1

Change for the Better

As a mode of reflection that looks critically at social arrangements from the point of view of the obstacles they pose for individual human flourishing, critical social theory has a built-in emancipatory perspective. Recalling the words of Rousseau, we might say that it seeks to liberate human beings from the social chains that bind them by showing how certain, historically contingent, social arrangements prevent them from fulfilling their potentials as human beings; its critical diagnoses and emancipatory projections are guided by an idea of the good society in which the salient social obstacles to human flourishing would once and for all have been overcome.

Transformation is therefore a key concept in critical social theory. Its centrality follows from a view of the social obstacles to human flourishing as being *contingent*: that is, the social arrangements that produce such obstacles are held to be neither divinely ordained, naturally necessary, nor historically inevitable and are therefore replaceable by other, more beneficial arrangements. Insofar as they posit a connection between theory and praxis, critical social theories interpret this as a call for transformative action: human beings themselves, by way of concrete struggles and interventions, must seek to transform the social arrangements that impede human flourishing. To do so, they must want to do so—they must be motivated to change the social arrangements in question; this implies, at a minimum, that they see such arrangements as impediments. To see them as such may require the transformation of perceptions of needs and interests.

The possibility of such a transformation is crucial because critical social theories rely on the distinction between the particular ideas of the good society orienting their critical diagnoses and emancipatory projections, on the one

hand, and the ideas of the good society dominant in the social order that is the object of their critique, on the other. However, as we shall see, if critical social theories are to avoid epistemological and ethical authoritarianism, they must suppose that their guiding ideas of the good society are able, potentially, to connect with the deep-seated, normative intuitions and expectations that are formative of the identities of the human beings they address: the inhabitants of the social order in question must be able, potentially, to recognize these intuitions and expectations as ethically valid, even though they may currently be lost, obscured, suppressed, or articulated in normatively deficient ways. In other words, on a nonauthoritarian understanding, the normative ideas guiding critical social theories, although not simply reducible to those prevailing in a particular social order, are nonetheless ideas with which the aforementioned inhabitants are in a sense already familiar; moreover, they are capable of being recognized as such when recovered, recalled, or presented in an illuminating way.

The distinction between their own guiding ideas of the good society and those dominant in the criticized social order allows critical social theories to regard the prevailing perceptions of needs and interests as possibly faulty: insofar as the inhabitants of the social order in question are guided by faulty views of the good society, they will hold correspondingly faulty views of human flourishing in general and of their own needs and interests in particular. In such cases, the transformation of prevailing social arrangements calls for a prior cognitive transformation.

To be sure, there are significant differences among critical social theories as to how faulty perceptions of the good society, of human flourishing, and of needs and interests should be rectified. Some theories propose therapeutic processes of recovery (Hegel);[1] some, poetic processes of world disclosure (Adorno);[2] some, reconstructive theories (Habermas).[3] Other theories propose hermeneutic processes of retrieval (Charles Taylor)[4] and others still, subversive bodily performances (Judith Butler).[5] Moreover, rectifying faulty perceptions of needs and interests may be understood as a task that either can be completed finally or can never, in principle, be concluded. Notwithstanding such differences, however, critical social theorists are united in the view that rectifying faulty perceptions is part of the critical enterprise itself.

A complication arises in critical social theories in which faulty perceptions are traced back to the social system and explained as an effect of that system's interest in its own self-preservation.[6] This is the classical view of ideology as "false consciousness." In such cases, the problem is twofold: not only are the

human beings who suffer from the negative effects of certain kinds of social arrangements unaware of these negative effects, there are structural obstacles to bringing them to their attention.

In the classical view, made famous by Marx, Lukács, Adorno, and others, ideology is systemically induced—that is, necessary—false consciousness.[7] Ideology in this sense refers to a general blindness of human beings to their real needs or interests that is induced by a given social or economic system for the purposes of its own reproduction. This idea is already anticipated in the work of Rousseau. With his criticism of *amour propre* as a corrupt form of self-love that develops only when human beings enter into association with one another, Rousseau makes the crucial link between false consciousness and life in certain social structures.[8] Marx takes the further step required for the idea of systemically induced false consciousness. He combines the view that false consciousness is socially produced with a view that it is produced in the interests of a self-maintaining socioeconomic system.[9]

However, this conception of ideology has fallen into disrepute for a number of reasons. To begin with, the notion of ideology as necessary false consciousness raises the questions of who is in a position to engage in ideology critique and from what vantage point it is possible for them to do so. The critique of ideology as necessary false consciousness seems to presuppose a vantage point outside of the otherwise closed ideological circle that is accessible only to some privileged individuals or groups within the social order in question, denying the other inhabitants of the social order the ability to themselves know what is good for them. This opens such a critique to the accusation of epistemological and ethical authoritarianism (I return to this point below).

A further reason for rejecting the thesis of necessary false consciousness is that it is anachronistic: it no longer seems to fit the reality of complex modern societies. The thesis of necessary false consciousness relies on a picture of the socioeconomic system as a self-interested, self-maintaining organism that is (at best) out of date. In this picture, the socioeconomic system itself is held responsible for bringing about a condition of general false consciousness and is accused of doing so for the sake of its own interests as opposed to the interests of the human beings it is supposed to serve.[10] The socioeconomic system is thus assigned the attributes of a human agent with rational and moral powers; it is seen as a rational agent with interests of its own and as a moral agent who is responsible for its actions and against whom moral claims can be made. This kind of personification of the social or economic system has become increasingly implausible in modern societies, which are not only complex internally

but connected with a multitude of other societies in complicated ways. Consequently, the notion of ideology as *necessary* false consciousness appears outdated.

Jürgen Habermas draws attention to yet another way in which the concept of ideology is anachronistic. Initially, Habermas upheld the legacy of Marx, Lukács, and Adorno by according a central place to the idea of ideology as necessary false consciousness.[11] He gradually moved away from the notion of ideology critique, however, and now seems to have distanced himself completely from it.[12] His present position seems to be that the concept of ideology no longer fits the forms of consciousness characteristic of late capitalist societies. For Habermas, all ideologies take the form of totalizing conceptions of order, imposing a socially integrative interpretation of society as a meaningful whole. Their effectiveness requires a realm of belief and action that is perceived as "sacred," in the sense of being immune to the corrosive effects of rational scrutiny. However, the process of cultural rationalization characteristic of modernity is a process of desacralization, which entails the subjection of ever more areas of social life to critical scrutiny. As a result, global interpretations that bestow meaning on society as a whole are no longer sustainable. As Habermas puts it: "the communicative practice of everyday life no longer affords any niches for the structural violence of ideologies."[13] In his view, the fragmentation of consciousness has now replaced ideological thought forms as their functional equivalent. Thus, for Habermas, in the desacralized societies of late capitalism, blindness to real needs and interests is no longer due to the acceptance of a deceptive interpretation of society as a meaningful whole; rather blindness, which for him, as we shall see in chapter 3, means blindness to the colonization of communicative rationality by the functionalist rationality of the economic and administrative systems, is the result of a fragmented consciousness that blocks the correct view of things by preventing interpretations of the whole from coming about in the first place.[14]

For reasons such as these, the concept of ideology as necessary false consciousness has lost favor among many contemporary critical social theorists, most noticeably among those in the Frankfurt School tradition.[15] It rarely features in their analyses of social evils and, when it does, it tends to fall prey to the kinds of epistemological, ethical, and social-theoretical difficulties alluded to above. To be sure, the sociotheoretical difficulties could be avoided by giving up the thesis of necessary false consciousness. Moreover, the epistemological and ethical difficulties could be alleviated by moving to an account of ideology

that gives up any claim to an epistemically privileged vantage point and that focuses on the forms ideological distortion takes rather than on the content of false consciousness. On such an account of ideology, the object of critique would not be the falsity of certain propositional contents but, for example, the ideological closure involved when certain ethical or political contents are removed from the realm of public interrogation (I come back to this idea of ideological closure in chapter 5 below).

I have suggested that, in seeking to bring about changes in social arrangements, critical social theories recognize that cognitive transformation may be a prerequisite of social transformation. Those of us who, in the eyes of a particular theorist, lack a proper perception of the social obstacles to human flourishing, are called upon to revise our views of the prevailing social arrangements, to reconsider our views of the good society, and to rethink our views of our needs and interests. Evidently, cognitive transformation is not sought for its own sake but for the sake of the superior perceptions of society and human flourishing in which it is supposed to result. Thus, it is not a good in itself but a means of achieving one. The crucial concept, therefore, is not cognitive transformation but beneficial cognitive transformation: what is sought is not just a change in the way we see things but a shift in perception that constitutes a change for the better. This holds also for transformative action that is directed at existing social arrangements. Here, too, transformation is to be understood as bringing about improvement, as a step forward that can be described as learning or progress.

We may say, therefore, that progress is a central concern of critical social theory—progress on the level of social order and, where necessary, on the level of perceptions.[16] Clearly, progress is an evaluative term; it implies the availability of an evaluative perspective from which changes can be assessed as for the better or for the worse. In the case of critical social theories, it is their guiding ideas of the good society that provide the required evaluative perspective: the vantage point from which changes in perceptions of needs and interests, or changes in existing social arrangements, can be seen as changes for the better or for the worse. The crucial question for our present purposes concerns the status of these guiding ideas of the good society, and the status of the forms of cognitive and social transformation for which they call. Four broad positions with regard to their status can be distinguished; however, not all of them fit well with the self-understanding and concerns of contemporary critical social theories.

• The first position appeals to the normative ideas expressed in the *Sittlichkeit* ("ethical life") of the society in question. Changes in perceptions of needs and interests are deemed changes for the better because they bring us closer to how things should be as determined by certain (linguistically mediated) social conventions, practices, and codes of behavior. This position asserts a difference between the normative ideas held by some inhabitants of a particular social order and those held by the inhabitants in general. Appeals to "how we do things here" are typical of this position. Candidates for beneficial transformation tend to be those who have not yet been adequately socialized into the social practices of the context in question, for example, children, foreigners, or the psychologically disturbed. I call this the *conventionalist* position.

• The second position appeals to normative ideas implicit but not fully realized within a given sociocultural context. The changes in question are deemed changes for the better because they bring us closer to how things would be, if only we were able to realize our own deepest hopes and aspirations. This position asserts a difference between the normative ideas that orient the everyday lives of the inhabitants of a particular sociocultural context and the ideas that would orient their lives, if only they were able to become more like themselves at their best (for example, more consistent or more strong willed or more open to the interpretations of human flourishing proposed by others). In contrast to the first position, therefore, it appeals to deep-seated, normative intuitions and expectations that, at any given time, may not be appropriately articulated or realized; accordingly, its guiding ideas of the good society may diverge from those articulated in the dominant ethical practices and codes of behavior. Similarly, it posits a difference between the social arrangements that prevail in a given sociocultural context and those that would prevail if these social arrangements were to fully express the deep-seated, normative intuitions and expectations that are formative of their inhabitants' identities. The crucial feature of this position is that the normative ideas guiding criticism are purely internal to the codes of behavior and practices of the inhabitants of a particular sociocultural context; they have no purpose or rationality beyond this context. To be sure, the ideas in question may have to be retrieved from obscurity or articulated more clearly or convincingly, and much effort may be needed in order to bring existing behavior and practices into line with them. The important point is that there is no vantage point external to a particular sociocultural context that would provide a basis for assessing the validity of the normative ideas held by its inhabitants. I call this the *radically contextualist* position.

• The third position appeals to normative ideas that are at once immanent to the sociocultural context in question and transcend it. As in the case of the second position, the ideas appealed to are context immanent in the sense that they are implicit within a particular sociocultural context, although possibly obscured, or forgotten, or not yet properly articulated. In contrast to the second position, however, these normative ideas are attributed with a rationality or purpose beyond that particular context. They are not merely expressions of *our* deepest hopes and aspirations (although they are that too); they represent hopes and aspirations that everyone, everywhere should have if they are to be able to fulfill their potentials as human beings. This position sees changes in the perceptions of needs and interests, or changes in the prevailing social arrangements, as changes for the better not only because they bring us closer to our own, historically and contextually specific ideals, but because they are steps forward for humankind in general. I call this the *context-transcending* position.

• The fourth position appeals to a transcendent, final authority. The changes in question are deemed changes for the better because they bring us closer to how things should be as determined by some transcendent power or idea whose authority is unquestionable. This position asserts a difference between the normative ideas that prevail in a given sociocultural context and those that would prevail if its inhabitants were to see their needs and interests in the ethically valid light. Similarly, it posits a difference between the social arrangements prevailing in a particular social order and those that would prevail if its inhabitants were to hold the correct view of the good society. The crucial feature of this position, which sets it off from the preceding one, is that correct perception entails the acceptance of the unquestionable authority of some transcendent power or idea. Thus, appeals to the authority of a divine will, or to natural necessity, or to the logic of history, are typical. I call this the *authoritarian* position.

Of these four, only two—the radically contextualist and the context-transcending positions—are congruent with the self-understanding and concerns found in contemporary critical social theories. The inappropriateness of the first and fourth positions is due to their assertion of an ethical standpoint that is unquestionable, immune to any kind of critical interrogation. With this assertion, they imply that ethical validity is accessible; moreover, that it can be established independently of the ethical reasoning of concrete human agents. By construing ethical validity as unquestionable, they invite accusations of

epistemological authoritarianism; by disconnecting ethical validity from the reasoning of concrete human agents, they invite accusations of ethical authoritarianism. This brings them into conflict with the antiauthoritarian impulses of contemporary critical social theories.

In the introductory chapter, I situated critical social theory as an enterprise within the normative horizon of modernity, specifically, Western modernity. I also drew attention to certain important shifts that have taken place within this social imaginary; these shifts have undermined the view that unmediated access to reality or truth is possible, have led to widespread acceptance of the view that ethical judgments are subjective and partial, and have fostered suspicion of context-transcending validity claims as possible instruments of repressive social power. In consequence of these and related shifts, contemporary critical social theories are driven by an antiauthoritarian impulse, which can be expressed by the concept of *situated rationality*.

To begin with, situated rationality entails the view that the social theorist's critical perspective is inescapably conditioned by historical, cultural, social, and subjective factors: her perspective is not—and cannot be—neutral. In addition, it entails the view that the social theorist's critical perspective expresses normative intuitions and expectations that are formative of the identities of the inhabitants of the sociocultural context that is the object of her critique—her perspective is internal to that context.

The first aspect of situated rationality is primarily epistemological. It articulates a conception of knowledge that has gained currency within the normative horizon of Western modernity, particularly since the latter part of the nineteenth century. According to this conception, human knowledge is temporal, subjective, and partial: our perceptions of the ways things are, or of how they should be, are unavoidably influenced by the historically specific, sociocultural context in which we live our lives as embodied, finite human beings. All access to reality, or to validity in a context-transcending sense, is mediated by history, context, and embodied subjectivity. The widespread acceptance of this view of knowledge is often associated with the "linguistic turn" of twentieth-century philosophy. When understood in a general way, this turn stands for a shift in how human knowledge is construed. Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Dewey are key figures in this regard, calling on us to dispense with the notion of knowledge as accurate representation and to adopt instead a pragmatic conception of knowledge as mediated by social conventions and practices.[17]

The second aspect is primarily ethical. It entails the view that critical social theory should be guided by the deep-seated, normative intuitions and expectations of the inhabitants of the social order in question. It articulates the ethical idea of autonomous agency, understood as the individual human being's freedom to form and pursue her conceptions of the good on the basis of reasons she is able to call her own. In chapter 6 I propose an interpretation of the idea of autonomy that connects it with the ethical norm of rational accountability, according to which the autonomous agent takes on a responsibility to support her views with reasons, if need be. The ethical idea of autonomous agency, with its emphasis on rational accountability, requires those who accept the validity of a particular critical perspective or emancipatory projection to have good reasons for doing so. From the point of view of autonomous agency, having good reasons implies, among other things, that the human subjects concerned make them their own good reasons—reasons that make sense to them in the context of their intuitions, expectations, commitments, convictions, and experiences as a whole. In other words, to see something as a good reason, human subjects must be capable of integrating it into the affectively imbued constellations of reasons that are formative of their identities. Failure to establish a connection with the most stable elements in these constellations would result in a lack of coherence; jettisoning all the other elements in order to make room for it would result in a lack of depth.[18] A similar need for integration holds on a collective level. If the inhabitants of a historically and culturally specific social order are to have good reasons for approving of a particular idea of the good society, these reasons must connect with the most stable elements in the affectively imbued constellations of reasons that shape their collective identity. Thus, it is in large measure due to a respect for autonomous agency that contemporary social theorists take already existing, deep-seated, normative intuitions and expectations as a fundamental point of orientation in their appeal to ideas of the good society.

Typically, these normative intuitions and expectations are sedimented in a multiplicity of social practices, norms, and institutions and may not be readily apparent. Sometimes, they will have been forgotten or obscured: in such cases, processes of hermeneutic retrieval, or aesthetic shock techniques, may be necessary before their validity can be recognized. Sometimes they will have been suppressed: in such cases, a process of therapy or, again, aesthetic shock techniques, may be required to recover them. Sometimes, they may lack the appropriate theoretical form: in such cases, they must be reconstructed

appropriately by the theorist. At other times, some of these ideas and expectations may be highly visible, constituting the explicit issues motivating concrete social struggles and movements. However, contemporary critical social theorists tend to be wary of attaching too much importance to the demands and expectations *expressed* in social struggles and movements. This is because the deep-seated, normative intuitions and expectations implicit in every social order are rarely fully articulated, informing social struggles and movements indirectly rather than directly. Furthermore, the demands and expectations voiced in certain social struggles and movements may be incompatible with the deep-seated, normative intuitions and expectations shared by most other inhabitants of the sociocultural context in question. Here we may consider how the claims to racial supremacy expressed in neo-Nazi movements clash with deep-seated commitments to equal respect for the dignity of all human beings. (This raises the questions of who decides what "our" deepest hopes and aspirations are, and on what basis. My discussion in chapters 5 to 7 suggests that it is a matter for practical deliberation among all concerned.) Indeed, the demands and expectations articulated in some social struggles and movements may clash with those articulated in other ones, where both parties claim to express our deepest hopes and aspirations. Here we may think of the demands of equality voiced by proponents of positive discrimination in favor of women, and the demands of merit or desert voiced by their opponents. (This raises the questions of who decides which principle should have priority in a given situation, and on what basis. Again, my discussion will suggest that it is a matter for practical deliberation among all concerned.) Notwithstanding these and related difficulties, contemporary critical social theories agree that the most appropriate reference point, at least initially, for assessing whether cognitive and social change is change for the better is the set of normative intuitions and expectations that shape our identities as individuals and citizens within a historically specific, sociocultural context.

This position is also found in poststructuralist versions of social criticism. Although they possess a number of distinctive features that mark them off, in particular, from hermeneutic, therapeutic, and reconstructive approaches, poststructuralist social theories share with these an orientation toward already existing normative intuitions and expectations as their reference point for criticism. Poststructuralist social critics stress the ways in which every actualization of our deep-seated, normative intuitions and expectations produces its own "outside," denying some aspect of these intuitions and expectations. The point is also about the incompleteness of identity: every articulation of normative

intuitions or expectations is held to open a gap between what it affirms and what it denies. For poststructuralist social critics, this gap is a space of historical possibility for beneficial cognitive, bodily, and social transformation; what is excluded can be made politically salient and activated with a view to bringing about various kinds of changes for the better. Accordingly, poststructuralist social criticism is concerned less with the retrieval of forgotten, obscured, or suppressed normative intuitions and expectations, or with reconstructing them in the appropriate theoretical form, than with the subversive and innovative rearticulation of them.

Here, it is important to recognize the multiple forms such rearticulation may take. Whereas hermeneutic retrieval, therapeutic recovery, and reconstructive theory are primarily linguistic modes of articulating normative intuitions and expectations, relying on narratives, conversations, or argumentation, poststructuralists also draw attention to the nonlinguistic ways in which deep-seated, normative intuitions and expectations may be rearticulated or reenacted. They often attach importance to anomalous and disruptive bodily practices, in which a given vocabulary is pushed to its limits so that new conceptual possibilities can emerge. Notwithstanding such differences in emphasis, however, poststructuralist critical social thinking shares with other contemporary approaches an insistence on the unavailability of an ethical vantage point beyond the influences of history and context, as well as a perception that the social critic must take her orientation from already existing, deep-seated, normative intuitions and expectations. Thus, although their concern with nonargumentative—and often, nonverbal—modes of critical interrogation may make them hostile to the term "situated rationality," poststructuralist critical social theories fully endorse the antiauthoritarian impulse it expresses.

Within the Left-Hegelian tradition of critical social thinking,[19] the idea of situated rationality has a further dimension. Here, too, critical social theories appeal to normative intuitions and expectations that are already embedded within the criticized social order; however, in seeking a reference point for criticism that is immanent to the context in question, their concern traditionally was not to avoid ethical authoritarianism but to uncover rational potentials within the process of history itself. The potentials in question were deemed rational in the sense that, historically, they represent a gain in rationality: they are expressions of the movement of reason in history (this is the Hegelian legacy). On this view of history, reason is thought to be sedimented in social practices and in deep-seated, normative intuitions and expectations; consequently, these are deemed to have rational potentials that can be released under

favorable conditions.[20] The difficulty facing contemporary critical social theorists in this tradition, however, is that, by setting up history as a final authority, an immanent approach of the Hegelian kind seems at odds with the nonauthoritarian impulse expressed by the idea of situated rationality. In chapter 3 I discuss Jürgen Habermas's and Axel Honneth's attempts to defend the immanence of criticism in a modified Hegelian sense without succumbing to epistemological and ethical authoritarianism.

The antiauthoritarian impulse that I attribute to contemporary critical social theory explains my use of the term "context-transcending" to characterize those approaches that claim universal validity for their critical perspectives and emancipatory projections. I call approaches of this kind "context-transcending" rather than "universalist" to underscore the importance of a dynamic interpretation of the universality that they claim. This dynamic quality can be contrasted with the static quality of claims to universal validity that posit the possibility of an end point of reason. When construed statically, claims to universal validity allege that the realization of reason in the historical world is possible: they allege, for example, that a world in which each human subject would be granted the full respect that is due to him, or in which human subjects would live in perfect harmony with each other, or in which human subjects would live in perfect harmony with nature is an attainable condition for human beings. In positing the attainability of a fully rational world, however, they deny the finitude of human knowledge and understanding, the contingency of human life and history, and the creativity of human free will (I return to this point in chapter 7 below). Moreover, they invite the accusation of epistemological authoritarianism since, by positing the possibility of the realization of reason in the historical world, they sets limits to the contestability of knowledge and validity. On a dynamic understanding of claims to universal validity, by contrast, no such limits are laid down. Although claims are raised for the validity of certain ethical ideas across sociocultural contexts and historical epochs, there is an accompanying awareness that there is an ineliminable gap between the aspiration of universal validity and all actual claims to instantiate it. The idea of universality, in other words, is itself construed as context transcending: it is held never to be commensurate with its historically specific articulations. Clearly, a dynamic interpretation of the idea of universality fits well with the antiauthoritarian impulse I attribute to contemporary critical social theories. It is for this reason that I use the term "context-transcending" to refer to contemporary theories that claim universal validity for the ideas of the good society that guide them.

Of the four positions identified, I have claimed that only the radically contextualist and the context-transcending views of ethical validity are congruent with the self-understanding and concerns of contemporary critical social theory. From this common basis, however, the radically contextualist and context-transcending positions move off in different directions. Since the debate as to which direction is the best one structures my discussion in the following chapters, it is worth emphasizing the antiauthoritarian impulse uniting both positions.[21] Both positions concur in the view that no unmediated and no privileged access to reality or to ethical validity is available; they also agree that ethical validity must be recognizable as such to autonomous human agents. The point on which they diverge is the importance of ideas of context-transcending validity in critical social thinking.

Advocates of a context-transcending approach claim that critical social theories cannot do without a reference to context-transcending validity. The core argument is that without such a reference, the critical interrogation of social life would be unacceptably limited in scope. An additional argument is that giving up this reference is simply not sustainable. Advocates of a radically contextualist approach dispute both arguments. They contend that effective social criticism does not require any kind of reference to context-transcending validity; moreover, that appeal to validity in this sense is not unavoidable.

The debate between the context-transcending and radically contextualist positions can also be cast in terms of the concept of ethical progress. Our question has been the status of the particular ideas of ethical validity through reference to which changes in social arrangements, or changes in perceptions of needs and interests, are deemed changes for the better. In contemporary critical social theory, as we have seen, both the radically contextualist and context-transcending approaches respond to this question by pointing toward the deep-seated, normative intuitions and expectations of the inhabitants of the social order being subjected to criticism. They diverge, however, regarding the status of these deep-seated intuitions and expectations. Whereas radically contextualist approaches deny them any rationality or purpose beyond the social order in which they play a formative role, context-transcending approaches attribute to them presumptive universal validity and regard them as open in principle to interrogation on the basis of good reasons. Thus, for radically contextualist social critics, our deepest hopes and aspirations are utterly contingent. Although we, as inhabitants of a particular social order may attach great importance to them, and although they form our identities and

shape our institutions and practices, there is no standpoint from which they could be deemed rationally superior to the deep-seated hopes and aspirations that are formative of identities in historically earlier or culturally different social orders. Context-transcending social critics, by contrast, regard our deepest hopes and aspirations as presumptively rational. They presume that there is a rational basis for seeing them as improvements over earlier hopes and aspirations, or as superior to conflicting ones, and that, if not, they should be abandoned or modified. These diverging views regarding the status of deep-seated, normative intuitions and expectations are connected with diverging conceptions of ethical progress.

On the radically contextualist view, the notion of ethical progress has no purchase beyond a historically specific, sociocultural context. This is because the normative intuitions and expectations embedded in a particular social order are regarded as normatively arbitrary: since there is no universal context of which they are part, there are no rational grounds for extending them to all human beings everywhere. Accordingly, the concept of progress is restricted to changes for the better *within* a historically specific, sociocultural context. Progress occurs, for example, when we, as inhabitants of Western modernity, pass laws that increase democratic accountability or develop educational institutions that are more inclusive and open. It is inapplicable, however, to changes in those deep-seated, normative intuitions and expectations through reference to which democratic accountability, inclusiveness, and openness are regarded as valuable goals for human beings. On the radically contextualist view, accordingly, the kinds of change that, following the work of Thomas Kuhn, have come to be known as "paradigm shifts" are regarded as random and arational—as purely arbitrary from a rational point of view.[22]

On the context-transcending view, by contrast, the concept of ethical progress can be applied *across* historical and social contexts. Since our deepest normative hopes and aspirations are accorded a presumptive rationality, they are presumed to constitute progress—change for the better—in relation to earlier hopes and aspirations and to be superior to culturally different ones. As such, they are ascribed a presumptive universal validity—they are presumed to be valid for everyone, everywhere, irrespective of sociocultural context, until challenged on the basis of good reasons. Accordingly, on the context-transcending view, the concept of progress can be used to describe historical changes that affect deep-seated, normative intuitions and expectations (i.e., paradigm shifts); in other words, it can be used in relation to ethically

significant changes that result from intercultural encounters, engagement with the historical past, technological innovations, ecological developments, new life situations, and the like.

Each of these views gives rise to different problems. The main problem arising from radically contextualist approaches is that they are unacceptably restricted in scope: they are unable to offer a critical perspective *across* sociocultural or historical contexts and must confine their critical observations to the immediate contexts in which they are situated. Their contextually restricted conceptions of progress mean that they lack the conceptual resources required for the critical interrogation of *new* ethical ideas that emerge as the result of intercultural encounters, engagement with the historical past, technological innovations, changing life situations, ecological developments, and so on; for the same reason, they lack the conceptual resources necessary for the critical interrogation of their own guiding ideas vis-à-vis the ones that have preceded them or currently challenge them.

We might also say that radically contextualist approaches lack the conceptual resources necessary to conceive of challenges to the deep-seated, normative intuitions and expectations, which are formative of identities in a particular social order, as *rational* disputes. Since they deny to such formative intuitions and expectations any rationality or truth value in an overarching, universal sense, the only nonauthoritarian basis on which, ultimately, they could be defended, rejected, or rearticulated, is arbitrary preference or strategic interest. Accordingly, responses to new ethical ideas, or to ethical paradigm changes, become, ultimately, a matter of arbitrary preference or strategic interest. This disadvantage is particularly evident under conditions of globalization in which cultures with diverging or conflicting, deep-seated, normative intuitions and expectations come into increasing contact with one another. Radically contextualist approaches lack the conceptual resources required in order to characterize intercultural exchanges as (mutual) learning processes; consequently, they are unable to describe any new ethical ideas that emerge from such encounters as ethical gains or losses. Their inability to provide a critical perspective affects the motivation of parties with significantly different or conflicting cultural views to enter into intercultural dialogue: if deliberation regarding new ethical ideas lacks any rational basis, the motivation for participating in processes of intercultural exchange cannot be the hope (on both sides) of cognitive or social change for the better; motivation can only be a matter of subjective desire or strategic interest; this implies that it would be incoherent to attempt to convince anyone of the

nonsubjective or nonstrategic value of engaging in such intercultural encounters.[23] A similar point can be made with regard to critical reflection on new ethical ideas that emerge in the wake of technological innovations, ecological developments, intercultural encounters, and so on. Although biotechnological innovations such as cloning, or ecological changes such as global warming, may give rise to new ethical ideas, radically contextualist approaches lack the conceptual resources necessary to interrogate them critically. Evidently, the same difficulty holds for their own guiding ethical ideas. Lacking an idea of context-transcending validity, radically contextualist critical social theories lack the conceptual resources required to engage in argument concerning their guiding hopes and aspirations and to attempt to defend them as improvements vis-à-vis earlier or conflicting ones.[24]

But context-transcending approaches have their own difficulties. Their strength is their ability to extend a critical perspective to the ethically significant social changes that emerge from intercultural exchanges, technological innovations, and the like, as well as to their own guiding normative intuitions and expectations. This extended scope gives them the advantage over radically contextualist approaches, particularly under conditions of globalization and in periods of rapid social, technological, and ecological change. However, they are faced with the challenging task of reconciling their reference to context-transcending validity with the claims of situated rationality or, as I prefer to formulate it, the challenge of maintaining a productive tension between the two.

This challenge gains in urgency if the radically contextualist position proves seriously inadequate. In the next chapter, I demonstrate its inadequacies. I do so by considering one of the most forceful contemporary proposals for a radically contextualist approach to social criticism: the pragmatist approach proposed by Richard Rorty. Rorty makes a vigorous—and, at times, ingenious—case for a purely internal, or immanent, perspective. The discussion shows, however, that his radically contextualist approach, if adhered to consistently, is limited in the ways indicated above. Interestingly, it also reveals that Rorty is consistently unable to sustain a radically contextualist position. Such contextualism, it seems, is inherently unstable.