SOCIAL CRITICISM, CULTURAL CREATIVITY AND THE
CONTEMPORARY DIALECTICS OF TRANSFORMATIONS

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I can’t help but dream about a kind of criticism that would not try to judge,
but bring an œuvre, a book, a sentence, an idea to life; it would light fires,
watch the grass grow, listen to the wind, and catch the sea-foam in the
breeze and scatter it. It would multiply, not judgments, but signs of
existence; it would summon them, drag them from their sleep.

Michel Foucault

[A contemporary critique of capitalism] is perhaps more needed than ever,
as the demise of state socialism has increased capitalism’s self-assertion.
Today there is scarcely anyone who wants to criticize capitalism. And yet
in the European Union alone we have seventeen million unemployed. . . .
We have to imagine something new in order to criticize this system. But
the standard of criticism can only be the realization of a radical democracy,
which naturally involves taming capitalism by means of a social state to a
degree yet unknown.

Jürgen Habermas

To go inside in the life of the spirit is also to expand oneself in terms of
consciousness, to break down the separating wall between oneself and the
all. Self-realization with the medieval saints of India was not a running
away from the world to what is called to save one’s soul; it is being reborn
galoless, so that you are able to look at the whole world in a different eye.
You become a rebel because you want the relationships and arrangements
of society to be determined anew.

Chitta Ranjan Das

Social criticism is part of a wider criticism of life and is animated
by a passion for both critique and construction. It begins with an
enquiry into the foundations of our life and an awareness of its
multi-dimensional dynamics—the material and the spiritual, the
collective and the individual; it evaluates the nature of our

contemporary social institutions from the point of view of justice and human dignity. Life means multiple webs of relationships and criticism is an inquiry into the quality of these relationships. Criticism begins with a description of the dynamics of relationships, observes and describes both coherence and incoherence, harmonies and contradictions, and seeks to move from incoherence to coherence, darkness to light, and from light to more light.

Sociologically, self, society and culture are three dimensions, domains or levels of reality where the webs of relationship called life are at work. Though social criticism has definitely more to do with the field called the social, it is not separated from the dynamics of criticism and creativity in the field of self and culture. Society consists of the dialectic of value and power and social criticism is an enquiry into the mode of this dialectic without presupposing that this dialectic is a process of determination where power determines the terms of discourse and holds the keys to human emancipation. Social criticism is an inquiry into the nature of legitimacy of a society’s structure of power and the dignity of its institutional order. But the process of social criticism goes hand in hand with the process of self-criticism (i.e. self-criticism in the life of the subjects as well as an object of concern in the life of fellow beings) and cultural criticism.

The task of social criticism is one of interrogating the foundations of one’s society (also of another’s; consider the exemplary social criticism of American democracy presented to us by the French Alexis de Tocqueville) and reinterpreting it. What is the dynamics of such criticism and who are its actors? The actor can be an individual, a group of like-minded individuals whom we can call a community of critics, a group or a movement. The actors of social criticism can either conceive their role as one of just standing by the side of the river and never jumping into it or immersing themselves totally in it and presenting a critique from the inside out. In the case of the former, the critics perceive their role as one of pointing out the faults and contradictions of the society concerned but they do not take responsibility for their critical positions. Here social critics behave as marginal men and women; like Simmel’s strangers, “they are in but not wholly of their society.” In contrast to this, we can