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SOCIAL CRITICISM AS A SOCIAL PRACTICE

Juha Räikkä

University of Turku

Abstract. In this paper I will analyse the notion of social criticism. I will follow a three-step strategy. First, I will distinguish between three types of social criticism that I take to be the main ways of practising social criticism. Second, I will briefly review a particular debate concerning the notion of social criticism. Third, a suggestion for the definition of ‘social criticism’ is given. According to that definition, social criticism refers to a public argumentative practice where a citizen’s primary interest is to convince people by a moral argument of the justifiability of a practical solution to some contestable social question that she thinks is right or that is recommended by the institution she represents. I will defend the definition that is put forth and explicate its implications. My overall motivation to study the notion of social criticism comes from a conviction that ‘social criticism’ is an important and useful concept since it helps us to clarify the muddy waters between pure politics and political theory.

The notion of social criticism seems to be accepted as a permanent conceptual tool in political philosophy.* Political philosophers use ‘social criticism’ in various contexts. The list of persons who are called social critics seems to be endless. The notion of social criticism is included as a headword in the *Philosopher’s Index*, and philosophers even have a journal that has ‘social criticism’ in its title, namely *Philosophy and Social Criticism*. There has also been some discussion of the main characteristics of the activity of social criticism (see e.g. Bottomore 1976, Sartre 1983, Newton and Rosenfelt 1985, Outhweite and Mulkay 1987, Habermas 1989, Shapiro 1990, Beynes 1992, Schmitt and Moddy 1993, Beiner 1985, Kitromilides 1992, Räikkä 1997). However, in comparison with concepts like ‘social theory’, ‘political philosophy’, ‘grand theory’, and ‘social philosophy’, the notion of social criticism in itself seems to have gathered

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relatively little attention from a philosophical point of view, i.e. from a point of view that asks what 'social criticism' *means*, what are the proper *aims* of social criticism and what is the relation between social criticism and *justification*. Given the general use of 'social criticism' in the literature and the long list of social critics, this lacuna is somewhat surprising. Perhaps one of the reasons is that 'social criticism' has close relations to critical theory while questions related to justification and meaning are more often pursued by theorists who come from the analytic tradition, so to speak.

Of course, social criticism understood as a criticism of social practices and institutions must be as old as societies themselves. Perhaps the most famous social critic is Socrates, but the history of philosophy contains many other social critics as well. Rousseau and Marx, for instance, are often included in the list. However, social criticism has not been the business of philosophers only. The name 'social critic' has been attributed to humanist writers such as Erasmus Rotterdamus and Thomas More, 20th century novelists such as George Orwell and Albert Camus, religious leaders such as Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, and political leaders such as Nelson Mandela and Vačlav Havel. Given the variety of "social critics", it is certainly justifiable to ask exactly what makes criticism of social practices a form of social criticism. Surely not all evaluation of the social world can be counted as social criticism.

In the next few pages I would like to analyse the notion of social criticism. I will follow a three-step strategy. First, I will distinguish between three types of social criticism that I take to be the main ways in which social criticism is practiced. In the following discussion these types are labeled the 'unmasking' social criticism, 'sociological' social criticism and 'principled' social criticism. Second, I will briefly review a particular debate concerning the notion of social criticism. I will argue that although the parties in that debate speak as if they are discussing the meaning of 'social criticism', they really are arguing what makes arguments that represent social criticism good and acceptable. Finally, a suggestion for the definition of 'social criticism' is given. I will say something to defend the definition that is put forth and explicate its implications.

My overall motivation to study the notion of social criticism comes from the conviction that 'social criticism' is an important and useful concept: it seems to help us to clarify the muddy waters between pure politics and political theory, and a relatively precise definition of 'social criticism' seems to add clarity to *substantive* debates in political theory. There has been much debate concerning the relation between politics and political philosophy. Arguments presented in that discussion over the years include claims that political philosophy is pretty irrelevant for politics and political activism (Bader 1990, Baier 1989:790), that at least implicitly political philosophy aims to shape social and political institutions (Miller and Siedentop 1983:2), that practical political guidance is not the only task of political philosophy (Leonard 1989:105), that political philosophy should be more relevant to politics than it actually is (Mouffe 1987), that political

philosophy should not only tell what to do but also how to go about doing it (Plamenatz 1968:29), and that political philosophers should not go into politics since political philosophy is best carried on at some remove from the most pressing political concerns (Thompson 1985:206, Rawls 1987:24). Understanding the role of social criticism helps to clarify at least some of these issues, and I will come back to this point in concluding remarks.

Let us begin, however, by distinguishing three types of social criticism.

1. Three types of social criticism

A quick look at the literature suggests that there are three main types of social criticism. Although these types are closely related to each other and social critics often use all of them, they are nonetheless clearly distinct. Let us call these (1) the unmasking social criticism, (2) sociological social criticism, and (3) principled social criticism.

(1) *The Unmasking Social Criticism.* When a social critic practices the unmasking social criticism she points out that there is a disparity between the interests that actually motivate action and the norms that individuals appeal to in justifying their action. People can and often do make mistakes about what motivates their behavior, and sometimes they are motivated not by what they say, although they are *not* mistaken. The motives may be egoistic and morally blameworthy even if they say that they are acting for the sake of morally good things, and even if they sincerely think that they are acting for the sake of morally good things. Social criticism may unmask the real motives behind certain social practices, demand people to correct their views concerning their motives, and ultimately commit them to action that is both justified *and* motivated with regard to morally acceptable reasons. The unmasking social criticism assumes a view contrary to the position sometimes called psychological egoism. The unmasking social criticism assumes that a person's motives are not always egoistic, that motives can be either morally acceptable or morally blameworthy. People clearly can act on ground that they reject if they do not know that they act on such, rejectable, ground. But surely they should *not* act on the ground they reject, i.e. if they are right in rejecting that ground.

Unmasking criticism is difficult. Although it is sometimes easy to reveal someone's motives, this is not always the case. A person who always suspects another's motives is not a social critic but a paranoid. When a person is right in her suspicions about someone else, it does not necessarily follow that such "bad guys" will confess that they are bad. They can always claim that their motives are pure, and often it seems that they are simply unable to see their real motives. This raises deep and disturbing questions. If a person is unable to identify her motives, who is able to identify them? Is it always wrong to act on other motives than the

motives one offers in justification of her actions? Is a suspect motive always a demonstration of a suspect position?

(2) *Sociological Social Criticism*. When a social critic claims that there is a disparity between what members of society actually do and what they think they do, she practices sociological social criticism. Detailed descriptions and interpretations of what people are actually doing (as a kind of critical history of the present), sometimes reveal unnoticed aspects of everyday activities, including discrimination, oppression and harassment (cf. Bohman 1991:204). Sociological criticism may show, for instance, that there are racist practices even in a society where people generally think that they oppose racism and that their society does not include racist practices. It is possible that a citizen who opposes racism and believes that racism is a thing of the past is unaware that many of her compatriots are still racists, or that she has hidden racist attitudes and habits. A logical implication of one's viewpoint may be a racist belief, even if one is unable to notice that implication herself. By giving new descriptions, referring to new empirical evidence, and pointing out logical implications of various viewpoints, a critic may claim ground for social change. Social sciences (and especially certain fields of sociology) are relevant for social criticism just because they often explicate the consequences of our commitments and provide revealing interpretations of social reality. Collective self-deception, social illusions and false consciousness, understood as a general ignorance of everyday but unpleasant social facts, are some of the objects of social criticism (cf. Wood 1988).

Sometimes sociological social critics aim to *define* social phenomena in a new way. Rather than specifying the hidden implications of our thoughts and practices, a critic may argue that certain familiar social practices are really something else than what they are generally thought to be. Perhaps a given practice *is* racist, even if it is not thought to be so. These kinds of arguments too represent a form of sociological criticism, and they are based on the conviction that naming things is an effective way to change things.

(3) *Principled Social Criticism*. Perhaps the most common type of social criticism is principled social criticism. It concerns the possible disparity, on the one hand, between adequate moral principles (or views) and people's beliefs about adequate moral principles, and, on the other hand, the disparity between practices that are recommended by the adequate moral principles and the actual practices of people. A principled social critic may criticize, say, laws concerning punishment, because she thinks that they are unjust. Or she may criticize her fellow countrymen's views about laws concerning punishment, because she thinks that these people are wrong since they support unjust laws. An important assumption in principled social criticism is the conviction that people may be wrong in their moral beliefs. Without this presumption, much of social criticism would be pointless. Of course, disagreements in civic discussion are often based on disputes concerning empirical (social) facts, not adequate moral principles or views. Persons may disagree about the moral acceptability of a certain type of

punishment just because they disagree about facts concerning the effects of that type of punishment. But frequently these kinds of confrontations have their roots in conflicting moral values. Thus, principled criticism suggests that there is a strict distinction between justified moral views and actual moral views (although some of the actual moral views may of course be justified too).

The “moral principles” included in principled social criticism should be understood in a broad sense. Moral principles can be principles of justice or views concerning virtues and values, and they can have either a religious or a secular ground. Moral principles can also be adequate parts of extensive political doctrines. A comprehensive *Weltanschauung* can serve as a “moral principle” in principled criticism. In short, principled social criticism can use any source that has or is claimed to have relevant normative implications.

This distinction between the unmasking criticism, sociological criticism, and principled criticism is not the only way to classify types of social criticism. Joshua Cohen (1986:297), for instance, has distinguished between the unmasking criticism, moral criticism, and political criticism. Cohen’s understanding of the unmasking criticism is similar to the understanding that is presented above. However, Cohen’s ‘moral criticism’ and ‘political criticism’ seem to be subtypes of what I call principled social criticism. A moral critic criticizes social practices on the basis of moral principles, but her suggestions are often *infeasible*; a political critic criticizes social practices on the basis of moral principles as well, but her suggestions are always *feasible*. Political critics take “human beings as they are and institutions as they can be” (ibid.). Cohen’s approach may be valuable, but since it neglects sociological social criticism entirely, the classification given above seems to be more exhaustive (although it need not be completely exhaustive).

2. Social criticism vs good social criticism

But even an exhaustive classification of the types of social criticism does not tell us what social criticism exactly is. So, let us briefly review a particular debate on the notion of social criticism, specifically, the debate between Michael Walzer and Brian Barry, to see what this exchange reveals about the nature of social criticism. Walzer has one of the most well known theories of social criticism. He has defended these ideas in *Interpretation and Social Criticism* (1987) and *Company of Critics* (1989), and also in a series of articles that followed these books (e.g. Walzer 1990), as well as in the more recent works *Thick and Thin* (1994) and *On Toleration* (1997). Barry (1984, 1990, 1995) in turn has expressed his account mainly in a series of critical reviews and survey articles on Walzer’s works.

The main issue in the debate between Walzer and Barry is the question what social criticism *is*. Walzer (1987:preface) aims to “provide a philosophical

framework for the understanding of social criticism as a social practice”, and he tries to define ‘social criticism’ in a way that is distinguished from what he calls the “conventional view” (ibid:38) and “the standard view of criticism” (1989:12) that “has the air of a theoretical account” (ibid:226) and makes the social critic a “total stranger” and “an outsider” (1987:38). Barry’s (1990:362) intention is to criticize Walzer’s “definition of ‘social criticism’”, thus rejecting “Walzer’s conception of social criticism” (ibid:364). According to Barry, the “essence of social criticism, on Walzer’s conception”, is wrongly identified. However, the question concerning what ‘social criticism’ means is not the only issue Walzer and Barry have discussed. They have also asked what kind of social criticism is “good criticism” (ibid:367), what kind of person is “the ideal critic” (Walzer 1989:233), and what is the “valid form of criticism” (Barry 1990:368)? Indeed, Walzer’s motivation in proposing his account of social criticism is evidently to draw attention to the actual or possible existence of a certain type of social discourse to which he attaches considerable value and importance, and he expresses this valuation of this specific kind of discourse by baptizing it ‘social criticism’. Barry’s objections to Walzer’s proposal in turn claim that the discourse not falling within Walzer’s narrow definition might have some value too, and that methodological and moral norms that (should) govern social criticism are different from those that Walzer suggests. In effect, Walzer and Barry answer all of the following questions (Q1-Q4) in a strictly opposite way:

- (Q1) To be counted as social criticism, must the criticism be made by a person who is a member of the society she is criticizing?
- (Q2) To be counted as social criticism, must the criticism be directed toward society at large, not only toward other critics?
- (Q3) To be counted as social criticism, must the criticism be based on an interpretation of values and meanings already embedded in society?
- (Q4) Is the main benefit of social criticism efficacy?

Walzer’s answer to all of the questions Q1-Q4 is ‘yes’. Barry answers ‘no’. In Walzer’s view, to be counted as social criticism, the criticism must be presented by a person who is a member of the society she is criticizing. (Q1) According to Walzer, “critics stand sufficiently close to their audience and are sufficiently confident of their standing so that they are not driven to use highly specialized or esoteric languages” (Walzer 1989:11). Barry (1990:367) thinks that critics can be outsiders, since it “may be that the members of a society are systematically blinded by their belief system to grave defects in their practices and that an outsider is better placed to illuminate the darkness”. Walzer argues that to be counted as social criticism, the criticism must be directed towards society at large, not only towards other critics. (Q2) For Walzer (1987:35), “social critics are individuals, but most of the time, members, speaking to other members who join in the speaking and whose speech constitutes a collective reflection upon the conditions of collective life”. Barry (1990:372) answers that John Rawls for

instance, who “is an academic rather than a journalist, novelist, or essayist”, is still a serious “candidate for inclusion” to the list of social critics. In Walzer’s view, to be counted as social criticism, the criticism must be based solely on the interpretation of value and meaning as already embedded in society. (Q3) The social critic, to Walzer (1989:232), “gives expression of his people’s deepest sense of how they ought to live”. According to Barry (1990:368-9), interpretation of existing (but hidden) values is not a sufficient method of criticism, since people may “produce rival interpretations of the same cultural inheritance”, and a criterion of good interpretation is needed. Walzer thinks that the main benefit of social criticism is efficacy. (Q4) In his view, even if social critics may be motivated “by a passion for truth” they “hope to be effective”, and the best criticism is efficient criticism. People “are the effective authority: we hold up our interpretations for their approval”. (Walzer 1989:19,30,233.) Barry (1990:367) writes that “efficacy among the members of the society being criticized is not the only criterion of good criticism”. The “matter of truth (something about which Walzer frequently expresses unease)” has to do with good criticism as well (ibid:373).

Walzer does not seem to draw a clear distinction between the notion of social criticism per se and the notion of good social criticism. Walzer answers ‘yes’ to questions concerning what social criticism is (Q1-Q3) just because he answers ‘yes’ to the question concerning what is good social criticism (Q4). That is to say, Walzer defines ‘social criticism’ on the basis of how he understands ‘good social criticism’. In Walzer’s view, criticism should be presented by a member of a society she criticizes because, so Walzer (1989:233) presupposes, only this kind of criticism can be effective, i.e. good. Likewise, criticism should be directed towards society at large, and it should be based on the interpretation of values and meanings already embedded in society, because, as Walzer (ibid:234) claims, this is the requirement of efficacy. From these convictions Walzer infers that to be counted as social criticism, criticism should be presented by a person who is a member of the society she is criticizing, should be directed towards society at large, and should be based solely on interpretation. True, in places, Walzer (1987:63) wishes to distinguish between ‘social criticism’ and ‘good social criticism’. For instance, he writes that while he is “tempted to say of Lenin and his friends that they were not social critics at all (...) it is probably better to say that they were bad social critics”. In general, however, Walzer does not treat the notion of social criticism as separate from his ideas of good social criticism.

Barry does not present his own definition of ‘social criticism’, but concentrates on criticizing Walzer’s definition. Interestingly, Barry’s objections to Walzer’s idea of the nature of social criticism are largely based on views concerning the evaluation of *good* social criticism. According to Barry (1990:367, 372), criticism presented by outsiders *can* be effective, and so can criticism that is directed mainly towards other critics and that is not based solely on interpretation. Moreover, on Barry’s (ibid: 368) view, criticism may be valuable even if it is not

efficacious – even if it “cuts no ice”. Because Barry relies on such arguments to claim that social criticism need not be presented by a person who is a member of the society she is criticizing, need not be directed towards society at large and need not be based solely on interpretation, he too is appealing to a view of good social criticism in formulating his conception of what social criticism is in itself. Barry’s solution seems plausible. ‘Good social criticism’ must be part of ‘social criticism’.

However, there is an easier way to criticize Walzer’s definition than questioning his ideas of good social criticism. It is trivially true that we do not need to appeal to good social criticism in order to define ‘social criticism’. We can say, for instance, that criticism that is presented by outsiders may not be effective nor otherwise good, but *still* is social criticism. Or we can say that criticism that is directed only towards other critics, and is not based solely on interpretation, represents social criticism *whether or not* it is effective or justified or whatever is thought to be the main virtue of social criticism. Walzer (1987:35) writes that although his “stipulative definition of social criticism” is not “the single possible or correct definition”, it is the one that “should come first” in “the dictionary’s usual list”. This claim, however, is hardly right. At least, ‘social criticism’ should not be defined on the basis of ‘good social criticism’, for we all know they are quite separate matters.

3. Social criticism (re-) defined

Now, it is clear that there is no single correct definition of ‘social criticism’. ‘Social criticism’ is used in many ways; sometimes ‘social criticism’ is meant to simply describe the critique of a certain practice on grounds that it causes social problems (see Paul 1998:92-3). There is nothing wrong with that. However, in order to be a useful concept for political (and social) philosophers, and political scientists perhaps, a definition of ‘social criticism’ should satisfy certain minimal criteria. These criteria include the following three requirements (C1–C3). (C1) First, the definition should be compatible with some ordinary meanings of the concept, and should not be incompatible with all dictionary definitions. (Otherwise, our definition would not be a definition of ‘social criticism’ but of something else.) In practice, this claim means that the definition should identify most of those persons who are usually called social critics as social critics. (C2) Second, the definition should distinguish social criticism both from political philosophy and politics. (Otherwise the definition would not help in clarifying the relation between political philosophy and politics.) (C3) Finally, the definition should suggest reasonable criteria, if any, for good social criticism. (Otherwise ‘good social criticism’ would not be a part of ‘social criticism’, an unacceptable implication.) A definition that seems to satisfy these conditions is definition SC.

(SC) Social criticism refers to the public argumentative practice where a citizen's primary interest is to make people believe, by appeal to a moral argument, in the justification of some practical solution to some contestable social question that she thinks is right or that is recommended by the institution she represents.

SC differs clearly both from Walzer's definition for social criticism and Barry's objections. Let us consider the implications of definition SC, having in mind criteria C1–C3.

(C1) *Coherence with some ordinary meanings.* When social criticism is interpreted according to SC, every citizen of a democratic society is a potential social critic. When a citizen uses a public forum – journal, newspaper, television, public lecture, meeting, or the internet – to argue, for instance, that social justice demands that the taxation system should favor those who are economically disadvantaged more than it currently does, she practices social criticism. Often, arguments representing this form of social criticism just reiterate what has already been said. Social critics are not necessarily heroic geniuses who have radically detached themselves from common ways of thinking and feeling. In every free country there are thousands of people who sometimes practice social criticism, although we can reserve the name 'social critic' to persons who practice social criticism regularly.

Social criticism, as defined in SC, does *not* necessarily require that one aims in social criticism to transform the existing social institutions, structures, practices, policies and laws. Social critics *may* support moderate revisions. Or they *may* defend radical reforms or even violent revolution. But they need not do either of these things. They may favor conserving the status quo. A conservative social critic criticizes suggestions made by those who strive for social change, or social processes that threaten the existing institutions. When mainstreamers support changes, a citizen who opposes changes may be radical – and still conservative in a sense. Environmental activists, for example, oppose societal changes that are harmful to the natural environment, but surely some of these activists are quite radical. A relatively common view that holds that the practice of social criticism is a respectable and welcome phenomenon ("a part of democracy") does not necessarily imply that supporting change is a respectable phenomenon. These two things are often equated, although their relation is clearly contingent. In any case, social critics may disagree whether the existing institutions should be changed, to what extent they should be changed, and to what direction they should be changed (if they should be changed at all).

According to SC, social criticism consists in argumentative proposals and critical responses to them. Social criticism consists in argumentative action; a person who regularly practices social criticism, but is not willing to do anything else to make people accept her views, is still a social critic. In real life, of course, social critics have often been very willing to do things beyond argumentative acts

too. Many famous social critics are known, not for their argumentative talents, but for their ability and willingness to use guns and dynamite. But direct action in this sense is not a necessary part of social criticism. Political results are often achieved by mere speech acts; this is why some social critics hesitate to use other political means than the most civilized and clever method, argumentation.

Of course, it is not a trivial matter to decide what should count as ‘argument’ in the context of social criticism. Here we must employ an extraordinarily wide conception of ‘argument’. When social critics make “arguments”, they may make them through films, novels or satirical comments, for instance. The question of exactly how art can be used as a means to present arguments should be skipped here; it is enough to suppose that it can have argumentative content.

Social critics are usually members of the community they evaluate and much of social criticism is *internal criticism*. But, according to SC, membership is not a necessary condition for being a critic. A person may criticize the affairs of a foreign country (transnational social criticism), another culture, or an ethnic or national minority within her country. A critic may do this in order to appeal to foreigners, members of another culture, or members of a minority. Or she may try to effect her compatriots’ acts regarding a foreign country, another culture, or a minority group. So we can distinguish between *external criticism* with *internal purpose*, and *external criticism* with *external purpose*. As it is often difficult to get trustworthy information concerning other cultures’ values, practices, meanings attributed to those practices and so on, we may often find it uneasy to criticize other cultures (cf. LaCroix 1988:249). The result is that criticism directed at the members of other cultures seldom produce results. However, sometimes a distance from accepted practices can help critics to reply to objections from foreigners, members of other cultures, or members of a minority community that are directed at them.

Social critics are sometimes *Gastarbeiters*, defending the views of institutions they represent. This may sound strange, but the reason why SC counts persons who serve institutions as social critics is relatively simple. Sometimes social criticism is practiced by collective agents: institutions, organizations, and corporations can be behind the arguments that represent social criticism. In practice, however, persons, or a person, presents these arguments and defends them. So, to do justice to ordinary ways of talking, it makes sense to say that an institutional representative is a social critic, although, in fact, the “real agent” is collective. A revolutionary party is not a social critic: its voice is.

Note that SC does *not* capture all of the ordinary senses of ‘social criticism’: on my definition, for instance, conscientious objectors (who don’t argue in public) are *not* social critics. Note also that one can point out the disparity between the interests that actually motivate people and the interests that people appeal to in justifying their actions also *without* having the usual goal of social criticism (suggested by definition SC).

❶ (C2) *Distinguishing social criticism from political philosophy and politics.* SC implies that not all public and moral arguments that concern contestable social issues represent forms of social criticism. These kinds of arguments may have other primary objectives beyond the purpose of making people believe in the justification of certain practical solutions to contestable social questions. A citizen may speak in the public square just to declare, report, announce or clarify her position in a moral debate. Sometimes there is a need for such talk. A professional may engage in a dialogue to help her fellow associates, say, a group of medical doctors, to identify basic values that define a group's functions. Or, she may tell outsiders about these values, simply to legitimize the existence and claims of the group. A "populist" politician may present public moral arguments about contestable issues and intentionally defend certain solutions merely in order to gain votes, without the primary interest to make people believe in the justification of those solutions. It is clear that a public and moral argument that concerns disputable issues of the large interest may be *interpreted as* social criticism although, in fact, the arguer's primary interest is not to make people believe in the justification of certain solutions to contestable social issues, but rather for other purposes. (Actually, when a populist politician's primary interest is to gain votes by her public talks, it is crucial that people misread the politician's real interests.) It follows that arguers who do not have a primary interest in making people believe in the justification of certain solutions to practical issues may, actually, contribute to their solution.

❷ While it is true that social criticism presupposes that people may be wrong in their moral beliefs, it does not follow that social criticism presupposes that moral claims can be justified without any reference to people's moral beliefs. According to SC, the practice of social criticism does not presuppose, nor imply, any contestable metaethical position. The view that a moral judgment's justification depends at least in part on it being appropriately related to our actual substantial moral views is compatible with the practice of social criticism. But so is the view which denies this and claims that the facts about the genesis of our moral beliefs militate against the appeal to actual moral convictions in the justification of moral judgments. Some social critics have explicitly based their arguments on shared values and meanings. Others have tried to justify their position without any reference to actual moral convictions. Granting that these two strategies really differ – one might argue that the contradiction between them is merely apparent – one or the other of them must be mistaken. But still they both represent social criticism.

❸ However, not all social critics try to *justify* the view they defend when they practice social criticism. A distinction should be made between 'justifying the conclusion' (justification *simpliciter*) and 'justifying the conclusion to a person' (personal justification). Suppose an atheist is arguing that abortion should be allowed by the law, because, on the correct interpretation of the *Bible*, abortion should be allowed. It is obvious that she is not trying to justify the view that

abortion should be allowed on the grounds of the law. However, she may try to justify the view that abortion should be allowed by the law *for those* who believe in the *Bible*. A person with fitting beliefs may be justified in believing that abortion should be allowed by the law, whether or not the view that abortion should be allowed by the law is justified. Sometimes social critics do not try to justify the conclusion they defend but instead justify the conclusion they defend for certain people – and by doing so make people believe in the justification of such practical solutions to some problem that they think is right or that is recommended by the institution they represent.

A distinction should be made also between ‘justifying the conclusion to a person’ and ‘convincing a person’ (persuasion). An atheist who defends the view that abortion should be allowed by the law may simply try to convince others to believe that abortion should be allowed by the law. After hearing an argument for the view that abortion should be allowed by the law, a person who does *not* have fitting beliefs may *not* be personally justified in believing that abortion should be allowed by the law. However, she may begin to believe that abortion should be allowed by the law, because she (mistakenly) thinks that, given her beliefs (that are in her view correct), she is justified in believing that abortion should be allowed by the law. A social critic may be interested in convincing people just in order to win them on her side, and by doing so make people believe in the justification of ideas she finds acceptable or that are recommended by the institution she represents. It follows that sometimes social criticism comes close to the form of argumentation often called *rhetoric*, aiming to affect people’s beliefs without reference to the real logical outcomes of their beliefs. In this light, certain versions of indoctrination and propaganda can also be seen as forms of social criticism, and it becomes transparent that social criticism should not be equated with political (or social) philosophy.

According to SC, social critics always presume that the position they defend is in fact justified or that it is justified at least according to the institution they represent. Suppose citizen S does not think that abortion should be allowed by the law and that it is not the official view of the institution that S represents that abortion should be allowed by the law. Suppose further that, for one reason or another, S convinces, by public moral argument, a religious person to believe that abortion should be allowed by the law. Or, suppose that S shows, by public moral argument, to a religious person that, given that person’s beliefs, she is justified in believing that abortion should be allowed by the law. In either of the cases (that are admittedly somewhat unusual in real life) the practice at hand is not social criticism. Perhaps S is just having fun, trying to win a bet or something. Or perhaps S benefits otherwise if the view that abortion should be allowed by the law becomes more common, even if S herself does not think that it should be allowed. In any case, whether public moral arguments represent social criticism depends, among other things, on the thoughts and the institutional position of the critic.

Arguments representing social criticism are moral arguments. SC says that social critics try to make people, or their opponents, *believe* in the views they defend, not merely *support* the views they defend. By argumentation and negotiation it is relatively easy to make people support certain views. For instance, when a citizen promises to give money to a voter if she votes for the view that ethnic minorities are entitled to special legal protection, it is possible that she will support that view. But here we are not talking about moral argumentation, far less social criticism. Moral arguments are not presented merely to make people support certain viewpoints, but instead aim to change peoples' minds too. It is clear that to make people believe in the justification for a certain policy, it is often important to make them support that policy too, but this result is not necessary. Arguments that represents social criticism should be distinguished from other politically relevant arguments that represent mere political bargaining.

(C3) *Suggesting reasonable criteria for good criticism.* In general, SC suggests reasonable criteria for good social criticism. A distinction should be made between the benefits of a public debate in which arguments representing social criticism are presented and the benefits of those arguments themselves. In liberal democracies good public debate occurs when it is possible to hear the views of all parties that are relevant with regard to the issue under discussion. We tend to think that discussion has failed if certain parties are passed over or excluded, intentionally or accidentally, without learning their opinion. A good public debate also includes experts' viewpoints. Decisions should be based on facts also, not only on interests, and a good public debate needs good arguments too. In a good public debate the role of media is crucial, for it is media that transforms mere debate into *public* debate where parties can easily be aware of each others' position.

What makes arguments themselves good? According to SC, the aim of the social critic is to influence, and so it is natural to conclude that good critics are those who realize this aim, i.e. who in fact influence social reality or people's thoughts. When an institution hires a person to morally defend, in public, its interests, surely this person, as a social critic, has succeed if those interests are in fact achieved and people believe in the reasons presented. Therefore, a good *argument* representing social criticism is an argument that has social effects. However, the claim that efficacy is the *only* criterion of good criticism would hardly be tenable. Rather stupid arguments may have social effects, and whether a particular argument does have social effects depends largely on how it is said and who says it. In social criticism good arguments are well-presented arguments, but obviously that is not enough. A good publicly presented moral argument is an argument that has to do with truth or justification as well. This follows from SC too. When a social critic defends a solution that she finds justified, she has not necessarily succeeded in social criticism, even if she has succeeded in changing people's minds. The aim of the critic is to make people believe in the justified solution; if the solution that she thinks is justified is not in fact justified, she has

not succeeded in her objective. Since good arguments support justified conclusions, it is important to study which conclusions are justified. Here, social criticism comes close to political (and social) philosophy again: the social critic needs political philosophy to study which conclusions are acceptable even if she need not use the arguments of political (or social) philosophy when presenting arguments that represent social criticism, i.e. when she wishes to be effective.

It follows that only a few of the arguments representing social criticism are good, and only few social critics are good critics, specifically those who effectively defend the acceptable conclusions. It also follows that it is extremely difficult to judge when an argument is good: it is hard to decide when conclusions are acceptable, and it is not easier to say when an argument has social effects, for arguments *alone* cause only few social effects.

4. Concluding remarks

I have argued that a tempting way to understand the notion of social criticism is to interpret it as a public argumentative practice where a citizen's primary interest is to make people believe, with a moral argument, in the justification of a practical solution to some contestable social question that the critic thinks is right or that is recommended by the institution she represents. This interpretation distinguishes social criticism both from politics and political philosophy. Not any kind of political bargaining represents social criticism, nor does any study of politically relevant arguments.

If the interpretation of social criticism defended above is correct, then presenting arguments in public and trying to shape social institutions is not the practice of political philosophy (or theory), but rather social criticism. However, in order to be a *good* social critic one needs political philosophy, for otherwise it is impossible to judge which social institutions and practices deserve criticism and which do not. So, there really is a continuum from political philosophy to politics, it is just that social criticism is in the middle of this continuum and is irreducible to either of the endpoints. It follows that one is not justified to believe that political philosophy is irrelevant for politics and political activism (cf. Bader). However, one *is* justified to believe that practical political guidance may be one of the tasks of political guidance (cf. Leonard 105), and that at least implicitly political philosophy aims to shape social and political institutions (Miller and Siedentop 2).

It remains open whether political theorists have a special moral obligation to engage in social criticism. It may be that they have such an obligation – after all, they are potentially good social critics. However, if political theorists should indeed practice social criticism, it does not follow that social criticism and political theory are in fact not clearly separate matters, obtaining their own ends.

Potentially, political theorists may be good social critics, just like mathematicians may be good musicians.

Address:

University of Turku
Department of Philosophy
FIN-20014 Turku, Finland

Fax: +358 2 333 6270

Tel.: +358 2 333 6339

E-mail: jraikka@utu.fi

http://www.utu.fi/~jraikka/

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