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Karl Marx: Critique as Emancipatory Practice

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Critique of philosophy, critique of religion, critique of politics, critique of political economy – there is almost no sphere of modern society of which Karl Marx's theory does not offer a critique. This makes it all the more necessary to investigate whether these different critiques possess any common traits, be it with respect to their aims or their methods.¹ In what follows, I argue that Marx's notion of critique is unified by three characteristics and that it is still relevant for contemporary critical theory if understood as practice rather than as science. First, Marx's critique is always at the same time a critique of forms of knowledge and of the forms of practice that correspond to them. Second, it is practical and emancipatory in the sense that it aims not only to understand, but also to contribute to a transformation of the social world that is already under way. Third, Marx follows Hegel in rejecting the dichotomy between internal and external critique and in opting instead for what can be called immanent critique.² His version of immanent critique focuses on the internal contradictions and crises of a specific social order (modern capitalist society) and its social imaginary. Accordingly, it cannot be reduced to a purely normative undertaking, but involves empirical analyses of both a historical and a sociological kind. In Marx's theory, analysis and critique are thus inextricably linked. With regard to these three characteristics, Marx's conception of critique became paradigmatic for the tradition of critical theory and continues to be so up until today.

In order to separate the pertinent features of Marx's notion of critique from its more problematic or obsolete aspects, I proceed in four steps. I will begin by outlining some of the basic methodological and theoretical premises of the form of critique that can be found in Marx's work. After presenting the main features of his critique of liberal political

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