.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Blanc, *Red State Revolt*, 71.

<sup>97</sup> Brown, ‘Neoliberalism’s Frankenstein’, 75.

<sup>98</sup> King, Jr., ‘We Need an Economic Bill of Rights’.

## 5. Conclusion

One way of glossing the account of misdirected anger provided here is that it is forward-looking, rather than backward-looking. When we claim that someone's ire is misdirected, we are not making a backward-looking claim about the psychological process that brought it about. Nor are we making a claim about the cause of that rage. We are making forward-looking claims about the likelihood of a given expression of anger to actually help the subject overcome the frustrations they face. Adapting Marx's words, we must 'prove the truth' of the critique we derive from emotions, i.e., its 'reality and power', its 'this-worldliness', 'in practice'.<sup>99</sup>

What does this mean for the understanding of critique that I have been developing? As mentioned, an account of how to judge whether any given interpretation of an emotion is better or worse from an immanent point of view is essential to a theory of critique grounded in feelings. What I have shown in this chapter is that negative emotions, qua practical engagements with world and attempts at problem-solving, carry their own normativity. In the form of embodied frustrations, they impose problems on us which cannot be ignored; they *will* manifest in one way or another, and the question is whether they are channelled in ways that practically help us overcome these frustrations or not. As such, critique becomes a moment in our practical engagements with the world: it is thrust upon us by the practical obstacles we run into, and its aim is to clarify the nature of these obstacles to help us transform the world for the better. Therefore, the 'question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question'.<sup>100</sup>

In many ways, this account of critique as a form of problem-solving is similar to Jaeggi's critical theory. However, this discussion of misdirected rage has brought out a crucial difference between my account and hers. Jaeggi believes that the only immanent point of view from which social critics can evaluate processes of problem-solving is a formal or processual one. It is, she writes, 'only after we understand *how these changes come about* that we will be able to understand whether or not we are in a position to evaluate them as

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<sup>99</sup> Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology* (1998), 569.

<sup>100</sup> Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology* (1998), 569.

## CHAPTER 5

progress, as change for the better'.<sup>101</sup> This is a backward-looking and formalist understanding of critique: we evaluate social change by investigating the form of the process that brought it about. Mine is instead forward-looking and substantial. The question is 'What is to be done?' By grounding critique in a materialist theory of emotions as practical engagements with the world, and deriving its normativity from that practical activity, we can provide substantive and forward-looking answers to that question in a way that remains immanently grounded in the practical interest of the oppressed in abolishing oppression. This view of critique will be fully fleshed out in the next chapter.

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<sup>101</sup> Jaeggi, 'Resistance to the Perpetual Danger of Relapse', 20.

## Chapter 6

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# ‘The Mere Feeling that Something is Wrong’: On Anger, Depression, and the Project of Critique

*[C]riticism is no passion of the brain, but is rather the brain of passion.*

—Karl Marx<sup>1</sup>

In this chapter, I return more explicitly to the question of critique as it has taken form in the work of the Frankfurt School. The first chapter explained why debates about critique could benefit from an engagement with emotions, and the intervening chapters have provided that engagement. In this final substantive chapter, then, I want to tie together the ideas arrived at so far, show how they amount to a coherent theory of immanent critique, and anticipate various likely objections to the account. In responding to those objections, the chapter further refines and develops the theory of how anger and depression lead to critique.

The idea that our emotions are what grounds social critique is often dismissed out of hand. In his recent book on Adorno, Peter Gordon rhetorically invokes what seems to him like a self-evident distinction between feelings and normative justification:

Social theorists may therefore feel tempted to dismiss the question of normative justification altogether [... This approach] offers the superficial allure of emancipatory criticism even while it recuses itself from the burdens of normative justification. Untroubled by paradox, it knows what it is against even if it does not know what it is for. And if it is pressed to provide

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<sup>1</sup> Marx, *Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right'*, 101.

some explanation as to why it finds a given condition intolerable, it dismisses the request with a wave of the hand. *The mere feeling that something is wrong is supposed to suffice.*<sup>2</sup>

An appeal to ‘mere feeling’ is here seen as obviously incompatible with an explanation of the normative basis for a judgment.<sup>3</sup> This dichotomy between justification and feeling, in turn, is seemingly not in need of any justification of its own. The mere invocation of the commonsensical assumption that feelings cannot carry the burden of justification is supposed to suffice.

My overall aim in this chapter, then, is to provide a comprehensive response to the common assumption that ‘mere feelings’ are too arbitrary and subjective to ground a context-transcending critique. Quite to the contrary, I want to argue, rooting critique in embodied experiences is not only plausible, but also furnishes an account of critique that better fits the materialist assumptions of Critical Theory. In the introduction, I already quoted Michel Foucault’s question of ‘whether, before one poses the question of ideology, it wouldn’t be more materialist to study first the question of the body’.<sup>4</sup> Contemporary Critical Theory, too, can be accused of ‘occlud[ing] the question of the body, in favour of consciousness and ideology’.<sup>5</sup> Debates about critique generally focus on the question of how critical consciousness can find a foothold within ideology to wrestle itself free from its stranglehold. This privileging of norms and reasoning in accounts of immanent critique has led to theoretical dead-ends which can be overcome by understanding critique as an embodied practice grounded in the account of negative emotions I have developed.

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<sup>2</sup> Gordon, *A Precarious Happiness*, xvii–xviii. Emphasis mine.

<sup>3</sup> In a different way, Robyn Marasco also embraces this dichotomy, although without dismissing appeals to feeling: ‘[Critical Theory] is energized by passions—“positive” and “negative” passions—as much as by reason. Recent work has focused so much on reason and rationality, the condition of validity claims, and the requirements of a rational political culture. These are important questions. But we must also speak to and for those experiences that are not quite captured in the philosophical requirements of reason, those that exceed the bounds of reason or are in discord with its demands’. I want to suggest, *contra* both Gordon and Marasco, that passion, far from being at odds with reason and justification, is integral to these practices. (To be fair, Marasco explicitly acknowledges, later on in the same essay, that passion does not necessarily ‘stand in opposition to reason’—but she then immediately reaffirms that they ‘circulate somewhere beyond reason and live under a different set of rules’.) Marasco, ‘Critical Theory and the Pursuit of a Political Education’, 758, 764.

<sup>4</sup> Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 58.

<sup>5</sup> Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 59.

This chapter will show, then, that the foregoing discussion of anger and depression allows us to paint a picture of critique as rooted in embodied experiences of dissatisfaction. Against the idea that normativity requires a yardstick, i.e., either external or immanent normative standards for measuring the object of critique, I will argue that the ‘desiring negation’ of anger, depression, and other negative emotions is in fact a source of normativity. This normativity comes from the subjective experience of the world becoming problematic and the normative pressure to resolve this problem. This is a materialist account of critique in that it locates normativity in embodied beings’ interactions with their material environment, rather than in norms and principles. At the same time, it remains a version of *immanent* critique, because this embodied experience is not seen as standing ‘outside’ of the social, but as the product of immanent social contradictions. Far from arbitrary or purely subjective, this materialist understanding of emotions grounds a robust account of the normativity of critique as the cognitive moment in our struggles to practically transform the world.

Defending this theory of critique also means rejecting Gordon’s claim that critique which ‘knows what it is against even if it does not know what it is for’ somehow involves a ‘paradox’. Against this, I defend a version of what Fabian Freyenhagen calls ‘metaethical negativism’: the view that it is perfectly possible to know what is wrong with the world without relying on a positive standard of the Good.<sup>6</sup> My version of negativist critique, however, is different from Freyenhagen’s in several respects. For one thing, I do not rely on the controversial premise of *epistemic* negativism, the thesis that we cannot know anything about the Good. And, unlike Freyenhagen, I see my negativist approach as a version of, rather than an alternative to, immanent critique. Negative emotions as subjective experiences of immanent social contradictions are what tells us that there is something wrong with the world, and any positive ideals should be seen as the outcome of a practical process of addressing those contradictions, rather than the basis for normative thought. As such, I also intend this chapter as a contribution to ongoing debates about negativism in Critical Theory.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Freyenhagen, *Adorno’s Practical Philosophy*, 10.

<sup>7</sup> Freyenhagen, *Adorno’s Practical Philosophy*; Gordon, *A Precarious Happiness*; Freyenhagen, ‘Misinterpreting Negativism’; Hemmerich, ‘Against Negativism’; Lepold, ‘Should Nonideal Theory Rely on Ideal Theory?’

It is worth specifying from the outset, that when I talk about critique, I have in mind an activity that is by no means restricted to the academic context. Social critique happens all across society all the time, in more and less self-conscious forms. It happens whenever people articulate their dissatisfactions with social life: from the vaguest complaint to the most sophisticated theoretical treatise. If academic critical theory is supposed to be continuous with these quotidian struggles to make sense oppression, then our account of the normativity of critique must apply to people's everyday epistemic efforts as much as the academic theorist's. This broad understanding of what it means to do critique means that one explanation of its grounding is taken off the table a priori: namely, the idea that critique begins from the claims of existing social movements.<sup>8</sup> While I agree that academic critical theory needs to be connected to social movements and organized resistance, an account that seeks to also capture how social movements, among other actors, themselves articulate critiques in the first place cannot take that articulation as its own grounding without becoming circular. The relationship between theorist and social practice remains an important question, and I will return to it in the conclusion. But it is best answered on the basis of a proper understanding of the normativity of critique that does not, from the outset, presuppose a division of labour between theorists and activists.

Section 1 will set things in motion with a brief discussion of immanent critique and by arguing that it cannot be grounded in 'normative surplus' alone. The rest of the chapter then goes on to elaborate on my alternative version of immanent critique as grounded in negative emotions. That discussion is structured around five potential objections to my approach. Section 2 counters the cryptonormativity objection by outlining a broadly Humean understanding of normativity as grounded in desire. Section 3 counters the subjectivism objection by highlighting the objective and somatic nature of emotions. Section 4 counters the externalism objection by explaining that negative feelings arise immanently as social contradictions. Section 5 counters the particularism objection by emphasizing the generalizability of particular emotional experiences through social-theoretical explanation. Finally, section 6 bites the bullet on the partisanship objection: critique is, and cannot but be, tied to the emancipatory interest of the oppressed in an

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<sup>8</sup> Fraser and Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition?*, 207–8; Celikates, 'Die Macht Der Kritik'.

avowedly partisan way. The result is an account of critique that is immanent, materialist, and negativist, and sees theory as a moment of emancipatory praxis.

### 1. Immanent critique and the explanatory deficit of normative surplus

Critical Theory is usually thought to be committed to one or another form of *immanent critique*. Immanent critique is defined in contrast to *external critique*, which relies on standards or norms external to its object—in the case of social criticism, critique that relies on sources of normativity external to the social practices we criticize. The most obvious examples are the various forms of moral realism that assume a moral truth which can be arrived at independently of an examination of the social practices it targets; whether one's principles are arrived at through divine guidance or rational reflection, the assumption is that they are true across time and space and can be used as a yardstick for critique of any society. Those committed to immanent critique reject this view. They follow Marx's injunction that the critic should 'not dogmatically anticipate the world', but rather 'find the new world through criticism of the old one'.<sup>9</sup> That is, immanent critique arises from within the social practices it seeks to criticize without relying on external standards.

The idea that we start our normative inquiry from within the existing social world is not, however, unique to Critical Theory. Many other approaches to political philosophy share this view, including Walzer's version of internal critique and Rawlsian constructivism. For Michael Walzer, critique should appeal to the norms people are already committed to in any given time and place and show what follows from a full elaboration and understanding of those normative commitments.<sup>10</sup> Rawls' constructivist approach, not so dissimilarly,<sup>11</sup> starts from 'certain familiar ideas' in our 'public political culture' which can then 'be worked up into a conception of political justice'.<sup>12</sup> What distinguishes these two approaches from Critical Theory is that they take an affirmative or reconciliatory stance towards existing ideals: they want to 'calm our frustration and rage against our society and its history by showing us the way in which its institutions, when

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<sup>9</sup> Marx, 'Letters', 143.

<sup>10</sup> Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism*; Stahl, 'What Is Immanent Critique?', 11–13.

<sup>11</sup> For the argument that Rawls' method, despite apparent differences, shared much with the communitarian approach, see Mulhall and Swift, *Liberals and Communitarians*, chap. 6.

<sup>12</sup> Rawls, *Justice as Fairness*, 5.

properly understood from a philosophical point of view, are rational'.<sup>13</sup> Critical theorists, by contrast, take an attitude of suspicion or opposition towards existing norms, seeking to fan the flames of indignation.<sup>14</sup> This attitude follows from the materialist maxim that ideas are not independent of material social forces, but a product of the latter: insofar as we think there is something wrong with the social world, the 'familiar ideas' of our political culture are more likely than not part of the problem.<sup>15</sup> Rather than just being imperfectly realized, these ideals may serve as the ideology stabilizing an exploitative structure and therefore cannot straightforwardly serve as resources for emancipatory criticism.<sup>16</sup> Rahel Jaeggi therefore distinguishes between *internal* critique à la Walzer, and *immanent* critique which 'does not restore a prior harmony between norm and reality that was lost, but instead seeks to transform a contradictory and crisis-riven situation into something new'.<sup>17</sup>

The rejection of external critique together with the materialist social theory gives rise to a special theoretical problem threatening to entangle the theorist in the dreaded 'performative contradiction'<sup>18</sup>: critical theorists generally assume that our minds are shaped by dominant ideologies but, in criticizing that ideology, they must assume that they themselves have transcended it. Gordon describes this as the 'challenge of self-reflexivity': that any critical social theory must be able to reflexively account for its own possibility.<sup>19</sup> If we are committed to a materialist social theory which claims that our subjectivity and thought are always products of society, then how can we account for the claim that critique is meant to transcend that given society and lead to radical

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<sup>13</sup> Rawls, *Justice as Fairness*, 3.

<sup>14</sup> See Jaeggi, *Critique of Forms of Life*, chap. 6.

<sup>15</sup> McCarthy, 'Political Philosophy and Racial Injustice', 160–61.

<sup>16</sup> Mills, "'Ideal Theory' as Ideology'. Rawls himself acknowledges this possibility in a footnote in his *Restatement*: "The idea of political philosophy as reconciliation must be invoked with care. For political philosophy is always in danger of being used corruptly as a defense of an unjust and unworthy status quo, and thus of being ideological in Marx's sense. From time to time we must ask whether justice as fairness, or any other view, is ideological in this way; and if not, why not? Are the very basic ideas it uses ideological? How can we show they are not?' Of course, he never followed through on this and never gave answers to these questions. It is certainly possible to argue, though, that some of Rawls' own methodological commitments ought to have pushed him in the direction of a more critical approach. Rawls, *Justice as Fairness*, 4.

<sup>17</sup> Jaeggi, *Critique of Forms of Life*, 203.

<sup>18</sup> Habermas, *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 119.

<sup>19</sup> Gordon, *A Precarious Happiness*, 20.

transformation? Critical theory itself clearly cannot claim to stand outside society but is, like everything else, a product of it.

It is widely assumed that the way to meet this challenge is by identifying normative *standards* or *principles* which are immanent to society yet capable of transcending it. For example, Rachel Fraser explains the ‘no-external-standards desideratum’ of immanent critique as follows:

Unlike the analytic political philosopher, the immanent critic must not develop her normative principles by way of a priori, ‘top-down’ reflection. Instead, she must develop her principles by grasping the practical contradictions within the form of life she seeks to criticize.<sup>20</sup>

The suppressed premise here is that critique, one way or another, *must* rely on principles: that ‘[n]ormative social criticism *by definition* appeals to some norm or standard’.<sup>21</sup> This assumption looks intuitive. After all, the alternative to such standards would seem to be, as Gordon puts it, relying on the ‘*mere feeling* that something is wrong’.<sup>22</sup>

I will challenge the idea normativity requires standards in the next section. First, however, I want to point to some problems that arise for critical theory which relies on immanent principles and should, at the very least, make it worthwhile to explore alternatives. There are, first of all, a number of existing critiques of immanent critique which assume that it relies on immanent principles. From a decolonial perspective, for example, Radhakrishnan has argued ‘that immanent critique, in recommending that we turn to the criteria or potentials that already exist within social institutions, risks naturalizing certain exclusions in critical praxis’.<sup>23</sup> Such problems do not arise if the immanent source of normativity can be decoupled from existing institutions and principles as I shall propose. Furthermore, Rachel Fraser has recently raised additional serious challenges, some of which will come up later in my discussion.<sup>24</sup> For now, I want

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<sup>20</sup> Fraser, ‘The Limits of Immanent Critique’, 105.

<sup>21</sup> Kauppinen, ‘Reason, Recognition, and Internal Critique’, 479. Emphasis mine.

<sup>22</sup> Gordon, *A Precarious Happiness*, xvii. Emphasis mine.

<sup>23</sup> Radhakrishnan, ‘Critique as Coloniality’, 4.

<sup>24</sup> Fraser, ‘The Limits of Immanent Critique’.

to focus on one specific problem: namely, that the yardstick approach struggles to give an answer to the challenge of self-reflexivity described above.

The idea is that, while existing norms serve to justify the existing order, they also carry a *normative surplus* which can be turned against the very order of which it is a product.<sup>25</sup> To give an example, the functioning of capitalism relies on a notion of freedom: to freely exchange goods, freely sell one's labour power, etc. However, at the same time, capitalism makes workers unfree by compelling them to sell their labour power to the highest bidder and thereby live an alienated existence.<sup>26</sup> The liberal notion of freedom emerged to justify capitalism, yet it may itself carry us beyond capitalism once properly interpreted. I do not want to reject this picture of social change as much as point out its explanatory deficit.

The issue is that principles, as Wittgenstein has taught us, do not interpret themselves. This is, of course, the very source of the normative surplus: the existing order can never fully 'pin down' the principles it requires to justify itself in a way that would prevent them from being turned against it. But the claim cuts both ways. There is no guarantee either that the principle will ever be interpreted in a way that challenges the existing order. It is tempting to simply stop here and declare ourselves satisfied with having pointed out the ever-present *possibility* of social change. This is, arguably, the route followed by some post-Marxists and radical democrats who, often drawing on Wittgenstein, focus on theorizing the ontological openness of the social world and the concomitant potential for radical and unpredictable disruption.<sup>27</sup> However, while the 'radical indeterminacy'<sup>28</sup> of the social order may be a *precondition* for social change, this alone tells us nothing about the real sociological dynamics of change and the concretely existing obstacles to and possibilities for emancipation.<sup>29</sup> And here the problem of self-reflexivity returns: if society can produce subjects who believe in hegemonic principles, it surely can also produce subjects who accept hegemonic interpretations of ontologically indeterminate principles. It is still left to explain how, when, and why it becomes possible for social agents to exploit the inherent indeterminacy of the social and subvert the existing order.

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<sup>25</sup> Boltanski et al., 'Sociology of Critique or Critical Theory?', 576; Honneth, *The I in the We*, 171.

<sup>26</sup> Cohen, 'Freedom and Money'.

<sup>27</sup> Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*; Zerilli, "'The Machine as Symbol'"; Rancière, *Disagreement*.

<sup>28</sup> Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, 147.

<sup>29</sup> McNay, *The Misguided Search for the Political*.

Any theory that looks towards norms as the source of social change, faces the following problem. Norms must either be seen as determinate or indeterminate. If they are determinate, and produced by an unjust society, the immanent critic will not be able to explain how they can carry us beyond the current social order. If they are indeterminate, however, we have rescued the possibility of transcending the present order, but their indeterminacy in no way guarantees that the direction of change is progressive, and social change becomes simply a struggle for hegemony.<sup>30</sup>

The way out of this quagmire, then, I will suggest, is to look for the grounds of critique outside of the realm of norms. We need to recognize that normative surplus, in itself, does not lead to critique, and critique does not come from disembodied minds but from materially situated human beings. A more fruitful conception of immanent critique needs to start not from the surplus or indeterminacy of normative principles, but from the experience of these embodied subjects.

## 2. Crypto-normativity and the normativity of emotions

A first objection often raised against any critique that does not rely on normative principles is that it is ‘crypto-normative’.<sup>31</sup> The premise of this objection is that behind every critique, ‘there is an implicit theory of justice, some conception of what conditions would have to be met before the institutions of a society could be deemed just’.<sup>32</sup> As such, the question is not whether we rely on principles or not, but only whether we explicitly avow said principles or not. The problem with this line of reasoning is that it relies on a mistaken view of the normativity of critique—or so I shall argue. On my view, normativity simply inheres in our emotional reactions to the world—a position that is quite familiar in the metaethics literature and known as moral sentimentalism or Humeanism.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.

<sup>31</sup> Habermas, *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 282–86; Fraser, ‘Foucault on Modern Power’; Fraser and Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition?*, 201.

<sup>32</sup> Wright, ‘Envisioning Real Utopias’, 12.

<sup>33</sup> Frazer, ‘Moral Sentimentalism’; Slote, *Moral Sentimentalism*; Kauppinen, ‘Moral Sentimentalism’; D’Arms, ‘Two Arguments for Sentimentalism’; Manne, ‘Locating Morality’.

To do social critique surely involves making normative judgments or claims.<sup>34</sup> What is a normative claim? At its simplest it is a claim that gives us reason to do or believe something.<sup>35</sup> Even Freyenhagen, an ardent defender of negativism, believes that '[t]o make normative claims is to invoke standards of judgement, and these standards are (part of) the account we give of the reasons we have'.<sup>36</sup> Yet, this is, *prima facie*, a rather implausible claim. We are very often motivated to do all kinds of things for reasons which cannot be characterized as 'standards'. I eat *because I am hungry*—not because I am hungry and, additionally, am committed to a normative standard that one should eat whenever one is hungry.<sup>37</sup> Our desires *do* seem to give us direct reasons to do something. But the question, of course, remains of whether these are the appropriate kinds of reasons to underwrite social critique.

The worry is that normative claims without principles may lack normative and practical authority.<sup>38</sup> I may well make the decision to eat without appealing to any principles, but social critique is not just about my own decisions. Crucially, it aims to convince its addressees that the social world is, in fact, bad and that they ought to contribute to social change. The thought seems to be that only critique which relies on sound normative standards will have the relevant normative authority. This is an intuitive idea, but it raises deep epistemological problems. If the authority of critique derives from normative

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<sup>34</sup> I take this to include a very wide variety of approaches, some of which have—mistakenly, in my view—been characterized as 'non-normative'. Butler, elaborating a Foucauldian notion of critique, warns against 'the rush to "judgment" as the exemplary act of critique'. But this is because they operate with a restricted notion of judgment as the 'subsum[ption of] a particular under an already constituted category'. Butler's account is avowedly normative: critique is about 'objecting to that imposition of power, to its costs, to the way in which it is administered'. On my view, an objection is a normative judgment—but for those who associate 'judgment' strictly with what Kant called 'determinant judgment', perhaps 'normative *claim*' will be a more palatable term. Butler, 'What Is Critique?'

<sup>35</sup> Compare Freyenhagen: 'By 'normative' I mean to denote those considerations that provide us with reasons – not just reasons to act (such as a moral obligation to help others in need, or a prudential consideration to stop smoking now in order to live longer and avoid future health problems), but also reasons to believe (such as the presence of a trace in the cloud chamber pointing to the existence of a sub-atomic particle) or reasons to admire (such as the fine workmanship of a craftsmen or the beauty of a painting).' Freyenhagen, *Adorno's Practical Philosophy*, 7.

<sup>36</sup> Freyenhagen, *Adorno's Practical Philosophy*, 7.

<sup>37</sup> This is a version of Bernard Williams' famous 'one thought too many' argument. See Williams, *Moral Luck*, 18.

<sup>38</sup> Fraser, 'The Limits of Immanent Critique', 97–98.

standards, we need to say why some standards (and not others) confer this authority and how we can come to know the correct standards.

Broadly speaking, there are two ways of arriving at normative principles: either we find them already in existence or we construct new ones. The first way can take very different forms from a theological ethics where we find the relevant principles through interpretation of scripture to internal or immanent critique where we identify relevant norms in our social practices. But, either way, deciding to adopt a given principle—and deciding on its correct interpretation—is always in itself a normative judgment which cannot be guided by said principle. Rachel Fraser makes this argument against versions of immanent critique which proceed from norms internal to social practices: ‘One’s acceptance of a norm gives one a (normative) reason to act in accordance with it only if one has (normative) reason to accept the norm. [...] The question becomes: whence the authority of these reasons?’<sup>39</sup> In order to explain the normative authority of our reasons to adopt principles, we need to be able to make authoritative normative judgments that *do not* rely on principles—otherwise we end up in an infinite regress.<sup>40</sup>

The other option, probably the standard in contemporary political philosophy, is a constructivist approach where we generalize across our intuitions about various cases in order to arrive at a ‘reflective equilibrium’.<sup>41</sup> This method also presupposes that it is possible to make normative judgments without relying on principles, because otherwise we would have no initial intuitions on which we could base these principles. If the initial intuitions were entirely arbitrary and subjective, any normative principle deduced from them would be equally lacking in normative authority. In any case, then, the claim that making normative judgments necessarily presupposes a normative principle can be dismissed as incoherent.

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<sup>39</sup> Fraser, ‘The Limits of Immanent Critique’, 115.

<sup>40</sup> Vogelmann makes what is essentially the same point in a different way: he argues that if critique consists in measuring an object against a standard, then those standards themselves would seem not to be possible objects of critique. If it is to be possible to criticize the standards we employ, then we need to admit the possibility of a kind of critique that does not itself consist in applying a standard to an object. Vogelmann, ‘Measuring, Disrupting, Emancipating’, 105.

<sup>41</sup> Rawls, *Justice as Fairness*, 29–32; Daniels, ‘Reflective Equilibrium’; see also McDermott, ‘Analytical Political Philosophy’.

Normative principles, once we are committed to them, *do* provide one source of normativity. But this normativity is neither necessary nor sufficient to ground critique. It is not *sufficient* because, as we have seen, we need normative reasons to decide which principles to adopt. And it is not *necessary* because, if it is possible to make normatively authoritative judgments in the absence of such standards, then it is also possible to do critique in their absence. Some might think that this argument is too quick: we might be able to judge what is good or bad in the absence of a yardstick, but social critique is special because we are making claims on *society* to remedy the identified ills. For this, some might say, we clearly need standards that distinguish between merely personal problems and problems we can justifiably burden society with. Or to put it another way: not all suffering leads to legitimate social criticisms (some unhappiness is surely part of life even in a just world), so do we not need a standard to determine which instances of suffering society ought to remedy? The problem is, again, that any standard we would employ to distinguish between the personal and the political would itself need to be open to critique; as the history of queer and feminist activism shows, social critique is often about challenging just this boundary. The fact that the very boundary between the private and the political is a key political question means that we should not insist that the type of normativity involved in social critique is categorically different from the normativity of everyday problem solving.

But what, if not normative principles, is the source of critique's normativity? My answer, *emotions*, will not be surprising to those versed in the metaethics literature. So-called desire-based or Humean theories of normativity hold that 'the existence of any reason for action is explained by the existence of some suitable desire'.<sup>42</sup> This is, to be sure, a controversial position.<sup>43</sup> I cannot here provide a full defence of it, but my aim is simply to outline how a certain type of desire, namely the desire involved in negative emotions, can plausibly constitute the source of normativity that we need for social critique.

Kate Manne has recently argued that the source of moral claims is what she terms 'bodily imperatives'. These are states of pain in which 'the body rebels and recoils'<sup>44</sup>—they

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<sup>42</sup> Manne, 'Democratizing Humeanism', 1.

<sup>43</sup> For criticisms, see Parfit, *On What Matters*, chap. 3; Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, 41–49.

<sup>44</sup> Manne, 'Locating Morality', 7.

induce what she calls a “make it stop” state of body and mind’.<sup>45</sup> To be in such a state is to issue an imperative (whether or not one can or does formulate this in linguistic form) and these imperatives are, on Manne’s view, moral claims. The moral reason I have not to kick a dog simply is that this will put the dog in a state of intense pain. These bodily imperatives constitute moral claims on any relevantly placed agent. Interestingly, Manne explains that, just like emotions on my account, bodily imperatives are both subjective *and* objective:

while these moral imperatives could hardly be more dependent on desires (in the broad or formal sense that encompasses bodily imperatives, recall), they will be independent of the desires of the agent on whom the claim is made. It will not be ‘up to us’ what morality asks of us as agents. Nor will it generally be up to us as subjects which core moral claims extend from us to others. For bodily imperatives involve movements of the will that are themselves involuntary.<sup>46</sup>

Just like Manne, I am interested in embodied states that issue a negative demand, but my category of negative emotions is broader than the category of bodily imperatives. Manne is interested in ‘non-negotiable’ moral claims, whereas social critique goes beyond the realm of the ‘moral’. Negative emotions involve what I call problem-consciousness, or what Iris Marion Young calls a ‘desiring negation’<sup>47</sup>: a desire for things to be different from what they are. Anger, depression, and other negative emotions, even when not rising to the level of a bodily imperative, are states of not feeling at home in the world; a consciousness that something is wrong which exerts a pressure to resolve the contradiction between subject and world. This pressure is the source of normativity. Call this view *negativist Humeanism*.

The advantage of sourcing normativity in a desiring *negation* is that we avoid the common problem that many of our positive desires are misguided.<sup>48</sup> We would not want to say that just *any* desire provides good reasons to critique society. The desire to dominate others, for instance, does not. But, say, the kind of anger that arises when men’s desires for

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<sup>45</sup> Manne, ‘Locating Morality’, 8.

<sup>46</sup> Manne, ‘Locating Morality’, 14.

<sup>47</sup> Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 6.

<sup>48</sup> Parfit, *On What Matters*, chap. 3.

dominating women are frustrated *does* reveal an objective social problem: namely that patriarchal society has created subjects with these desires. As Freyenhagen writes, ‘pain and badness more generally give us even here a reason for action, although not necessarily a reason to satisfy the frustrated desire (but, say, a reason to change the society that brings about desires such as these; or to undergo therapy)’.<sup>49</sup> Hence, my *negativist* Humeanism: the source of the normativity of critique is not the given content of anyone’s desires but rather the negative experience of frustrated desire.

Negative Humeanism is a version of what Freyenhagen terms metaethical negativism: the view that ‘we can account for normativity even in the absence of knowing the good’.<sup>50</sup> If normativity follows directly from embodied states of suffering, then no knowledge or positive principle of what is good or right is needed to account for normative claims. It is different from Freyenhagen’s own negativism, however, because, as we saw above, he endorses the assumption that critique must rely on normative standards. That endorsement forces him into a rather contorted defence of negativism. He argues that all we need for critique is a ‘minimal’ standard of the most basic requirements for human flourishing. But apart from the fact that this minimalism might be objectionably unambitious, it raises the question of what, exactly, is so negativist about a positive, but minimal, standard of human flourishing. Furthermore, if critique does rely on standards, then it becomes hard to explain why we need to limit ourselves to minimalist ones. To justify this restriction, Freyenhagen needs recourse to the thesis of epistemic negativism: the idea that we do not have epistemic access to anything about the Good Life beyond this minimal standard. This epistemic negativism has been the target of the most persuasive critiques of the negativist approach.<sup>51</sup> Defending metaethical negativism on the basis of a Humean approach to normativity requires no commitment to epistemic negativism, and therefore escapes most of the critiques levelled at negativism to date.

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<sup>49</sup> Freyenhagen, *Adorno’s Practical Philosophy*, 212. Note that Freyenhagen here seems to contradict his claim, quoted above, that normative reasons depend on normative standards. In this case, he seems to say that pain *in itself* gives us a reason for action.

<sup>50</sup> Freyenhagen, *Adorno’s Practical Philosophy*, 10.

<sup>51</sup> Hemmerich, ‘Against Negativism’; Gordon, *A Precarious Happiness*. Freyenhagen also points out that Gordon’s critique mainly targets *epistemic* negativism and largely leaves out discussion of metaethical negativism. Freyenhagen, ‘Misinterpreting Negativism’, 2.

The crypto-normativity objection, then, assumes an implausible meta-normative theory that I do not share. Accusations of crypto-normativity, at the very least, cannot assume without argument that any normative claim relies on an implicit standard. Without giving such an argument, they are, one might say, guilty of crypto-meta-normativity. This being said, I am well aware that Humeanism faces many objections of their own,<sup>52</sup> and what I have said so far does not amount to a full defence of desire-based theories of normativity. The above sketch, though, should suffice to show that it is perfectly possible to give a coherent account of the normative sources of critique without appealing to standards or principles. The aim of this chapter is not to develop a fully-fledged metaethical theory, but rather to develop a convincing materialist theory of critique. I shall therefore not engage further in debates within metaethics but turn instead to the kinds of objections to supposedly subjectivist approaches to critique that we find in the Critical Theory literature.

### 3. Subjectivism and the objectivity of emotions

When Gordon dismisses the idea that we can ground critique in the ‘mere feeling that something is wrong’,<sup>53</sup> he is relying on the intuition that our feelings are too subjective and arbitrary to be reliable guides. Nancy Fraser, too, argued, in her debate with Honneth, that ‘pre-political’ experiences of suffering cannot constitute a ‘normatively reliable’ foundation for critique, since we will need some principled way of distinguishing ‘what really *merits* the title of injustice’ from ‘what is merely *experienced* as injustice’.<sup>54</sup> This is the subjectivism objection to an emotion-based theory of critique.

Fraser’s objection is, I believe, a fair point against Honneth’s recognition-theoretic approach. As we saw in chapter 1, Honneth understands emotions (at least those relevant for critique) in terms of violated normative expectations. This puts him in line with many contemporary philosophers of emotion who see anger, in particular, as a reaction to moral wrongs. But if emotions just are the apprehension of a normative violation, then it *does* seem like we need to ask whether that apprehension is accurate or ‘merely *experienced* as

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<sup>52</sup> E.g., Parfit, *On What Matters*, chap. 3; Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, 41–49.

<sup>53</sup> Gordon, *A Precarious Happiness*, xvii.

<sup>54</sup> Fraser and Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition?*, 205. Emphasis original.

injustice'. Indeed, Honneth himself later admitted that Fraser's criticisms had made him realize 'that the attempt to locate the normative standards of critique in the experiences of misrecognition involves the risk of regarding all expectations as justified'.<sup>55</sup> And this, in fact, prompted him to gradually subordinate his negativism to the idea of normative surplus of institutionalized orders of recognition.<sup>56</sup> This development of his thought exemplifies the shortcomings of cognitivist models of emotion: if they are understood in terms of images, as representations of the world, then they are themselves in need of justification.<sup>57</sup> This is why much of the contemporary literature on political emotions and affective injustice takes the easy way out and simply limits its concern to emotions which are, *ex hypothesi*, 'apt' or 'fitting'<sup>58</sup>—thereby deferring judgment to some independent standard of justice which is usually not provided.<sup>59</sup>

This is why, in my account of negative emotions, I have stressed their somatic and objective aspects. Here, I have followed the spirit of Adorno's claims that suffering 'is the weight of objective realities bearing down on the individual',<sup>60</sup> 'the last epistemological quiver of the somatic element'.<sup>61</sup> For him, it is *physical* suffering and pain that are 'the moving forces' of critique.<sup>62</sup> However, as I also explained in chapter 1, we have to be careful not to fall into a naïve naturalism that treats physical pain as a self-evident reference point for critique (as Adorno occasionally seems to do). We do not have access to any purely physical, unmediated experience of pain. Instead, I have developed an account of emotions as embodied, but always socially and conceptually mediated, experiences.

Thus, instead of evaluative judgments or attitudes, I conceive of negative emotions as embodied experiences of having one's practical aims in the world frustrated; as a kind of

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<sup>55</sup> Boltanski et al., 'Sociology of Critique or Critical Theory?', 573.

<sup>56</sup> Boltanski et al., 'Sociology of Critique or Critical Theory?', 573–74; McNay, 'Historicizing Recognition', 90.

<sup>57</sup> Hartmann terms this view the 'epistemological model': the 'idea that the standards of appropriateness and inappropriateness are met (or not) when the emotion in question somehow fits the world as it (really) is'. Hartmann, 'A Comedy We Believe In', 146.

<sup>58</sup> Srinivasan, 'The Aptness of Anger'.

<sup>59</sup> Some authors *do* provide an explicit standard, though. E.g., Alison Jaggar: 'emotions are appropriate if they are characteristic of a society in which all humans (and perhaps some non-human life too) thrive, or if they are conducive to establishing such a society.' Jaggar, 'Love and Knowledge'.

<sup>60</sup> Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, 190.

<sup>61</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 203.

<sup>62</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 202.

*problem-consciousness*. This approach is meant to avoid the subjectivism of Honneth and cognitivist theories of emotion, while also staying clear of the dangers of ‘naïve naturalism’, by walking a middle road—or, more precisely, by overcoming the dichotomy between subjectivity and objectivity.

To see exactly how, it is worth dwelling on what exactly it means to perceive the world as ‘problematic’. As Rahel Jaeggi points out, problems are ‘at once given and made’<sup>63</sup>—that is, both objective and subjective:

[O]n the one hand, a problem first becomes a problem through interpretation but, on the other hand, it cannot be constructed out of nothing either. Rather, it is made out of what is there independently of our influence and makes itself felt as a disruption.<sup>64</sup>

That is to say, the material reality we face constrains our interpretation of the world: negative emotions register real, material obstacles to action and are not simply completely subjective judgments about the world.

However, it is not quite enough to say that there is always something real ‘out there’ which constitutes the raw material for our interpretation of the world. In fact, in Jaeggi’s conception of problems, the objective and the subjective moment sit together somewhat uneasily in a picture that might be described as dualist: there is the real world out there ‘independently of our influence’, and then there is the world as it exists *for us* only through our interpretation—and somehow the objective world has a way of ‘making itself felt’ subjectively. Instead of merely pointing to how the subjective is constrained by the objective, we need to start by questioning that division itself.

This is where the concept of affordances from ecological psychology plays a crucial role. Affordance is precisely a concept that, according to its originator James Gibson, ‘cuts across the dichotomy of subjective–objective and helps us to understand its inadequacy’.<sup>65</sup> This is not just because an affordance combines subjective and objective elements, but because it describes what Fuchs calls a ‘circular’ relationship between a subject and its environment: while ‘the living being [subjectively] makes sense of the environment as

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<sup>63</sup> Jaeggi, *Critique of Forms of Life*, 140.

<sup>64</sup> Jaeggi, *Critique of Forms of Life*, 143.

<sup>65</sup> Gibson, *The Ecological Approach*, 121.

affording certain possibilities of action’, this environment, in turn, ‘objectively offers precisely these possibilities of interaction, [and through] the course of a concrete action, these affordances and their sensory flow continually define the body’s further sense-making activity’.<sup>66</sup> As such, affordances are ‘objective relational properties’.<sup>67</sup> They describe, objectively, a relationship between the subject and its environment but this relationship is both shaped by and shapes the subject’s subjective experience of its surroundings.

By extension, we can describe emotions too as *objective relational properties*. Negative emotions show us, objectively, that a subject’s relationship to the world has become problematic. My perception of the world as problematic depends on my physical body and its location in a physical environment but clearly not in any unmediated way: as Merleau-Ponty puts it, sensations and images ‘never make their appearance anywhere other than within a horizon of meaning’.<sup>68</sup> But neither is my body simply one of the objects of my perception and interpretation. It is not that I perceive an obstacle, and then perceive my body in order to determine what possibilities for action the latter embodies in relation to that obstacle. It is rather that my perception of the obstacle—along with the very concept of what constitutes an obstacle—is already shaped by my body.<sup>69</sup> What motivates critique then is not a mere physical pang of pain. Even if we had unmediated access to physical pain, it would motivate nothing if it were not already meaningful to us. Instead, the impetus for critique is an embodied being’s experience of its relationship to the world becoming problematic.

This view chimes well with the materialist view that our subjectivity is shaped by the society we live in. Not only the physical but also the social environment shapes the affordances available to us. This is apparent, for example, in the way different affordances become available to people who are socialized differently. For instance, faced with the same frustrating social situation, men are more likely than women to see a possibility for aggression as they, to a larger extent than women, are socialized to see aggression as a

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<sup>66</sup> Fuchs, ‘The Circularity of the Embodied Mind’, 5.

<sup>67</sup> Fuchs, ‘The Circularity of the Embodied Mind’, 5; Chemero, ‘An Outline of a Theory of Affordances’.

<sup>68</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 18.

<sup>69</sup> Again, we can find this insight in Merleau-Ponty: ‘far from my body’s being for me no more than a fragment of space, there would be no space at all for me if I had no body’. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 117.

viable solution to problems. Thus, the question of whether one sees a given social frustration as an occasion for aggression is clearly a subjective question in that it depends on the subject in question; but it is also an objective question of this subject's relation to their (social) environment.

If we understand negative emotions as the perception of the loss of our normal possibilities for action, then we can see how they constitute an objective anchor for critique. It is not that they give us access to an unmediated substratum of physical suffering, rather they are *objective relational properties* describing a relationship between a subject and its social world. Thus, it avoids the pre-dialectical dualism that occasionally dogged Adorno, despite his efforts to circumvent it (see chapter 1, section 1). At the same time, by maintaining an objective and materialist element, it also solves Honneth's problem that grounding critique in experiences of suffering 'involves the risk of regarding all expectations as justified'.<sup>70</sup> The experience of negative emotion always reveals what is objectively a problem: namely a problematic *relation* between the subject and their social world.

While negative emotions reveal a mismatch between the subject's practical expectations and the structures of the world, this does *not* mean that any and all normative expectations that become disappointed are justified. Some disappointments are clearly a necessary part of human life even in an ideal society: the loss of a beloved friend or partner, for instance, means that one's habitual expectations from the world will, at least for a while, be tragically out of tune with reality. Equally, the mismatch could be the result of unreasonable expectations just as well as an unreasonable social world: those who have come to expect subservience from others will usually react with fury to even small challenges to their power. Nancy Fraser, here, would likely still insist that this approach gives us no way of distinguishing 'what really *merits* the title of injustice' from 'what is merely *experienced* as injustice'.<sup>71</sup> But this is only a problem if we assume that critical theory is in the business of measuring everything against a given standard of justice in the way analytic political philosophy generally proceeds. Yet, what characterizes Critical

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<sup>70</sup> Boltanski et al., 'Sociology of Critique or Critical Theory?', 573.

<sup>71</sup> Fraser and Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition?*, 205. Emphasis original.

Theory is precisely a broader notion of critique that does not start from a theory of justice, but from what are often called ‘social pathologies’,<sup>72</sup> or, more simply ‘social problems’.<sup>73</sup>

Once we see social problems, and not deviations from a fixed norm of justice, as critique’s starting point, Fraser’s worry disappears. On the one hand, there is the obvious point that people’s expectations of unfair privileges in themselves constitute social problems. A materialist perspective reminds us that it is not enough, for example, to convince men and whites that patriarchy and racism are unjust, but that we also need to dismantle the material structures that perpetuate those systems of injustice including the way men and whites are socialized to have certain embodied expectations from the world around them.<sup>74</sup> On the other hand, it is also always possible even for dominant subjects to come to the insight that the real obstacle to their own happiness is actually the very structure which allows them to subordinate others. Men who get angry, disappointed or sad when their desire for domination meets with resistance may start questioning that very desire and realize that chasing a patriarchal fantasy of self-sufficiency and domination is not conducive to a good life. Of course, as mentioned, some forms of unhappiness do not constitute a political problem at all—at least if we assume, as I would, that some death, loss, and heartbreak are inevitably part of human life. But as discussed in the previous section, this does not mean that we need criteria or standards to distinguish between ‘social’ and merely ‘personal’ suffering. If we think of experiences of dissatisfaction as involving a problem-consciousness putting normative pressure on us to deal with the problem, then the question of which emotional experiences lead to valid social critique is determined by the nature of the problem: if there are viable social reforms that will do away with the sources of our misery, then critique is appropriate; if not, then we must make do as best we can in a world that sometimes breaks our hearts. This, however, is not something that can be established a priori by any principle; it is determined, in the last instance, only in practice.

Taking a materialist approach to emotions thus means that, though we never have access to any *uninterpreted* raw material, we can decouple feelings from any *given*

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<sup>72</sup> Freyenhagen, ‘Critical Theory and Social Pathology’; Honneth, *Pathologies of Reason*, chap. 2.

<sup>73</sup> Merton, ‘Introduction’; Spector and Kitsuse, *Constructing Social Problems*.

<sup>74</sup> Bufkin, ‘Racism, Epistemic Injustice, and Ideology Critique’; Haslanger, ‘Racism, Ideology, and Social Movements’.

interpretation through *re*interpretation. Thus, we can see feelings as an objective starting point for critique without thereby regarding any and all claims they give rise to as valid. The question of the validity of any given claim is one that will depend on the validity of the empirical analysis it relies on and the plausibility of the solutions it proposes (I will get back to this); first, however, we need to place the experience of suffering within a social theory that explains how and why this problem-consciousness can arise.

#### 4. Externalism and the immanence of emotions

It is worth asking in what sense critique rooted in negative emotions remains a species of *immanent* critique.<sup>75</sup> Some forms of affect theory and feminism arguably seek in feelings or in the body an extra-social reference point for critique, ‘a source “outside” of ideology to ground critique’.<sup>76</sup> Adorno could also be accused of this mistake in certain moments, when he speaks of suffering as existing in some ‘somatic, unmeaningful stratum of life’ untouched by ideological distortions.<sup>77</sup> This is an untenable strategy because, as theorists like Foucault, Bourdieu, and Judith Butler have taught us, and as Sally Haslanger summarizes it, ‘ideology is not simply a matter of beliefs, but acts on and trains our bodies, our perception, our desires, [and] our emotions’.<sup>78</sup> What I call the externalism objection, then, says that grounding critique in affect either unduly reifies the body as an extra-social source of resistance, or fails to respond to the challenge of self-reflexivity. Since our embodied experience too is shaped by ideology, we need an explanation of how this experience can be *immanent* yet ground a critique that transcends the given.

My answer to this objection lies in the conception of negative emotions as social contradictions. Precisely because suffering animates critique, domination functions most seamlessly where it denies people the experience of suffering by perfectly adjusting them to the world they inhabit. If we lived in a world of such total domination, then critique would not be possible. This is captured in Frankfurt School theorists’ worries about

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<sup>75</sup> Both Freyenhagen and Gordon assume that negativism is an *alternative* to immanent critique, rather than a species of it. I disagree. Freyenhagen, *Adorno’s Practical Philosophy*, 15; Gordon, *A Precarious Happiness*, 26.

<sup>76</sup> Haslanger, ‘Disciplined Bodies and Ideology Critique’, 7; see also Mazzarella, ‘Affect’.

<sup>77</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 365.

<sup>78</sup> Haslanger, ‘Disciplined Bodies and Ideology Critique’, 5. See also Fraser and Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition?*, 204–5.

‘repressive satisfaction’ and ‘prescribed happiness’,<sup>79</sup> and as Adorno put it with characteristic hyperbole, it ‘is part of the mechanism of domination to forbid recognition of the suffering it produces, and there is a straight line of development between the gospel of happiness and the construction of camps of extermination’.<sup>80</sup> At this point, however, critical theorists usually emphasize that the social world is *not* an absolutely seamless whole, but rather is ridden with contradictions. Domination is never total, because the social world is complex and always contains contradictory tendencies which leave open the possibility for transformation.

The concept of contradiction at work here needs to be unpacked, though. Often this concept too has been interpreted by critical theorists in an overly cognitivist way. For Gordon, for instance, ‘to say that society contains contradictions is just to say that some of its norms stand in conflict with others’.<sup>81</sup> Adorno, in his turn, often takes contradiction to mean the nonidentity of concept and object, ‘the fact that the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived’,<sup>82</sup> and makes this inevitable inadequacy of conceptual thought the basis of the possibility of critique (in a way that is reminiscent of the Wittgensteinian radical democrats who also locate the openness of the social in the impossibility of conceptual closure). My suggestion is that we instead look towards a different—more materialist—concept of social contradiction which can be found in Marxist social reproduction theory.

As explained in the second chapter, we can think of negative emotions as social contradictions. The paradigmatic contradiction, here, under capitalism, is that between the need to reproduce labour power, i.e., workers, and capitalism’s constant tendency to undermine that reproduction. In the short term, it is in the interest of capital to maximally exploit workers to the point of exhaustion and even death—‘sap[ping] the vital energy of the people at the root’.<sup>83</sup> But in the long term, capital needs workers not just to survive but also to stay mentally and physically healthy enough to work productively as well as to raise children who will become future workers. One of the ways these contradictory needs are

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<sup>79</sup> Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 9; Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 62.

<sup>80</sup> Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 63.

<sup>81</sup> Gordon, *A Precarious Happiness*, 25.

<sup>82</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 5.

<sup>83</sup> Marx, *Capital* (Vol. 1), 273.

managed under capitalism is by assigning the necessary social-reproductive labour to women as unpaid work. ‘Society assigns to women the mission of unknowingly creating human beings who will “feel at home” in a reified world’, as Angela Davis puts it.<sup>84</sup> Yet, ‘capitalism’s orientation to unlimited accumulation tends to destabilize the[se] very processes of social reproduction’ by, for example, devaluing care work or drawing women into the labour market, leading to constant ‘care deficits’.<sup>85</sup> On this understanding, contradictions do not exist mainly on the level of norms. While one can always identify clashing norms (like the simultaneous valuation and devaluation of femininity<sup>86</sup>), the contradiction plays out, first and foremost, on the level of the body whose ‘vital energies’ are not reproduced.

A key aspect of social reproduction is what Alva Gotby has recently termed ‘emotional reproduction’.<sup>87</sup> For any social order to remain stable, it needs to produce subjects who ‘feel at home’ in it, that is, subjects whose embodied expectations align with the affordances of their social world. Negative emotions are precisely the failure of this process of emotional reproduction. The angry or depressed subject does not feel at home; they harbour, in whatever submerged form, the consciousness of their own alienation. This inchoate consciousness, I have argued, can always, potentially, be turned into explicit political consciousness. This is also a point made by Marxist standpoint epistemologists. ‘Just as the proletarian standpoint emerges out of the contradiction between appearance and essence in capitalism’, Nancy Hartsock explains, so the feminist standpoint emerges from the contradictory nature of women’s experiences.<sup>88</sup> This standpoint, she continues, ‘embodies a distress which requires a solution’.<sup>89</sup> My account of emotions has clarified the exact mechanism by which such a standpoint arises from embodied experiences of social contradictions.

In this way, then, we can explain why capitalism can never eliminate the immanent potentials for its own critique and overcoming. Not because of the constitutive instability

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<sup>84</sup> Davis, ‘Women and Capitalism’, 170.

<sup>85</sup> Fraser, ‘Crisis of Care?’

<sup>86</sup> Davis, ‘Women and Capitalism’.

<sup>87</sup> Gotby, *They Call It Love*.

<sup>88</sup> Hartsock, ‘The Feminist Standpoint’, 174.

<sup>89</sup> Hartsock, ‘The Feminist Standpoint’, 174.

of social norms or the nonidentity of concept and object, but because of the necessary social-reproductive contradictions which mean that its subjects never feel fully at home.

It is worth briefly addressing an argument made by both Rahel Jaeggi and Rachel Fraser to the effect that contradictoriness itself cannot ground critique. This is because a ‘functional critique’ of capitalism—criticism of capitalism on the basis of its tendency to undermine its own functioning—always covertly relies on some normative judgments about what it would mean for capitalism to function *well*.<sup>90</sup> Dysfunction cannot serve as a ‘free-standing’ normative criterion, because functionality itself is, to use a clichéd phrase, in the eye of the beholder. I do not disagree with this argument, but, crucially, I am not positing functionality or smooth emotional reproduction as a normative *criterion* for critique. Instead, I have had recourse to the notion of contradiction here in order to explain why critique is possible—that is, to give an answer to the problem of self-reflexivity. Contradiction is a pre-condition for critique, but that does not make it into a normative standard.

To exist in the world ‘at ease’,<sup>91</sup> or, in Hegelian terms, to be reconciled with the world, is, in one sense, the *telos* of the normative impetus of negative emotions. Every instance of anger or depression presents itself as a problem to which we cannot but seek for a solution. Yet, we rightly shudder at the thought of a world in which *no* negative emotions exist. A social world entirely free of contradictions would be a world of total stasis and homogeneity. Thus, non-contradictoriness is not the yardstick of critique but the death of critique.

##### 5. Particularism and the generalizability of emotions

Even admitting all the above—that feelings are an objective and immanent source of normativity—a sceptic might still ask whether the resulting critique, in practice, amounts to more than a collection of individual complaints. The aim of social critique is, after all, a *systematic* analysis of the ills of the social world with the aim of radical transformation. Rachel Fraser worries that in basing critique not on general principles, but on particular

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<sup>90</sup> Jaeggi, ‘What (If Anything) Is Wrong with Capitalism?’, 50; Fraser, ‘The Limits of Immanent Critique’, 112.

<sup>91</sup> See Lugones, ‘Playfulness, “World”-Travelling, and Loving Perception’, 12.

judgments, we are sacrificing this systematic aspect and end up with a particularistic critique that can only condemn individual *instances* of wrong. This is the particularism objection: without general normative principles, we ‘give up on anything like a systematic social theory’.<sup>92</sup>

The assumption behind this claim is that the only way to systematically connect individual normative judgments to a general critique of society is by appealing to general normative principles—but this is not the case. We can generalize across normative judgments by relating them to a general principle; but we can equally generalize across particular judgments by saying that they all refer to a more general object or problem. Emotional experiences become politicized when people collectively start interpreting their particular, individual experiences as all connected to a shared obstacle. In fact, if we ground critique in negative social experiences rather than a theory of justice, systematic social theory becomes all the *more* important—for we can no longer judge institutions to be good or bad by comparing them to some blueprint, but only by investigating empirically whether they are part of the reason for our suffering. This investigation requires abstracting from any particular emotional reaction to generalize across different situations and across collectives who experience different emotional reactions to shared conditions.

It is worth making clear, then, that the approach I am proposing does away with abstract normative principles, but not with abstraction *tout court*.<sup>93</sup> What I have highlighted throughout the preceding chapters is that negative emotional experiences do not *automatically* give rise to emancipatory claims, but that these are political *achievements*. While emotion provides the normativity and the impetus for critique, the real work of critique is to provide sociological and political analyses of these problems and their possible solutions and thus to transform problem-consciousness into political consciousness.

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<sup>92</sup> Fraser, ‘The Limits of Immanent Critique’, 113. Fraser also claims that ‘[p]articularist critique is an alternative to immanent critique, not a version of it’. She seems to believe this because she defines immanent critique by an appeal to immanent *standards*. However, if she admits the possibility of particularist critique (as she does), then it is unclear why she would define immanent critique as necessarily relying on standards. What defines *immanent* critique is the fact that the source of normativity is immanent; not whether or not that source is a general principle.

<sup>93</sup> See also Mills, “Ideal Theory” as Ideology’, 166–68.

The transformation of a personal problem into a political problem necessarily requires going beyond a purely individual perspective. The realization that my unhappiness is not simply *mine* but in fact shared by a group of people facing the same oppressive social structures is what makes it into a political problem. As Hartsock puts it, arriving at a feminist standpoint requires ‘searching for common threads which connect the diverse experiences of [for example] women, and searching for the structural determinants of the experiences’.<sup>94</sup> Only through a process of comparing experiences, identifying ‘common threads’, and building abstract models of the structural causes of and links between such experiences can they be understood as responses to oppression. To see one’s depression about meaningless work as being *about* capitalism, or to see one’s anger at untoward sexual behaviour as *about* patriarchy, is to abstract from the particular content of one’s experiences.

The charge of particularism has often been levelled against experience-based forms of theorizing, especially in the feminist traditions of standpoint epistemology and intersectionality.<sup>95</sup> But such charges usually rely on a conflation of the latter traditions with ‘postmodernist discourse that labels as “totalizing” all systemic connections and emphasizes only the mutability and constructedness of identities and social structures’.<sup>96</sup> Far from being ‘against all forms of generalization’, as Chandra Mohanty explains, feminist standpoint theory emphasizes the need for ‘materialist analysis that link[s] everyday life and local gendered contexts and ideologies to the larger, transnational political and economic structures and ideologies of capitalism’.<sup>97</sup> To start from experience and emotion, then, is entirely compatible with abstraction and rigorous social-theoretical analysis. In fact, the very act of coming together collectively to explore ‘common threads’

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<sup>94</sup> Hartsock, ‘The Feminist Standpoint’, 174.

<sup>95</sup> Especially the latter term has become popularized and is often used (by both supporters and detractors) in ways that emphasize particularity. However, a careful reading of, for instance, Crenshaw’s seminal text on intersectionality shows that she is emphasizing how paying attention to the experiences of Black women at the intersection of racism and sexism allows for a *more* general understanding of oppressive structures by revealing the interlinkages between racism and patriarchy. Crenshaw, ‘Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex’.

<sup>96</sup> Mohanty, “‘Under Western Eyes’ Revisited”, 504.

<sup>97</sup> Mohanty, “‘Under Western Eyes’ Revisited”, 504; see also Harding, ‘Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology’.

of different experiences is already an act of abstraction—a process which Hartsock, following the Marxist tradition, aptly terms ‘science’.<sup>98</sup>

Mohanty argues that the reason for the misunderstandings is the dominance, in certain parts of the academy, of a certain kind of relativist postmodernism with which feminist theory is then confused. However, another source of confusion, I would argue, is the hegemony within analytic political theory of a strict separation between the empirical and the normative. Normative theorizing is often done in a way that is disconnected from social-theoretical analysis in the realm of thought experiments and behind ‘veils of ignorance’. If normative thought is entirely separate from analysis of the empirical world, then the only way to abstract across various normative judgments would indeed be through general principles or ideal-theoretical models. This is the only way to make sense of Rachel Fraser’s otherwise odd-sounding claim that, without general principles, we must also give up on general social theory.<sup>99</sup>

In opposition to such an approach, critical theorists stress the way normative and empirical thought is intertwined.<sup>100</sup> The question of what we should do depends on the empirical analysis of the problems that give rise to the normative pressure to change the social world. It is easy enough to look at the immense amounts of suffering in the world and see that something is wrong—we need no Theory of Justice to tell us this. But it is much harder to say exactly *what* is wrong and what would enable us to overcome this suffering. To do this we need to build what Mills calls ‘ideal-as-descriptive-models’, rather than ‘ideal-as-idealized-models’<sup>101</sup>—that is, models that help us understand the functioning of capitalism, patriarchy, racism, etc., by abstracting across different experiences and contexts. ‘Intellectual rigor’, as Horkheimer put it long ago, ‘is as important for those who view conditions from the standpoint of conscious interest as it is for those who seek to eliminate interest from their considerations’.<sup>102</sup> But at this point, we need to say more about what and whose interests and emotions critical theory can and should rely on.

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<sup>98</sup> Hartsock, ‘The Feminist Standpoint’.

<sup>99</sup> Fraser, ‘The Limits of Immanent Critique’, 113.

<sup>100</sup> McNay, ‘Contemporary Critical Theory’.

<sup>101</sup> Mills, “Ideal Theory” as Ideology’, 166–68.

<sup>102</sup> Horkheimer, *Critical Theory*, 165.

## 6. Partisanship and the emancipatory interest

One final objection I shall consider in this chapter goes as follows. Emotions are always *someone's* emotions and the desiring negation they embody is always *someone's* desire. Is not the point of normative political theory precisely to arbitrate between the potentially incompatible wishes of different actors? In other words, is critique that starts from emotions not unavoidably *partisan* in an objectionable way? The first part of the objection I concede: critique *is* partisan and indeed it cannot but be. This partisanship, however, is not objectionable but a necessary consequence of the realization that critique is always the situated activity of real human beings and cannot adopt a point of view from 'nowhere'.

In fact, for some, 'partisanship' is one of the distinguishing features of critical theory vis-a-vis traditional theory.<sup>103</sup> As Nancy Fraser writes, the difference between a critical and an uncritical theory is a political one: 'critical social theory frames its research program and its conceptual framework with an eye to the aims and activities of those oppositional social movements with which it has a partisan though not uncritical identification'.<sup>104</sup> Yet, this notion of partisanship raises a dilemma. We cannot pretend that it is a given which social movements are emancipatory. We always need to make decisions about *which* ones to align ourselves with (by 'we' I mean not just theorists but also would-be activists and any other person choosing which movements to support—recall my remarks at the start of the chapter about the scope of my use of the term 'critique'). Or, as Edward Said once put it: 'Never solidarity before criticism'.<sup>105</sup> Yet, if criticism comes *before* solidarity, then how can critique be partisan? Fraser herself posits that the claims of social movements must be tested against a 'deontological' and 'nonsectarian' theory of justice.<sup>106</sup> But it makes no sense to say that critical theory is partisan when its allegiance to specific social movements is supposedly determined by objective and 'universally binding' moral principles.<sup>107</sup> Or, in any case, such a weak notion of partisanship would no longer distinguish it from any

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<sup>103</sup> Horkheimer, *Critical Theory*; Harris, *Critical Theory and Social Pathology*, 4, 164.

<sup>104</sup> Fraser, 'What's Critical about Critical Theory?', 97.

<sup>105</sup> Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, 32.

<sup>106</sup> Fraser and Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition?*, 228–29.

<sup>107</sup> Fraser and Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition?*, 33. Löwy accuses Marcuse of much the confusion when the latter claims, in his early work, that critical theory is grounded in the standpoint of the proletariat, but then justifies this partisanship with appeal to 'self-evident', 'ahistorical' ethical principles. Löwy, 'Partisan Truth', 292–93.

‘uncritical’ normative theory which inevitably ‘takes sides’ with whichever party is, according to that theory, in the right.

Understanding critique as grounded not in normative principles but in emotional reactions clarifies in what sense critical theory must be partisan. If normativity arises only through our active engagement with the material world, then there simply is no ‘view from nowhere’.<sup>108</sup> Normative thought is always already an *interested* engagement with the world as it is. The attempt to sever the link between this thought and its somatic roots, as I argued with Adorno in chapter 1,<sup>109</sup> can only ever constitute a self-misunderstanding in the form of fetishism. This is why critical theory needs to link up with an ‘emancipatory interest’ in the absence of which ‘the demand for social progress would remain a merely moral “ought,” lacking any support in historical reality’.<sup>110</sup>

If critique is to lead to an emancipatory standpoint, then, it must satisfy two conditions: one objective and one subjective. The objective condition is that it must provide an empirically adequate analysis of the social-structural determinants of people’s suffering (as explained in the previous section). The subjective condition is that for critique to contribute to an emancipatory *standpoint*, it must provide explanations which can elucidate experiences of suffering in a way that subjectively makes sense to those who suffer and connects to their practical interest in overcoming that suffering. This is why it is crucial to connect critique to everyday negative emotional experiences caused by exploitation and oppression. If social-theoretical work does not connect to the concerns of those whose oppression it seeks to analyse, it will not receive uptake and not become socially efficacious. Marcuse, thus, could not be more wrong when he claims, in a 1936 essay, that without an ‘Archimedean point’ of objective and universal values, we have ‘no bases from which the weapon of critique can be employed’.<sup>111</sup> Theory, as Marx’s well-known dictum goes, ‘becomes a material force [only] once it seizes the masses’.<sup>112</sup> The weapon of critique cannot be wielded from nowhere — quite to the contrary, its bases must always be the engaged position of all those with a practical interest in emancipation.

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<sup>108</sup> Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*.

<sup>109</sup> See section 1 of chapter 1.

<sup>110</sup> Honneth, ‘Is There an Emancipatory Interest?’, 908.

<sup>111</sup> Marcuse cited in Löwy, ‘Partisan Truth’, 299.

<sup>112</sup> Marx, *Critique of Hegel’s ‘Philosophy of Right’*, 137.

Critical theory has no need to flee into the realm of abstract moral principles, or to hide its own interestedness behind a veil of ignorance. Critique is ‘worldly’.<sup>113</sup>

This means rejecting the comfortable fantasy that social change can come about through persuasive moral arguments that ‘appeal to society at large, without distinction of class’.<sup>114</sup> Even if there were such a thing as an abstract normativity that is universally valid, moral principles, on their own, are hardly going to motivate radical social change. Critique that wishes to have an effect on the world must appeal specifically to the working class and to all those whose social position puts them at odds with racial, patriarchal, colonial, and ableist capitalism.

This is not to say that critical theory has validity *only* for those groups who have a direct material interest in emancipation. Returning to Kate Manne’s Humean metaethics, she insists that ‘*any* subject’s bodily imperatives can make moral claims on *any* moral agent’.<sup>115</sup> This seems right. We are often moved to action by the distress of people close to us, and occasionally even by that of complete strangers. However, this happens, once again, not through abstract reasoning behind a veil of ignorance, but through taking someone else’s perspective and allowing us to be motivated by their distress. As Marx and Engels write, ‘the consciousness of the necessity of a fundamental revolution’ emanates from the proletariat, but even members of the bourgeoisie *can* achieve this consciousness ‘through the contemplation of the situation of [the working] class’.<sup>116</sup> That is, the suffering of others can make claims on us not because it violates some universally valid principle of human flourishing (as in Freyenhagen’s interpretation) but because we are capable of sharing someone else’s perspective. We are capable of partisanship beyond self-interest. But it remains the case that, since most of the time most people do what ‘they perceive to be in their own material interest, the making and accepting of ethical arguments is not very effective on its own for producing real change and for that reason is not, in and of itself, a

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<sup>113</sup> See Morefield’s account of Edward Said’s work as ‘worldly criticism’. Morefield, ‘Critique Is the World’.

<sup>114</sup> Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 47.

<sup>115</sup> Manne, ‘Locating Morality’, 3.

<sup>116</sup> Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology* (2022), 59.

priority'.<sup>117</sup> The priority of critical philosophy, as Marx once wrote it, is 'self-clarification' of the 'struggles and desires' of our time.<sup>118</sup>

As I have stressed, critique is not the preserve of philosophers but is a kind of 'self-clarification' that we all carry out whenever our embodied expectations clash with the structures of the social world and we begin to question them. It is an integral part of the activity of any social movement. When critique *is* carried out in academic spaces, it must not forget that this is its *raison d'être*: the need to make sense of and practically overcome our unhappiness with the world as it is. As Celikates writes, academic critical theory must thus always remain 'anchored in pre-theoretical experiences, oppositional forms of consciousness and theorizing, as well as really existing practices of critique and resistance'.<sup>119</sup> Normative critique, thus, is closely intertwined not just with systematic social theory, but also with political praxis. The work of the critic is to provide analyses of the causes of our dissatisfaction with the social world and to propose concrete avenues for social change. The ultimate test of such theory lies in praxis: a successful critique is one that helps us grasp the nature of the obstacles we face and thereby overcome them. As Friedrich Engels once said, 'the proof of the pudding is in the eating'<sup>120</sup>—but this does not absolve us of the need to think hard about the best possible recipe before baking.

## 7. Conclusion

When people have to provide a characterization of the project of Critical Theory, they usually appeal to some combination of the following features: it is an approach to social critique which is (1) immanent, (2) materialist, (3) interdisciplinary, and (4) committed, in a partisan way, to emancipatory aims.<sup>121</sup> The aim of this chapter has been to show that the account of negative emotions developed in this thesis amounts to a theory of critique

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<sup>117</sup> Wills, *Marx's Ethical Vision*, 38–39.

<sup>118</sup> Marx, 'Letters', 146.

<sup>119</sup> Celikates, 'Die Macht Der Kritik', 83. Translation mine.

<sup>120</sup> Engels, *Socialism*, 19.

<sup>121</sup> The following authors all list (some combination of) these features: Horkheimer, *Critical Theory*, 188–243; Benhabib, *Critique, Norm and Utopia*, 1–18; McNay, 'Contemporary Critical Theory'; Celikates, 'Critical Theory and the Unfinished Project', 206; Finlayson, 'Political, Moral, and Critical Theory'; Azmanova, *The Scandal of Reason*, 45–52; Honneth, 'Critical Theory'.

which does justice to all those features while avoiding some problems faced by existing accounts.

Particularly, I argued that versions of immanent critique which rely on identifying a normative surplus within existing norms and practices struggle to answer the challenge of self-reflexivity without abandoning their materialism. A thoroughly materialist approach to critique must also account for normativity in materialist terms, and by understanding normativity as arising from the embodied experience of subjects acting in the world, we do exactly that. It is true enough that institutionalized normative principles can be reinterpreted in emancipatory ways and turned against the social order in a revolutionary way; but the reason we have to prefer one interpretation of such principles over another is because we start from the practical problem of dissatisfaction and the need to change the world. The normativity comes from the ‘desiring negation’ of anger, depression, and other forms of ‘consciousness of the degradation of the world’. Further, unlike some versions of new materialism which can be accused of reifying the body as an extra-social source of critique and resistance, the social-reproductive understanding of emotions as the conscious experience of social contradictions remains immanent. The source of normativity is located in our embodied experience not because it harbours some pure somatic element untouched by ideology, but because it is the site of contradictions which spur on a process of practical problem-solving.

Critique, then, should not be understood on the model of measuring an object against a yardstick. The social critic is nothing like the film critic who evaluates their object and outputs one to five stars. Rather, social critique is a form of problem-solving. It draws its normative impetus from the embodied experience of dissatisfaction and cannot be disentangled from the practical process of transforming the world. Hence, social critique cannot get off the ground without reference to both emancipatory practice and an empirical understanding of the social world (i.e., partisanship and interdisciplinarity). The value of critical theoretical work is to be judged by whether it clarifies our ‘struggles and wishes’ in ways that open up paths for political practice; whether it reveals new affordances for channelling our frustrations and unhappiness in the direction of emancipation.

Let me end with a brief reflection on Marx's interesting quip that critique is 'the brain of passion'.<sup>122</sup> It suggests the familiar Platonic image of reason and passion where the intellect (the 'brain') must steer the chariot pulled by the horsepower of the passions.<sup>123</sup> But the question is how exactly to understand the role of critique as passion's brain. Plato's image of the soul as a chariot suggests a clear separation between the passions as pure force, and the charioteer as the pure intellect who must control and make use of those forces. On this image, critique is driven by passion, but the direction comes from normative principles provided by Reason. The critic, then, can acknowledge the need for emotions as 'motivational raw material' but, ultimately, they can safely withdraw to the realm of Reason where they will discover and apply the right normative principles to determine the correct direction for the chariot of critique.

Such a reading, however, would clash with Marx's materialism. It would not go well with his insistence that consciousness is 'directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men—the language of real life'.<sup>124</sup> Reason does not have a foothold outside of passion from where it can discipline it; rather it is always already the mental activity of an embodied and impassioned being. Adorno reminds us: 'All mental things are modified physical impulses'.<sup>125</sup> Critique, then, is not the rational charioteer guiding the wild passions in the right direction but itself, as modified physical impulse, a *continuation* of passion. As I have stressed, critique requires theoretical work; it is the mental moment of a practical process of problem-solving. When that intellectual work happens in academic spaces, to varying degrees removed from the real-life problems it reflects on, it is easy to forget this embeddedness of critique in 'the language of real life'. We will do well to remember that critique is not just *the brain* of passion, but, crucially, the brain *of passion*.

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<sup>122</sup> Marx, *Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right'*, 101.

<sup>123</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 28ff.

<sup>124</sup> Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology* (1998), 42.

<sup>125</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 202.

## Conclusion

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### Fighting Feelings

*Our feelings will lead us to our theory, our theory to our action.*

—Kathie Sarachild<sup>1</sup>

In the introduction, I began with a sketch of the politico-emotional circumstances under which I first formed the questions that came to guide the present work. It seems appropriate here, then, to briefly reflect on the political context in which I am currently finishing this thesis.

At the UK and German universities where I have been based during the final stages of my doctoral work, the political climate has been shaped, on the one hand, by the ongoing genocide in Palestine and reactions to it, and, on the other, by the global rise of what some term ‘late fascism’.<sup>2</sup> The plight of the Palestinian people has caused enormous grief and anger around the world, and, for many of those based at universities, the student encampments became a way to channel some of those feelings. These encampments became places for collective grieving for and remembering of the countless innocent people murdered and lives senselessly uprooted. But they also became bases for channelling some of the frustration and rage against this injustice into meaningful action. Often geographically far removed from the site of this genocide, these movements, among many other things, became places for analysing the broader structures that enabled and continue to enable this violence in order to identify meaningful proximate targets of rage. University administrations became the main objects of this anger, and much research was

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<sup>1</sup> Sarachild, ‘A Program for Feminist “Consciousness Raising”’, 78.

<sup>2</sup> Toscano, *Late Fascism*.

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done into wealthy educational institutions' links to and complicity with Israeli war crimes.<sup>3</sup> The encampments were often met with violent police repression—especially in the US and in Germany—but they also achieved significant successes with some institutions giving in to pressure and agreeing to divest from the arms industry.<sup>4</sup> In the US, of course, the level of repression has increased significantly since the inauguration of the second Trump administration with students linked to Palestine protests being literally snatched off the streets and disappeared to detention centres.<sup>5</sup> This development is part of a global rise of far-right authoritarian governments—a movement that is itself fuelled by its own feelings of rage and resentment.

As such, the role of negative emotions in politics has certainly not become any less prominent over the course of my work on what is now this thesis. Anger and frustration are rampant across the political spectrum and, while depression rates have dropped slightly after the COVID-19 pandemic, they remain significantly above pre-2020 levels in the UK.<sup>6</sup> Much, then, remains the same as it was when I first began thinking about the politics of negative emotions. But some things also feel different. While the responses from institutions and elites to social discontent around COVID and the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests were, of course, often violent, there were also significant attempts at a kind of therapeutic management aimed, one might suppose, at defanging these emotions: from the way social suffering was medicalized and individualized to the kind of symbolic recognitive responses to anti-racist protests, like when congressional Democrats decided to pose kneeling draped in kente cloth. These kinds of therapeutic responses have increasingly given way to open hostility and violence: from universities having their own students arrested for protesting to increasingly belligerent ableist rhetoric about those with

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<sup>3</sup> At my own institution, for instance, the Oxford BDS Coalition has published a detailed report on how the University of Oxford, through its partnerships and investments, 'is likely beneficially complicit in plausible acts of genocide against Palestinians, Israel's unlawful occupation, and the racial segregation and apartheid regime in the occupied Palestinian territory.' Oxford BDS Coalition, *The University of Oxford's Complicity in Israeli Crimes*, 2.

<sup>4</sup> deHahn, 'These US and Canadian Universities Have Negotiated Israel Divestment'; Mulla, 'Cambridge's Wealthiest College Votes to Divest'; Mulla, 'King's College Cambridge to Divest Millions'.

<sup>5</sup> See *Ozturk v. Trump*.

<sup>6</sup> Office for National Statistics, *Cost of Living and Depression in Adults*.

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mental ill-health as lazy benefit-seekers.<sup>7</sup> By painting leftist university students and those with mental ill-health as scapegoats, right-wing political movements pit reactionary rage against the anger and depression of others—thereby ensuring that none of these emotions actually stand a chance at destabilizing the existing order. As I shall explain in section 1 below, these two tendencies—management and reaction—constitute two ideal-typical ways in which negative emotions can be channelled in ways that are system-stabilizing. We are left with the question: is it still possible to direct all this dissatisfaction with the world in an emancipatory direction instead?

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This conclusion will recap the most important theoretical contributions of the thesis while also building on the analysis in certain respects and explicitly discussing a few themes which have, so far, only been implicitly present. The focus will be on the relation between emotions and social struggles: How should we characterize political struggles over emotions (section 1)? What role does theory play in these struggles (section 2)? How do the objective and subjective moments of struggle relate (section 3)? And, finally, what are we struggling towards (section 4)?

### 1. The miserable is political

The title of this thesis is meant to hint at a very specific way in which the miserable is political. It is not just that our feelings have a rightful place in political deliberation; nor is it merely to say that social suffering constitutes an important problem for political actors and theorists to deal with. Both claims are true, of course. But the key point of this thesis is that the miserable is political in the sense that our negative emotions—the ways they are interpreted, articulated, channelled—themselves constitute an arena of political struggle. Emotions are never simply ‘givens’. Not in the sense of constituting a kind of ‘prelapsarian knowledge’, a ready-made standpoint available to the oppressed ‘such that need for inquiry is bypassed’.<sup>8</sup> Nor in the sense of value-neutral data on the basis of which the social theorist

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<sup>7</sup> E.g., Parris, ‘Our Disability Benefits System Invites Abuse’.

<sup>8</sup> Silva, ‘The Epistemic Role of Outlaw Emotions’, 673.

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can diagnose social pathologies. Far from obvious or automatic, coming to an emancipatory articulation of one's feelings is a political achievement—an achievement of both 'science' and 'struggle'.<sup>9</sup> Conversely, the mobilization of strong affect for anti-emancipatory political movements is naturally also a political accomplishment of the right. Reactionary feelings are no more hardwired or automatic than emancipatory ones, but just as much the result of political work which can, in principle, be undone—even if, at times, this seems rather hopeless. Finally, and less obviously, the depoliticization of feelings, the interpretation of our suffering as a merely personal and not political problem, is also a political achievement of the forces of the status quo. Our feelings, not least when they *seem* to be merely personal, are always already a product of political forces.

I have been arguing that negative emotions constitute an objective problem both for the individual and for society: once they become widespread enough, they are problems which simply cannot be ignored. These problems are the expression of social contradictions; of a mismatch between individual habitus and the social structures individuals must navigate. This discordance produces a need for adjustment and, schematically speaking, such adjustment can take the form either of changing social structures or of adjusting individuals to better fit society while leaving structures intact. In the chapter on misdirected rage, however, I also identified a different strategy for protecting existing structures from the challenges arising from their own contradictions: negative emotions can be channelled into scapegoating and politics of reaction which provide outlets for anger and other strong feelings without actually addressing the problem at the root of this malaise. We can thus identify three broad 'strategies' for channelling negative emotions: I will call them 'management', 'reaction', and 'emancipation'. Let me discuss each in turn.

The strategy of 'managing' individuals' negative emotions in a way that allows for the continued reproduction of the existing social structure has often been ascribed to bourgeois psychiatry and psychology. Within Critical Theory, it is well known, for example, from Adorno's and Marcuse's critiques of psychotherapy which, in the words of the latter, 'aims at curing the individual so that he can continue to function as part of a

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<sup>9</sup> Hartsock, 'The Feminist Standpoint'.

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sick civilization'.<sup>10</sup> Or as Selma James once put it, the disciplines of psychology and psychiatry aim at 'convincing us that our "problems" are personal hang-ups and that we must adjust to a lunatic world', at 'increasingly incorporat[ing] our demands in order more efficiently to redirect our forces into safe channels under their stewardship'.<sup>11</sup> While most clearly exemplified in therapy, the strategy of emotional adjustment is by no means restricted to that setting, though. As I hinted at in chapter 1,<sup>12</sup> the politics of recognition should, in some instances at least, be seen as a form of such emotional management.<sup>13</sup> In cases where settler-colonial governments, for example, issue emotionally-laden apologies for 'past' injustice while maintaining existing settler-colonial structures, they are equally attempting to change people's negative feelings towards the status quo without changing the status quo.<sup>14</sup>

From the point of view of social theory explicitly committed to emancipation, the problems with such adjustment seem obvious enough. But, at the same time, we have to be careful not to slide into a one-sided prioritization of the 'material' over the 'psychological', or the simplistic assumption that making people happier here and now contradicts the aim of tearing down the structures that make us miserable. At its worst, such assumptions can lead to an accelerationist politics that allies itself with ableism and austerity in the misguided hope that revolution will somehow spring from the deepest depths of despair.<sup>15</sup> This idea is deeply misguided for many reasons, but one of them is that a revolution requires agents capable of carrying it out, and many forms of suffering impair just that agency. Depression, as we have seen, is characterized by the lack of meaningful affordances perceived by the agent. Thus, it is a state that *inhibits* action and not one that is likely to foster revolutionary agency. As Emily Dyson has recently argued,

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<sup>10</sup> Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 188. See also Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 58–59, 62–63.

<sup>11</sup> James, 'The American Family', 197–98. Or consider Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 1967 address to the American Psychological Association: 'there are some things in our society, some things in our world, to which we should never be adjusted[, ...] some things concerning which we must always be maladjusted if we are to be people of good will'. King, Jr., 'The Role of the Behavioral Scientist', 10–11.

<sup>12</sup> See section 4, 'The Limits of Recognition'.

<sup>13</sup> I also make this argument in greater detail in Friedrich, 'Anger and Apology'.

<sup>14</sup> Friedrich, 'Settling Accounts at the End of History'; Bentley, 'The Sorrow of Empire'; Somani, 'The Apology and Its Aftermath'.

<sup>15</sup> For a critique of how critiques of psychiatry and therapy can converge with ableism and austerity politics, see Chapman, 'A Critique of Critical Psychiatry'.

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we should reject the ‘undialectical either/or between reformist therapy and revolutionary politics’ and instead see personal recovery and collective political action as necessarily entwined.<sup>16</sup>

The problem with therapeutic management, then, is not that it deals with the psyche—for psychological change is surely a part of social change—nor that it aims at making people feel better. As we have seen in chapter 4, consciousness-raising and critical theorizing can take the form of ‘political therapy’ which aims at a sociogenic understanding of our emotions allowing for a shift of blame from the self to social structures. This psychological change is a key condition for resisting oppression and it may also make people feel better to the extent that it relieves them of self-blame and can have cathartic effects.<sup>17</sup> The problem with the forms of emotional management that are objectionable is that they seek *purely* individual and psychological resolutions of social contradictions. They hold society as a constant and seek to adjust individuals to whatever conditions they currently face. Naturally, the distinction will rarely be so clear cut, and, needless to say, it will be subject to dispute whether a given intervention, like a symbolic gesture of reconciliation, is a mere attempt at reconciling people *to* the status quo, or part of a real transformation of the recognition order. Nevertheless, we can criticize the management of emotion to the extent that it closes off alternative avenues for emancipatory action.

Another way to ensure that potentially destabilizing emotions do not threaten the status quo is to misdirect them. From Du Bois’s analysis of the Black Reconstruction to the Frankfurt School’s work on antisemitism and contemporary analysts of right-wing populism, the idea that people’s well-founded anger and dissatisfaction is being directed at scapegoats, thus maintaining the very system that caused it, crops up again and again. If

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<sup>16</sup> Dyson, ‘From Critical Theory to Critical Therapy’, 7. While I entirely agree with Dyson’s positive arguments about the need to overcome the dichotomy between ‘bad’ therapy and ‘good’ action, I would dispute her characterization of a host of thinkers discussed in this thesis as falling into that ‘undialectical’ view. She claims that Marcuse, Adorno, Foucault, and Hanisch each adopt a view on which ‘[o]ne can either be mentally healthy and deluded, [...] or mentally ill and clear-eyed’. This seems clearly off the mark for Hanisch who is at pains to stress that women in CR groups are *not* mentally ill; equally, Adorno is clear that ‘the sickness of the normal does not necessarily imply as its opposite the health of the sick’. Hanisch, ‘The Personal Is Political’; Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 60.

<sup>17</sup> Cattien, ‘Neurotic Situations’.

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the strategy of management was characteristic of the heyday of ‘progressive neoliberalism’,<sup>18</sup> then today’s political climate is increasingly dominated by the strategy of *reaction*.

Violent reactionary movements, like Trump’s in the US, Bolsonaro’s in Brazil, or Milei’s in Argentina, may look disruptive of the status quo on the surface. And, in a sense, they are: they do destabilize the hegemony of ‘a “progressive neoliberalism” that mixed together truncated ideals of emancipation and lethal forms of financialization’.<sup>19</sup> Yet, as many scholars of historical and contemporary fascism have argued, underlying this surface destabilization lies a deeper system-stabilizing dynamic.<sup>20</sup> The direction of rage against scapegoats, most often racialized minorities, allows for the continued reproduction of capital and the maintenance of the property order. Du Bois called this the ‘counter-revolution of property’.<sup>21</sup>

The forms of reactionary misdirected rage that targets Jews, Blacks, sexual minorities etc. instead of capital is system-affirming in two ways. First, it allows some groups of people to release their anger in cathartic ways without actually threatening existing power structures. An important point of this thesis has been to stress how the negative emotions produced by life under oppressive and exploitative conditions are not always easy to interpret. When their causes are complex structural dynamics, coming to an understanding of these is a difficult political-hermeneutic achievement. Once one arrives at a political interpretation of one’s dissatisfaction, though, it often feels cathartic—it allows for a displacement of blame from the self to external sources, and it often opens up avenues for action.<sup>22</sup> Unfortunately, this catharsis and feeling of potency is just as easily—perhaps more easily—produced by reactionary political interpretations as by emancipatory ones. Right-wing authoritarian movements promise quick and easy solutions by targeting groups that are either relatively powerless (like migrants) or small (‘woke’ university professors). Thus, for some parts of the white working class, such movements provide a cathartic outlet for the frustrations produced when the ‘meritocratic dream crashes against

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<sup>18</sup> Fraser, ‘Progressive Neoliberalism versus Reactionary Populism’.

<sup>19</sup> Fraser, ‘Progressive Neoliberalism versus Reactionary Populism’, 282.

<sup>20</sup> Toscano, *Late Fascism*.

<sup>21</sup> Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, chap. 14.

<sup>22</sup> See Cattien, ‘Neurotic Situations’.

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the shores of a capitalist reality'.<sup>23</sup> The materialist approach to emotions developed here helps us understand why such reactionary misdirections of anger are crucial to the reproduction of capital. Because these feelings are not superstructural but materially embodied social contradictions, they cannot be wished away. Advocating meekness over anger is a futile solution.<sup>24</sup> The dissatisfaction produced by the necessary contradictions of capitalism will express itself in one way or another—and one way of ensuring that it does not destabilize the accumulation of capital itself is by directing the ire towards scapegoats.

Another way in which this reactionary anger stabilizes existing power structures is by targeting precisely those who have the strongest interest in overturning them. On Du Bois's analysis of the Black Reconstruction, for instance, Black people became targets of violence and hatred not only because they constituted a convenient scapegoat to allow for cathartic release of pent-up anger, but, more importantly, because they constituted a real threat to the order of property—they had, after all, carried out 'one of the most extraordinary experiments in Marxism that the world, before the Russian revolution, had seen'.<sup>25</sup> Equally, misogynistic violence against women functions not only to allow men an outlet for aggression, but also as a form of punishment for women who act 'out of order' and threaten patriarchal power structures.<sup>26</sup> And transphobic violence punishes those who upset the binary gender order.<sup>27</sup> As such, we cannot understand historical and contemporary reactionary movements *just* in terms of misdirected rage—for, from the point of view of racial patriarchal capitalism, it is usually directed at exactly those subjects who *do* constitute potential threats. No matter how much right-wing authoritarians present themselves as anti-elitist, these movements are usually elite-driven and receive their most crucial support from elements of the capitalist class—as personified, for example, in Elon Musk's crucial role in the second election of Donald Trump. When we say that reactionary anger is misdirected, then, it is not from the perspectives of Musk or Trump. It is misdirected only from the perspective of those who become convinced by reactionary narratives, even though their real interest would be to target the capitalists who exploit

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<sup>23</sup> Emerick and Yap, 'Betrayed Expectations', 353–54.

<sup>24</sup> Pace Pettigrove, 'Meekness and "Moral" Anger'.

<sup>25</sup> Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 358.

<sup>26</sup> Manne, *Down Girl*.

<sup>27</sup> Bettcher, 'Evil Deceivers and Make-Believers'.

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them; those whose ‘psychological wages’ of whiteness and maleness constitute only a rather meagre substitute for emancipation from actual wage labour.

As explained in chapter 5, we best determine how emotions ought to be directed by seeing them as parts of an active process of problem-solving. For those who are oppressed and exploited—and critical theory always starts from their point of view—the litmus test is whether a given interpretation of our feelings furthers the project of emancipation. From this point of view, what is wrong with the strategies of management and reaction is that they prevent just that. The question for critical theory and political activism is how to counter those strategies by interpreting and channelling our feelings in other ways. For this process to be successful, both theory and practice—science and struggle—are required.

What is required is the kind of collective interpretation and analysis of our feelings that allows them to be channelled into effective resistance against oppression. In a well-known phrase: the ‘self-clarification of the struggles and wishes of the age’. Nancy Fraser, among others, has used these words, originally from Marx, to characterize the role of critical theory as the ‘clarification’ of existing social struggles.<sup>28</sup> I would like to broaden the meaning of the phrase, though. For Fraser, critical theory is largely about testing and clarifying the demands and wishes already articulated by activists.<sup>29</sup> However, I have argued that we should see organized emancipatory movements as the outcome, and not the starting point, of critique—keeping in mind that most of that critique does not happen in academic spaces. What social movements do is precisely to provide interpretations of and outlets for our everyday struggles and wishes—those subterranean, pre-political experiences that motivate us to seek out social movements in the first place. Our negative emotional reactions to the world are the way our struggles and wishes first make themselves conscious to us: in the struggle to go on with things as they are, and in the inchoate wish for the world to be otherwise. These emotions, their interpretation and articulation, are prime sites for political contestation. And emancipation requires the kind of self-clarification of our feelings which happens not just through theory, but importantly also *through* praxis. The next section will elaborate on what such a process of emancipatory

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<sup>28</sup> Fraser, ‘What’s Critical about Critical Theory?’, 97; Marx, ‘Letters’, 145.

<sup>29</sup> Fraser and Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition?*, 208.

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self-clarification can look like—but what is clear is that if we cede any ground in these struggles over emotions, the forces of the status quo stand ready to employ the strategies of management and reaction to turn our desiring negations against themselves.

Emotions have a rightful place in politics—that much few political theorists would dispute today. But what I have stressed in this thesis is that we should not take them simply as inputs into the political process, but as products of and sites for social struggles.

### 2. The theoretical is practical

How, then, are we to think of the role of theory and critique in those struggles?

Robin Celikates writes that the question of the relation between theory and practice in Critical Theory ‘has lately been pushed into the background by the dominance of the debate on the normative standards of critique’.<sup>30</sup> One of my aims in this thesis has been to show that those two questions—of theory’s relation to practice and to normativity—are best thought of as fundamentally intertwined.<sup>31</sup> If we take seriously the claim that critical theory is supposed to be an ‘extension of epistemic efforts undertaken by oppressed groups in their daily struggles’,<sup>32</sup> then it follows that the normativity of critique must also be found in its relation to those daily struggles. It will have to be seen as a moment of practice, and thus the normativity of critique derives from the normativity of practice.

In line with this assumption, I have developed an account of critique that does not begin from the problem of how to relate academic theory to social practice, but instead begins by asking about the role of critique and normativity in people’s everyday epistemic efforts to make sense of a problematic world. The assumption is that a theory of critique needs to account for the activity of interpreting and criticizing the world wherever it happens, academic theory being nothing but a highly specialized version of that everyday activity. Therefore, I have searched for the sources of normativity not in the philosopher’s

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<sup>30</sup> Celikates, *Critique as Social Practice*, 9.

<sup>31</sup> Celikates stresses that the two questions are ‘by no means identical’ and that the ‘question concerning normative foundations [...] cannot replace the at least equally central question [of] the relation between theory and practice’. This is true of the way in which questions of normativity have been approached in recent debates, but if one accepts my claim that normativity is derived from our practical engagement with the world, then the two questions, though not identical, are two sides of the same coin. Celikates, *Critique as Social Practice*, 9.

<sup>32</sup> Honneth, ‘Is There an Emancipatory Interest?’, 919.

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preferred realm of ideas but in the arena of everyday interaction. The root of critique, I have argued, lies in the experience of one's habitual interaction with the world becoming problematic, which can register as feelings of anger, depression, frustration, sadness, or other negative emotions. When one's embodied habitus clashes with the structures of the social world, this is the subjective experience of a social contradiction, and the resulting negative feelings exert a pressure to resolve the contradiction. This normative pressure propels a problem-solving process which involves both action and reflection. Critique is the cognitive moment of this practical process.

Naturally, far from all experiences of anger or depression will lead to social critique. But it is always, in principle, possible to politicize our everyday grievances when it turns out that they are shared with others. The feminist practice of consciousness-raising presents, perhaps, the paradigmatic example of how this process can appear. 'Our feelings', writes Kathie Sarachild, 'will lead us to our theory, our theory to our action'.<sup>33</sup> Women's persistent feelings of dissatisfaction and, sometimes, depression with their lives in a patriarchal society led them to seek out others with similar experiences to collectively analyse and make sense of their emotions. This required developing new hermeneutic resources for understanding the social-structural determinants of their shared experiences, that is, theories of patriarchal domination. The resulting theory, in turn, became the basis for action targeting the structures that had been identified as causing women's misery.

This neat, linear description (feelings→theory→action) needs to be complicated a bit, though. For, as I have stressed, our feelings are never fully 'pre-theoretical', in the sense that they are always mediated by the interpretive framework we use to make sense of the world. Therefore, as we have seen, theory also changes our feelings. For example, diffuse feelings of depression characterized by self-blame and internalized feelings of worthlessness can be turned into anger once blame for one's unhappiness is externalized and located in societal structures. There is thus a circular relation between feelings and theory: negative emotions disrupt our habitual engagement with the world and drive us to interpret the obstacles we face; the interpretations we come up with, in turn, recast our feelings in new ways, giving rise to new possibilities for action but also new problems that require further interpretation.

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<sup>33</sup> Sarachild, 'A Program for Feminist "Consciousness Raising"', 78.

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I am not, of course, the first to point out that our interpretative resources shape our feelings.<sup>34</sup> But a more important contribution of my theory is that our emotions are also shaped by practice. This is because our emotions are not judgments about or representations of the world but constituted by affordances—by opportunities for action. What determines whether a given situation leads to disappointment or anger, I have argued, is not, as many philosophers assume, whether I judge the action to be morally wrong in addition to being undesired. The difference, rather, is whether I see opportunities for aggressively reacting to the object of my emotion or not. Our emotions therefore are co-constituted by the (physical and social) environment we inhabit and the opportunities for action it offers. The existence of social movements and political organizations, by providing new avenues for action, therefore transforms our feelings. The example of the ‘Red for Ed’ movement discussed in chapter 5 is a case in point: by organizing education workers, new avenues for collective action were opened up which led to a ‘redirection of popular anger upward, against the ruling rich’.<sup>35</sup> Naturally, organizers of this movement made arguments about the causes of people’s anger, but such arguments alone would not have led to the redirection of emotions on a large scale. Social movements are especially productive sites for the (re-)interpretation and articulation of antagonistic emotions, because they are sites of theory *and* action. They allow us to reinterpret the world while also transforming the affordances available to us.

As such, we have to think of the whole feelings→theory→action sequence as both circular and multidirectional. Our feelings inform our theory and action, just as much as our theory shapes action and feelings, and action, in turn, influences our feelings and theory: feelings↔theory↔action↔feelings. In short, we have to think of theory, practice, and emotion each as moments of the life-process taken as a whole, of our metabolism with the natural and social world. This is why, as Marxists have often maintained, emancipatory knowledge requires both analysis and ‘political struggle on the basis of which this analysis can be conducted’.<sup>36</sup> The account of emotions and critique presented here clarifies these claims. Critical analysis of the social world is always carried out by embodied and situated

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<sup>34</sup> See, for example, Campbell, *Interpreting the Personal*.

<sup>35</sup> Blanc, *Red State Revolt*, 71.

<sup>36</sup> Hartsock, ‘The Feminist Standpoint’, 162.

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subjects motivated by a feeling that something is wrong, by a desiring negation; this analysis, though, is intimately connected to the practical possibilities for transforming the world, and the only way to successfully transform an inchoate feeling of distress into an emancipatory standpoint is by opening up avenues for emancipatory *action*. Once our everyday problem-consciousness and problem-solving become collectivized through the vehicle of social struggles, our feelings stop being merely a part of social *reproduction* but become—potentially—part of a process of radical social *transformation*.

Having treated the relation between theory and action at this level of abstraction, of course, still leaves those of us doing theory in academic settings with the question of how we, as theorists, should relate to practice—this is the question that Celikates urges critical theorists not to neglect. I cannot fully answer that question here—such an answer would require a thorough analysis of the actual social position of academics within contemporary societies, including the political economy of academia and the publishing industry (such analysis is curiously absent from even the most thoughtful treatments of the relationship between theory and practice, which sometimes seem to assume a figure of a public intellectual that hardly matches the position of academic theorists today<sup>37</sup>). Nevertheless, let me provide some initial thoughts on the question based on the conception of critique I have developed.

My approach rules out two extreme positions on the relation between theorists and practice: vanguardism and ventriloquism. The vanguardist, or paternalist, position—sometimes attributed to Adorno—says that, since people are likely to be ideologically deluded, the task of theorists is to explain to the masses what their real interests are. ‘[I]n the state of immaturity that humanity is in now’, writes Freyenhagen, ‘we have to make do

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<sup>37</sup> For example, when Maeve Cooke terms theoretical approaches which make ‘static’ claims to universal validity ‘authoritarian’, she arguably invokes a dated image of the intellectual as vanguardist leader paternalistically guiding the masses to the truth. The cogency of her theoretical arguments notwithstanding, talk of ‘authoritarian’ forms of theory has a mildly comical ring to it in an age where academic theory is mostly written for specialized audiences and paywalled by predatory publishers. While Cooke emphasises that ‘the theorist’s perspective must be seen as situated in a historically specific socio-cultural context’, she never touches on the actual social position of academic theorists or the political economy of higher education. Cooke, ‘Avoiding Authoritarianism’, 382–83. For a rare example of a discussion of Critical Theory that *does* centre its institutional place in the academy, see Marasco, ‘Critical Theory and the Pursuit of a Political Education’.

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in following the most progressive minds—not uncritically, to be sure, but nonetheless ultimately taking our direction from them'.<sup>38</sup> This position is incompatible with the understanding of critique as tied to everyday problem-consciousness and to practical transformation. No matter how brilliant the theories developed by the 'most progressive minds', they will have no emancipatory force unless they are rooted in the everyday experiences of those with a practical interest in emancipation and connected to possibilities for collective action. As we have seen, an emancipatory standpoint is not likely to come about by people simply 'taking their direction' from the intellectual vanguard, but rather from people collectively interpreting their own unhappiness and desires for change.

At the same time, however, my understanding of emotions also guards against the opposite position: that the theorist has nothing of special value to contribute to critique and resistance, except insofar as they may be able to amplify the voices of other social actors. Foucault, for example, at times seemed to take such a position, remarking in an interview with Deleuze that 'the masses [...] know perfectly well, without illusion; they know far better than [the intellectual] and they are certainly capable of expressing themselves'.<sup>39</sup> As we have seen, negative emotional experiences of oppression and exploitation do not *automatically* give rise to emancipatory knowledge. Coming to such knowledge is a hard-won political achievement, and it can by no means simply be assumed that 'the masses' already know 'without illusion' what is up. In fact, the claim that the subaltern knows best, and that the theorist is simply amplifying their voice, allows 'the intellectuals [to] represent themselves as transparent', thus disavowing responsibility for choosing which voices to represent and how to interpret them.<sup>40</sup> Spivak evocatively terms this the 'ventriloquism of the speaking subaltern'.<sup>41</sup>

An adequate account of the relation between theory and its recipients, then, has to walk a middle road between ascribing to the masses a totally deluded self-consciousness, and knowledge 'without illusion'. Our feelings of dissatisfaction are often inchoate and diffuse, and other times they are plainly misguided; properly understanding their political import requires *analysis*. While such analysis can, in principle, be carried out by anyone, there is

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<sup>38</sup> Freyenhagen, *Adorno's Practical Philosophy*, 249.

<sup>39</sup> Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, 207.

<sup>40</sup> Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', 29.

<sup>41</sup> Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', 27.

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no reason why academic theorists should not contribute the skills, resources, and considerable time they have at their disposal to develop theoretical and hermeneutic resources which help us come to more emancipatory understandings of our feelings (bearing in mind that the social position of the academic theorist also comes with its own blind spots and disadvantages).

One account of critique that does walk such a middle road can be found in Celikates' *Critique as Social Practice*. My approach shares a lot with his, but it also differs on a few points, so let me briefly discuss it and point to where my theory of critique diverges. For Celikates, as for me, critique should begin from 'the suffering of its addressees' and 'their awareness (however diffuse and weakly developed) that there is a problem'.<sup>42</sup> Because, however, this awareness is often inchoate or partially blocked, the contribution of the critical theorist is to analyse these blockages and prompt processes of self-reflection. Here, Celikates understands the theorist's role on the model of the psychotherapist: just like in psychotherapy, the theorist is not meant to provide the addressee with first-order solutions to their problems, but instead tries to provide second-order solutions that remove distorting factors in the recipient's own reasoning process thereby enabling them to reflect more autonomously on the first-order problem.

While the focus on emotions in my account of critique may seem to lend itself to this psychoanalytic analogy, I would like to resist it. As I argued in chapter 5, we should not understand misdirected political emotions on the model of repression which can be solved therapeutically. Of course, Celikates does not have only psychological blockages in mind: he also understands ideology and false consciousness as second-order blockages that theorists need to help their addressees overcome.<sup>43</sup> But these blockages, I would argue, are not relevantly analogous to psychological ones. The assumption of psychoanalysis is that psychological blockages, like repression, can be identified without passing judgment on the first-order content of the repressed feelings; it is, if you will, a purely procedural matter. But social blockages, like false consciousness, cannot be identified on a procedural level without reference to first-order solutions. The only way to show that someone's interpretation of the world is misguided is by showing that it hinders their own

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<sup>42</sup> Celikates, *Critique as Social Practice*, 148.

<sup>43</sup> Celikates, *Critique as Social Practice*, 160–61.

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emancipation or contributes to the oppression of others. These are first-order arguments about the content, not the form, of our reasoning. The way in which critical theory can help us better understand and direct our emotions in emancipatory ways is by suggesting what, concretely, might be the best targets of our ire. This can take many forms, from disclosive redescriptions of the social world to concrete proposals for strategic political action. But the point is to do precisely what the analyst must refrain from: suggesting concrete interpretations of the causes of and solutions to people's suffering.

However, as explained, we should not understand these contributions on the vanguardist model of the intellectual who guides the masses. Instead, the theorist should be seen simply as one social actor among many, who happens to specialize in intellectual labour. The theorist's relation to other actors should be conceived not on the model of instruction, but *dialogue*. Here we can take inspiration from Paulo Freire's dialogical approach to political education.<sup>44</sup> Citing Lukács' claim that the task of the intellectual is to 'explain[] to the masses their own action', he adds that, for him, 'the requirement is seen not in terms of explaining to, but rather dialoguing with the people about their actions'.<sup>45</sup> Freire's approach assumes that the concerns of the people are what guides theoretical work, and that everyone is fully capable of coming to an understanding of their own oppression—but also that the educator (or, by extension, the intellectual) might have valuable resources to contribute to the collective process of interpreting the social world. As such, political education is not a task of *directing* the masses, but one of contributing to a collective form of consciousness-raising—what Freire terms *conscientização*.

More can and should be said about the concrete ways academic theory today can enter into such dialogue while navigating the significant constraints of precarious employment, the marketization of higher education, and a highly extractive publishing industry. Nevertheless, any adequate account of the concrete role of critical theory in social transformation should be based on a proper understanding of the role of critique, more generally, as a moment of our practical interaction with the social world. When philosophers forget that the normativity and telos of critique derive from the experience

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<sup>44</sup> For an example of an approach to critical theory that explicitly takes Freire as inspiration, see Apostolidis, *The Fight for Time*, esp. chapter 1.

<sup>45</sup> Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 53; Lukács, *Lenin*, 35.

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of embodied human beings interacting with their material environment and their need to overcome pain and suffering, they hypostasize the historically contingent division between practical and mental labour. In the worst case, they fetishistically treat moral-philosophical principles as having independent authority over our actions, rather than being part of a practical problem-solving process. In the characteristically caustic words of Karl Marx, they ‘do not think that they are human beings that happen to criticise, but “Critics” who beside that are unlucky enough to be human beings as well’.<sup>46</sup> In other words, they neglect that critique, like all other human activity, is a part of the material world—more on this now.

### 3. The subjective is objective

‘[S]uffering is the weight of objective realities bearing down on the individual’—thus Adorno. What the subject ‘experiences as his innermost subjectivity [...] is mediated objectively’.<sup>47</sup> A central aim of this thesis has been to clarify what this means by developing a materialist theory of political emotions—a theory that takes seriously the claim, not just that suffering has subjective as well as objective aspects, but that *it is objective in its subjectivity*. Negative emotions are objective social contradictions subjectively experiencing themselves.

Some interpretations of Adorno have taken seriously the claim that suffering is objective while jettisoning his focus on the subjective experience of this objectivity ‘bearing down on the individual’. Thus, for Freyenhagen, suffering constitutes an objectively verifiable shortfall from the requirements for human functioning.<sup>48</sup> The subjective experience of such suffering, he claims, is often distorted and unreliable which is why we need to rely ‘the most progressive minds’ to analyse them as symptoms of social pathologies.<sup>49</sup> While this view may be true to Adorno in some of his more elitist moments,

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<sup>46</sup> Cited in Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx*, 101.

<sup>47</sup> Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, 190.

<sup>48</sup> Freyenhagen, *Adorno’s Practical Philosophy*, chap. 9.

<sup>49</sup> Freyenhagen, *Adorno’s Practical Philosophy*, 247–48; see also Freyenhagen, ‘Critical Theory and Social Pathology’.

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it does not do justice to his claim that pain is itself not just an objective symptom of a sick society, but also the ‘moving force of dialectical thinking’.<sup>50</sup>

To get a handle on this subjective and agentic aspect of suffering as providing both insight and motivation for critique, I have turned to philosophy of emotions. Contemporary philosophers have had much to say about how emotions subjectively help us understand the world and act upon it. But they have also often committed the opposite mistake of overemphasizing the subjectivity of feelings. While there has been a clear political and feminist turn in contemporary analytic philosophy of emotions, it still relies largely on the methods of moral philosophy and analytic epistemology and therefore suffers from the individualizing and cognitivist biases of those approaches. Accordingly, much contemporary philosophy of emotion has focused on whether and when it is appropriate to feel certain emotions<sup>51</sup>—as if philosophical arguments could simply convince people to change their feelings. The materialist social theoretical perspective I have adopted mitigates against such idealism and voluntarism. We should not ask whether we should have this or that emotion, which feelings are apt or inapt, but rather start from the reality of suffering and ask what to do about it: how can we direct these emotions in emancipatory ways.

To understand political emotions as objective social phenomena while still doing justice to their subjective experience, I have had recourse to a somewhat eclectic mix of theoretical resources: from phenomenology and ecological psychology to Marxist social reproduction theory. What binds these different approaches together and allows the resulting combination to form a coherent whole is that they all treat consciousness as something produced in and through the subject’s interaction with its material environment.

From the point of view of the subject, negative emotions occur when our embodied expectations—our *habitus*—clash with the structures of the world we encounter. They are, in Sartre’s phrase, ‘consciousness of the degradation of the world’<sup>52</sup>—‘the world’, here, being one’s subjectively experienced environment and the affordances for action one

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<sup>50</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 202.

<sup>51</sup> Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness*; Nussbaum, *Political Emotions*; Pettigrove, ‘Meekness and “Moral” Anger’; Reis-Dennis, ‘Anger’; Callard et al., *On Anger*.

<sup>52</sup> Sartre, *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions*, 52.

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perceives in it. The clash between expectations and reality may range from minor disturbances to a complete loss of meaning: a small obstacle to my everyday course of action might produce a mild annoyance, whereas, in the case of severe depression, I can come to experience my world as lacking in meaningful possibilities for action altogether. In either scenario, though, the negative emotional experience interrupts my non-reflexive engagement with the world and prompts a process of problem-solving: whether that be a minor technical problem, or, in the case of depression, my relationship to the world as a whole that has become problematic. At the same time, different emotions are characterized by the kinds of affordances they make salient. In anger, I see the possibility to aggressively assert myself; in shame, I want to hide; in fear, to flee. At the limit, depression is characterized by a painfully felt lack of meaningful affordances.

Negative emotions, then, describe a relationship between a subject and their environment. This means that they cannot be understood merely as properties of subjects. A transcendental subject would have no emotions; these only exist in physically embodied beings within a material environment. Feelings are, like affordances, *objective relational properties*. They cannot be described without reference to the agent's subjective states, of course, but these subjective states are no less a part of the material world than the physical and social structures they relate to. In the case of negative emotions this relationship between the subject and its world has, objectively, become problematic.

Moving up to the level of social theory, we can describe all this in terms of social reproduction. The smooth reproduction of a social order requires reproducing subjects who are attuned to just those affordances which the physical and social environment in fact offers up to them. In other words: subjects whose habitus are adjusted to allow them to seamlessly move through their social world. Under patriarchal capitalism, this reproductive labour is largely assigned to women who, through their care work, 'unknowingly creat[e] human beings who will "feel at home" in a reified world'.<sup>53</sup> However, subjects are never in fact *perfectly* adjusted to their environment. For this, our forms of life are way too complex and contradictory. Capitalism relies on social

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<sup>53</sup> Davis, 'Women and Capitalism', 170.

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reproduction, but it also constantly undermines the conditions for caring relationships.<sup>54</sup> The ensuing contradictions are felt subjectively in the form of negative emotions.

Once they are widespread enough, these emotions constitute crises of social reproduction. They are evidence that we are never fully interpellated into the social world we inhabit, but this is not because there is some part of us that remains untouched by society as a pristine source of resistance against reification. Rather, it is because there are internal contradictions within any given social order, and the subjective experience of those contradictions is what holds open the door for radical social transformation. Hence, the potential for critique and resistance inherent in the embodied experience of negative emotions is an immanent potential within existing society. Here, my account is in line with the Frankfurt School and the wider Marxist tradition which assumes that emancipatory social change must be the realization of potentials already present within the existing order, and not a utopia abstractly imposed on it.

This marks a difference between my materialism and some forms of feminism and ‘new’ materialism which seek to locate extra-social forces of resistance in matter or the body.<sup>55</sup> Against the common prejudice that a Marxist materialist framework is ‘mechanistic’ or ‘economistic’, I have tried to show that ‘old’ materialism is perfectly capable of incorporating the active and affective aspects of human experience—and, indeed, that attention to these is crucial in understanding social change from within a historical materialist framework. Marx himself had criticized the ‘hitherto existing materialism’ of his time for conceiving of reality ‘only in the form of the *object of contemplation*, but not as *sensuous human activity, practice*, not subjectively’.<sup>56</sup> Emotions, I have argued are key to understanding how we experience the material world subjectively, and how, through theoretical-practical activity, we intervene in it and potentially transform it. This materialism might be ‘old’, but it is very much alive. It conceives of physically embodied human beings as living, active and sensuous subjects who continually make and remake the world we inhabit—albeit never under conditions of our own choosing.

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<sup>54</sup> Fraser, ‘Crisis of Care?’

<sup>55</sup> Haslanger, ‘Disciplined Bodies and Ideology Critique’; Mazzarella, ‘Affect’.

<sup>56</sup> Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology* (1998), 569. Emphasis original.

#### 4. The utopian is dystopian

I have argued for an understanding of critique and resistance as growing out of our ordinary interactions with a world that leaves us dissatisfied or much worse. This is a negativist understanding of critique. A materialist social theory, I have argued, cannot ground its own normativity in the realm of positive norms and ideals—it needs to start from the sensuous activity of embodied human beings. It is the experience of pain, of dissatisfaction, of feeling out of place that produces the need for normative thought in the first place. But while normativity derives from the negative experience, and not from a positive ideal, we can nevertheless ask if an image of the Good does not fall out of the negativist account I have provided. In other words: if our feelings lead to theory and our theory to action, then where does our action take us? I want to end this thesis with a brief reflection on what one might call the ‘utopian horizon’ of my theory.<sup>57</sup>

Adorno writes at one point that the *telos* of a rationally organized society ‘would be to negate the physical suffering of even the least of its members’.<sup>58</sup> This seems to imply a straightforward image of the good social world we are seeking: it is one free of suffering. If negative emotions tell us that things are not as they should be, then a world that is as it should be would have no negative emotions—or so one might think.

For, as soon as we imagine this society free of any negativity, the suspicion creeps in that it might be a dystopia and not a utopia. Indeed, it is a standard trope of dystopian fiction that any dissatisfaction has been banished from the world. As I have theorized them, negative emotions are the result of maladjustments between the individual and their environment, and it follows from this that a world without negative emotions is one where we are perfectly ‘adjusted’. The maladjustment experienced as a desiring negation is what makes critique and social change possible. Conversely, the world where we are perfectly interpellated is a world of complete stasis—a world without critique. This stasis is what lends a work like Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* its chillingly dystopian feel. If utopia

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<sup>57</sup> By the metaphor of ‘horizon’ I mean to capture the fact that negativist critique, by telling us what to move away from, implies a direction of movement towards something which is not, however, clearly within view. Additionally, a horizon is not static but keeps changing as one moves—one can move *towards* a horizon, but one can never reach it. See Suvin, ‘Locus, Horizon, and Orientation’, 76–78.

<sup>58</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 203–4.

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is understood as a world where all problems have been solved, all contradictions overcome, then it seems to converge with dystopia.<sup>59</sup>

On the face of it, we seem to have entangled ourselves in a paradox. The telos of critique and social change is the negation of suffering; negative emotions spur a process of problem-solving aimed at overcoming the negative feeling. Yet, the world where suffering is banished is dystopian *just because* critique has become impossible. It may seem that we either have to bite the bullet and accept that a Brave New World *is* desirable (as a strict utilitarian might); or, we have to abolish the idea that the abolition of suffering is our telos. On Adorno's reading, Huxley urges us to do the latter: 'A society which wants nothing but happiness, according to Huxley, moves inexorably into insanity, into mechanized bestiality'.<sup>60</sup> Instead of subjective happiness, therefore, we ought to base our society on some objective standard of the Good Life.

With Adorno, I think we should reject this 'crude alternative' between utilitarianism and deontology, which he sees as 'the philosophical basis for the reactionary character of [Huxley's] novel'.<sup>61</sup> The apparent paradox above is the result of the assumption that the telos of an activity is a static end-state. This would indeed be the case for critique if it were based on a positive normative principle: we criticize the world insofar as it falls short of our principles, and the telos of this activity is a world that conforms to said principles. But I have argued that this is not how critique works. Critique is a part of our metabolism with our material environment, a moment in the process of practical problem-solving and creative transformation that is life. Such a process is geared towards the solution of ever-new problems and the satisfaction of ever-evolving needs; it does not aim at any fixed endpoint.

Here, my account of critique converges with certain interpretations of Marx's understanding of needs. For Marx, the point of a good society is to satisfy our needs, but human needs for him cannot be reduced to a static list of things we need for survival.

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<sup>59</sup> I am not saying that we *should* understand utopia that way. William Paris, for instance, suggests an understanding of utopia as a real tendency identifiable in emancipatory social movements dealing with oppression: 'Utopias are always responses to existing problems in social life'. This is an understanding of utopia that goes very well with my understanding of critique. Paris, *Race, Time, and Utopia*, 8.

<sup>60</sup> Adorno, *Prisms*, 111.

<sup>61</sup> Adorno, *Prisms*, 112.

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Beyond such ‘natural’ needs, Marx includes a category of ‘social’ or ‘historical’ needs, ‘which are themselves the offspring of social production and intercourse’.<sup>62</sup> That is, while we have some needs in virtue of our biological constitution—for nutrition, clean air, shelter from the elements, etc.—we also constantly produce new needs through the way we shape our social world.<sup>63</sup> Needs for certain kinds of intellectual stimulation and entertainment, creative expression, political participation, etc., for example, have arisen only in the course of historical development. For Marx, as Vanessa Wills puts it, ‘having a need is not a passive state but rather one moment in a mutually reinforcing and co-constitutive dialectic of needing and creating’.<sup>64</sup> Agnes Heller has also termed these kinds of needs ‘radical needs’ because they arise within the existing society but cannot be satisfied without transcending it.<sup>65</sup>

Our negative emotions are the clash between felt needs and the failure of society to satisfy them. These emotions become ‘radical’ when the clash cannot be overcome without a fundamental transformation of the existing social order. They are the subjectively experienced social contradictions generated by a society that produces needs it cannot satisfy—and therefore allow for a critique that carries us beyond the confines of the existing social world. It is worth again contrasting this view of critique with Freyenhagen’s, as I did already in chapter 1. His negativism is based on the premise that, under current conditions, we simply do not have epistemic access to what a Good human society would even look like.<sup>66</sup> We therefore have to make do with referring to a minimal standard of what is required for basic human flourishing and base our critique on that. Freyenhagen and I agree that critique cannot be based on a fixed blueprint of the just society we want to achieve. But I disagree that the reason for this is some kind of epistemic limitation of our ‘state of immaturity’.<sup>67</sup> Rather, my reason is that I do not think that normativity comes from a ‘standard’ against which we measure the social world, but from

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<sup>62</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, 527.

<sup>63</sup> The distinction between ‘natural’ and ‘social’ needs should not be understood as absolute, but only as a useful heuristic device. In reality, as Adorno has also emphasized, every need ‘is socially mediated in such a way that its natural side never appears directly, but only as something socially produced’. Adorno, ‘Theses on Need’, 79.

<sup>64</sup> Wills, *Marx’s Ethical Vision*, 78–79.

<sup>65</sup> Heller, *The Theory of Need in Marx*, chap. 4.

<sup>66</sup> Freyenhagen, *Adorno’s Practical Philosophy*.

<sup>67</sup> Freyenhagen, *Adorno’s Practical Philosophy*, 249.

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an open-ended process of practical problem-solving—a ‘mutually reinforcing and co-constitutive dialectic of needing and creating’.<sup>68</sup>

It is fair to ask, of course, whether every single negative emotion really discloses a political problem. The straightforward answer is ‘no’. Negative emotions always disclose a problem, but not all problems are political. The sadness we feel at the loss of a loved one is not something that can ever be eliminated politically (although, a tragic number of actual deaths are, of course, socially caused!). This does not mean, however, that such sadness does not reveal a problem: it poses the problem of how to go on living without what used to be a key source of happiness and support in one’s life. We could read Freud’s account of mourning as an account of what constitutes successful problem-solving in the case of loss.<sup>69</sup> How do we know, then, whether problems are political or not? When ought emotions give rise to *social* critique rather than individual processes of problem-solving? This, I would like to maintain, can only be established in the process of analysis. Everything could *potentially* be a political problem if it turns out that we can identify social structures as the causes of our misery and identify avenues for political action that may remedy it. I take this to be a key strength of my approach: it does not a priori draw any boundaries between the personal and the political and can thus better account for the process whereby seemingly private issues become politicized—as exemplified, for example, in the long history of feminist and queer activism.

This also tells us something about the ambition of my version of negativist critique. Negativism has sometimes been criticized for being too unambitious in rejecting images of the ideal society in favour of ‘just’ remedying the worst suffering.<sup>70</sup> My approach, however, is one that invites us to think about how we could collectively transform society in ways that address, potentially, *all* our everyday frustrations, worries, and anxieties—in the full knowledge that the horizon we are aiming at can never actually be reached. If that is not utopian, I do not know what is.

Granted, in the world we currently live in, where even people’s most basic ‘natural’ needs for alimentation and bodily integrity are routinely violated, this utopian horizon

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<sup>68</sup> Wills, *Marx’s Ethical Vision*, 79.

<sup>69</sup> Freud, ‘Mourning and Melancholia’.

<sup>70</sup> Hemmerich, ‘Against Negativism’, 124; Stahl, ‘Beyond the Nonideal’.

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seems hopelessly far off. But Adorno once wrote that '[t]he power of the status quo puts up the façades into which our consciousness crashes.'<sup>71</sup> If this is so, then negative emotions are the subjective experience of this crash. And, in 'recogniz[ing] this world's walls [and] push[ing] against them' (borrowing María Lugones' words<sup>72</sup>), they are proof, at the very least, that our consciousness is still moving and not standing still. 'Woe speaks: "Go."<sup>73</sup> It does not tell us where, but it is not a mere desire for escape or withdrawal either. It contains a positive longing for a place faraway which is not yet, but the contours of which we, perhaps, can begin to trace in the process of making sense of what it is we yearn to leave.

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<sup>71</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 17.

<sup>72</sup> Lugones, 'Hard-to-Handle Anger', 12.

<sup>73</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 203.

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