

Contemporary Critical Theory and Methodology

Piet Strydom



Social Research Today

Contemporary Critical Theory and Methodology

Piet Strydom



First published 2011
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge 270 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

© 2011 Piet Strydom

Typeset in Baskerville by Prepress Projects Ltd, Perth, UK
Printed and bound in Great Britain by TJI Digital, Padstow, Cornwall

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Strydom, Piet

Contemporary critical theory and methodology / by Piet Strydom.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

1. Critical theory. 2. Critical theory- Methodology. I. Title.

HM480.S77 2011

301.01- dc22

2010035713

ISBN: 978-0-415-54827-4 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-203-87556-8 (cbk)

Celebrity Society

On television, in magazines and books, on the Internet and in films, celebrities of all sorts seem to monopolize our attention. *Celebrity Society* brings new dimensions to our understanding of celebrity, capturing the way in which the figure of 'the celebrity' is bound up with the emergence of modernity. It outlines how the 'celebrification of society' is not just the twentieth-century product of Hollywood and television, but a long-term historical process, beginning with the printing press, theatre and art.

By looking beyond the accounts of celebrity 'culture', Robert van Krieken develops an analysis of 'celebrity society', with its own constantly changing social practices and structures, moral grammar, construction of self and identity, legal order and political economy organized around the distribution of visibility, attention and recognition. Drawing on the work of Norbert Elias, the book explains how contemporary celebrity society is the heir (or heiress) of court society, taking on but also democratizing many of the functions of the aristocracy. The book also develops the idea of celebrity as driven by the 'economics of attention', because attention has become a vital and increasingly valuable resource in the information age.

This engaging new book will be a valuable resource for students and scholars in sociology, politics, history, celebrity studies, cultural studies, the sociology of media and cultural theory.

Robert van Krieken is Professor of Sociology at the University of Sydney, and Visiting Professor at University College Dublin. His research interests include the sociology of law, criminology, the sociology of childhood, processes of civilization and decivilization, cultural genocide, as well as contributing to the theoretical debates around the work of Elias, Foucault, Luhmann and Latour. Previous books include *Norbert Elias* (1998), *Celebrity and the Law* (2010, co-authored) and *Sociology* 4th edition (2009, co-authored).

Contemporary Critical Theory and Methodology

Contemporary critical theory's methodology is currently taking shape under the impact both of transformative internal developments within the discipline, and of external pressures and incentives arising from a series of international debates.

In this book Piet Strydom presents a groundbreaking treatment of critical theory's methodology, using as a base the reconstruction of the left-Hegelian tradition, the relation between critical theory and pragmatism, and the associated metatheoretical implications. He assesses extant positions, presents a detailed yet comprehensive restatement and development of critical theory's methodology, compares it with a wide range of current concepts of social criticism and critique, and analyses leading critical theorists' exemplary applications of it. Besides immanent transcendence and the sign-mediated epistemology common to the left-Hegelian tradition, special attention is given to the abductive imagination, reconstruction, normative and causal explanation, explanatory mechanisms and the communicative framework which enables critical theory to link up with its addressees and the public.

Contemporary Critical Theory and Methodology is recommended reading for senior undergraduate and postgraduate students, as well as professionals working within disciplines such as sociology, philosophy, political science, critical theory and cultural studies.

Piet Strydom is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Sociology, School of Sociology and Philosophy, at University College Cork, Ireland. His research interests include areas such as critical theory, the history and philosophy of the social sciences, and cognitive social science, in which he has noted publications.

Social Research Today

Edited by Martin Bulmer

The *Social Research Today* series provides concise and contemporary introductions to significant methodological topics in the social sciences. Covering both quantitative and qualitative methods, this series features readable and accessible books from some of the leading names in the field and is aimed at students and professional researchers alike. This series also brings together for the first time the best titles from the old *Social Research Today* and *Contemporary Social Research* series edited by Martin Bulmer for UCL Press and Routledge.

Other series titles include:

Principles of Research Design in the Social Sciences

Frank Bechhofer and Lindsay Paterson

Social Impact Assessment

Henk Becker

The Turn to Biographical Methods in Social Science

Edited by Prue Chamberlayne, Joanna Bornat and Tom Wengraf

Quantity and Quality in Social Research

Alan Bryman

Field Research

A sourcebook and field manual

Robert G. Burgess

In the Field

An introduction to field research

Robert G. Burgess

Qualitative Analysis

Thinking, doing, writing

Douglas Ezzy

Research Design (second edition)

Catherine Hakim

Measuring Health and Medical Outcomes

Edited by Crispin Jenkinson

Methods of Criminological Research

Victor Jupp

Information Technology for the Social Scientist

Edited by Raymond M. Lee

An Introduction to the Philosophy of Social Research

Tim May and Malcolm Williams

Research Social and Economic Change

The uses of household panel studies

Edited by David Rose

Introduction to Longitudinal Research

Elisabetta Ruspini

Surveys in Social Research (fifth edition)

David de Vaus

Researching the Powerful in Education

Edited by Geoffrey Walford

Researching Race and Racism

Edited by Martin Bulmer and John Solomos

Statistical Modelling for Social Researchers

Principles and practice

Roger Tarling

The International Social Survey Program 1984–2009

Charting the globe

Edited by Max Haller, Roger Jowell and Tom W. Smith

Models in Statistical Social Research

Götz Rohwer

Managing Social Research

A practical guide

Roger Tarling

Martin Bulmer is Professor of Sociology at the University of Surrey. He is Director of the Question Bank (a WWW resource based at Surrey) in the ESRC Centre for Applied Social Surveys (CASS), a collaboration between the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen), the University of Southampton and the University of Surrey. He is also a Director of the department's Institute of Social Research, and an Academician of the Academy of Learned Societies for the Social Sciences.

I dedicate this book in gratitude to
Frederik van Zyl Slabbert (1940–2010),
who first introduced me to the philosophy of social
science,
and to
Karl-Otto Apel,
who shaped my understanding of the field like no other

Figures and tables

Figures

4.1 Immanent transcendence	98
6.1 Reconstruction	136
6.2 Explanation: reconstructive explanatory model and explanatory critique	140
6.3 Dimensions of the objective situation: three axes	143
6.4 Methodology of Critical Theory	153
7.1 Types of critique	167

Tables

0.1 Architectonic structure of Critical Theory	8
6.1 Generative mechanisms	141
8.1 Models of democracy	201
8.2 Worlds of sustainability in the constitution of European society	224

Preface and acknowledgements

The central argument advanced in this book owes its inspiration to a remark of Karl-Otto Apel to the effect that the young Marx understood knowledge in terms of a process of mediation which approached the *medium quo* or sign-mediated theory of knowledge developed in fine detail by his younger contemporary, the founder of pragmatism, Charles S. Peirce. The inspirational meaning of this remark was progressively brought home to me by a series of debates of the past three decades or so. The urgency of exploring it is signalled by the fact that these debates in some way all grapple with the current problem situation that arose in the wake of the late twentieth-century return of historicism: how to resolve the relation between transcendental foundationalism and hermeneutic circularism. The first debate concerns the revitalization of left-Hegelianism, which both Marx and Peirce represent, and the recovery of its concept of ‘immanent transcendence’; the second is what has become known as ‘the renaissance of pragmatism’; and the third is the debate about social criticism and critique. I should mention also my interest in the cognitive revolution and its implications for the social sciences, Critical Theory in particular, which allowed me to appreciate a certain connection among these three debates. The concept of immanent transcendence, Peirce’s emphasis on the clarifying and unifying function of general concepts, and the possibility of critique all turn on the most basic cognitive phenomenon: that something belonging to the world is nevertheless able to distinguish itself from the world and to develop a perspective on and relation to the world.

The idea of the book, however, arose in connection with a paper I presented on immanent transcendence and the left-Hegelian heritage of Critical Theory at the tenth anniversary conference of the *European Journal of Social Theory* held in June 2008 at the University of Sussex, organized by Gerard Delanty, editor of the journal. I have been intrigued by the concept of immanent transcendence for a long time and for many years prior to the conference I have been working on the methodology of the social sciences, including Critical Theory. However, it is this event that crystallized the vision of a book project that would bring these various concerns together in a systematic way. I owe a debt of gratitude to Gerard Delanty for helping me to see the goal as well as the path towards it more clearly. My thanks for comments and discussions in this context are also due to Klaus

Eder, Krishan Kumar, Larry Ray, Chris Rumford, Göran Therborn and Laurent Thévenot.

Over many years, some of the ideas in the book were flagged in undergraduate courses and graduate seminars dealing with Critical Theory and the philosophy of social science. A stimulus to investigate certain relevant matters a little more closely was provided by an invitation in 2007 which came via the International Sociological Association to contribute an extensive article – published in 2009 – on philosophies of the social sciences to UNESCO's massive online *Encyclopedia of Life Support Systems*, which seeks to bring together all relevant knowledge to confront the civilizational crisis we are facing today. I am indebted to Charles Crothers, secretary of the Research Committee on the History of Sociology, for this opportunity. Also in 2007, I had the opportunity to explore the relation between Critical Theory and critical realism in the context of a conference, 'Critical turns in Critical Theory: *Festschrift* in honour of Piet Strydom', the proceedings of which were published in 2009. In this context, I wish to express my deepest gratitude to Seamus O'Tuama, who organized the event and edited the publication, as well as to Gerard Delanty, Mauricio Domingues, Ananta Kumar Giri, Gerard Mullally, Patrick O'Mahony, Tracey Skillington, Andrea Pontual and other participants. In 2009, various contexts lent themselves to the development and presentation of ideas related to the concept of immanent transcendence and the methodological issues central to this book. On two different occasions, in March and June, in the framework of a visiting professorship at the Université de Provence, Aix-en-Provence, France, I was able to present papers centred on the concept of immanent transcendence and its implications for critical social science and for a cognitive approach. In this case, I wish to thank above all Alban Bouvier, but for a variety of comments and discussions also Yves Gingras, Paul Roth and Jesús Zamora-Bonilla. In May, the Sociology and Philosophy Summer School organized by members of the School of Sociology and Philosophy at University College Cork, in particular Kieran Keohane and Patrick O'Mahony, and held at Blackwater Castle, Castletownroche, Ireland, offered another opportunity to focus on the methodology of Critical Theory with specific reference to the concept of immanent transcendence. It allowed attention to be given specifically to the epistemological and ontological presuppositions of Critical Theory. In this context, my thanks go to Kieran Bonner, Maeve Cooke, John O'Neill and Tony O'Connor. I am also grateful to Ananta Kumar Giri, Madras Institute for Development Studies in Chennai, India, who has regularly issued invitations over the past several years for material on relevant topics such as Critical Theory, cognitive sociological analysis, creative social research, ontology, philosophical anthropology and knowledge for publication in a variety of works. More recently, in May 2010, some of the ideas in this book were presented and discussed at the second Blackwater Castle Summer School on 'Evaluation, Judgement and Critique' organized under the auspices of the School of Sociology and Philosophy, University College Cork. In this case, my thanks are due to Julia Jansen, Kieran Keohane and Patrick O'Mahony as well as other participants. Here at University College Cork, I have become dependent on regular discussions with Patrick O'Mahony and, equally, discussions with Gerard

Mullally, Seamus O'Tuama and Tracey Skillington – not to mention the sustaining encouragement and support I receive from them.

My hope is that this book contributes not only to a better understanding and thus the advancement of Critical Theory, but also to the consolidation of the new School of Sociology and Philosophy at UCC.

Piet Strydom
Kinsale, May 2010

Contents

<i>List of figures and tables</i>	x
<i>Preface and acknowledgements</i>	xi

Introduction	1
--------------	---

PART I

Metatheoretical foundations 15

1 Classical foundations	17
2 Appropriation of the classical foundations	34
3 Contemporary Critical Theory and pragmatism	56
4 Immanent transcendence as key concept	87

PART II

Methodology 107

5 Contemporary critical theorists on methodology	109
6 The methodological framework of Critical Theory	134
7 Varieties of critique: Critical Theory compared	166
8 Methodology in action	198

<i>Notes</i>	230
<i>Bibliography</i>	233
<i>Index</i>	243

Introduction

The principal argument of this book, the argument regarding contemporary Critical Theory's methodology, is a response to a significant development internal to Critical Theory as well as to demanding contextual pressures exerted upon it. Both the internal development and the contextual change can be dated to roughly the same period. From the late 1980s, it became increasingly evident that a new concept, the concept of 'immanent transcendence', has emerged to take the place of Critical Theory's key concept. It brought Critical Theory's left-Hegelian heritage into much sharper focus than ever before, highlighting in particular the relation between Critical Theory and pragmatism. At about the same time, the international debate about critique, which was earlier marked by the clash between Habermas and Gadamer, was rekindled by a wave of both direct and indirect assaults on Critical Theory from a variety of vantage points, some of an interpretative kind and others representing concepts of critique differing from that of Critical Theory. These attacks did not just call forth predictable defensive reactions from Critical Theory, but more productively also stimulated reflection, self-examination and efforts aimed at self-clarification and elaboration. The confluence of the internal development and contextual pressures pointed towards the need for the specification of Critical Theory's methodology in terms of its left-Hegelian heritage as encapsulated by the new concept of immanent transcendence.

This task was taken up first in the early 1990s, but it has gained momentum only in the new millennium. Although a number of significant milestones have been erected along the way, much still remains to be done. The aim of this book, therefore, is to make a contribution to this task by taking the elaboration of Critical Theory's methodology a step farther in terms of the currently prevailing internal requirements of its own tradition and external demands emanating from the wider intellectual context in which it is embedded. In Part I, the internal development of Critical Theory is traced from the perspective of the new concept of immanent transcendence, with due regard for those elements of the left-Hegelian tradition which have been rendered visible by this novel vision. In Part II, the methodology of contemporary Critical Theory is developed and illustrated in terms of this new concept and its metatheoretical and theoretical implications, based on recent achievements and located within the context of the international debate about critique.

Internal development of Critical Theory

The development that eventually culminated in the recognition of immanent transcendence as the key concept of Critical Theory was initiated by Karl-Otto Apel and Jürgen Habermas in the post-war period. In the 1960s, they were faced with making sense of the relations among hermeneutics, the tradition which continued uninterrupted through the Nazi era, and the two traditions which returned from exile after the war, namely Critical Theory and positivism, in a way that critically salvaged the defensible elements of the core German tradition. Besides a critique of science and a critique of hermeneutics, which bloomed into the well-known positivist dispute and Habermas–Gadamer debate, they found vital support in pragmatism, particularly on the basis of Apel's groundbreaking studies of its founder, Charles S. Peirce. Pragmatism resonated with various trends in the broader intellectual milieu, such as the linguistic-pragmatic turn, the cognitive revolution and the structuralist revolution, yet more important still was that, like Critical Theory, it not only maintained a relation between theory and practice but also formed part of the left-Hegelian tradition. Both the two leading second-generation critical theorists – to resort to the somewhat arbitrary device of generations for expository purposes – returned again and again to left-Hegelianism and its classical roots in Kant and Hegel and on that basis identified, besides Marx, also Peirce and Kierkegaard as its authentic representatives. Although for them this tradition, as these three names suggest, was concerned with world constitution and transformation, problem-solving knowledge production and subject formation, they saw Peirce as having provided the necessary means to think through this whole complex of relations. It took the form of his semiotic theory of signs and the associated sign-mediated theory of knowledge with its multilevel conception of reality.

Habermas and Apel drew out a variety of implications of this fuller understanding of the left-Hegelian tradition, including for example a pluralist philosophy of social science, a communication theory of society, the normative foundations of critique, the concept of immanent transcendence, the threefold theory of signs and the relation between Critical Theory and pragmatism, but partial emphases, incomplete developments and gaps remained. In addition to continuing the major lines such as the normative foundations of critique and the communication theory of society, the third generation of critical theorists became attentive to some of these inadequacies and introduced a series of diversions and qualifications. Among these were the appeal to praxis philosophy to overcome the dualism of lifeworld and system (McCarthy, Honneth); the shift from language to recognition (Honneth); the introduction of feminism (Benhabib, Fraser); the pragmatization of Critical Theory to do justice both to the impurity of the historical realization of reason (McCarthy) and to the democratic social organization of critical social research and knowledge production (Bohman); the placing of the concept of immanent transcendence on the agenda and pursuit of methodology to some degree (McCarthy, Honneth); and, finally, the development of a theory

of structure formation to fill a conspicuous gap in the theory of the process of constitution of society (Eder). As the international debate about critique intensified, the third generation gradually increased the attention paid to methodology (McCarthy, Honneth), but it is remarkable that this methodology's link with immanent transcendence was not adequately substantiated and that its epistemological underpinnings rooted in the semiotic theory of signs were virtually completely ignored. A consequence of this twofold deficiency was that Critical Theory's explanatory function remained below the required level of explication.

The relative neglect of Critical Theory's methodology was highlighted by the intensifying international debate about critique and, in fact, awareness of it became so acute that, besides efforts on the part of Honneth, the emerging younger generation of critical theorists overwhelmingly tends towards addressing this problem. They do so from different angles, stretching from a rehabilitation of ideology critique (Jaeggi), through an elaboration of reconstructive critique beyond Habermas's communication-theoretical and Honneth's recognition-theoretical versions (Iser, Celikates) as well as putting in place and appropriating Foucault's genealogical critique (McCarthy, Honneth, Saar, Basaure), to a rehabilitation of the psychoanalytical model (Basaure, Celikates) and rethinking the relation between Critical Theory and its addressees (Celikates). What is remarkable despite this level of response, however, is the continuing methodological deficit. Various aspects are indeed fruitfully addressed, but appreciation for the left-Hegelian tradition and thus the relation between Critical Theory and pragmatism is too low for its metatheoretical, epistemological and ontological significance to receive sufficient recognition. Occasionally, the key concept of immanent transcendence is mentioned, yet is afforded little elaboration, whereas the sign-mediated theory of cognition, knowledge production and action disappears from sight and is no longer available as a source for the systematic development of Critical Theory's methodology. As a consequence, the latest phase in the development of Critical Theory tends to reproduce, despite the oft-repeated demand that it must be able to provide causal explanations, the explanatory deficit from which it has been suffering for some time. Not only do the critical theorists need to go beyond a preponderant emphasis on normative critique, yet without surrendering it, but they are also required to come to grips with the advances and demands of the post-empiricist phase in the development of the social sciences.

It is against this background of the internal development and failures of contemporary Critical Theory that the aim of this book and the thrust of its principal argument become comprehensible. In Part I, it first seeks to recoup left-Hegelianism in a way that highlights the relation between Critical Theory and pragmatism as two related strands of this tradition and to bring out the core they have in common.¹ Although the concept of immanent transcendence is central here, this core also embraces the semiotic theory of signs and the associated epistemological and ontological assumptions. On this basis, Part II is devoted to providing a systematic and coherent development, presentation and illustration of contemporary Critical Theory's methodology. This is done with due regard