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**Critical Theory and the Concept of Social Pathology**

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Introduced by *James Gordon Finlayson*

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## Critical Theory and the Concept of Social Pathology Conference : The Centre for Social and Political Thought, University of Sussex, Date: September 2017

### Introduction

In September 2017 the bi-annual Centre for Social and Political Thought at the University of Sussex took place on Critical Theory and the Concept of Social Pathology. Speakers included Arto Laitinen, Arvi Särkelä, Federica Gregoratto, Fabian Freyenhagen, Lois McNay, Lorna Finlayson, Dagmar Wilhelm, Koshka Duff, Mariana Teixeira, Catherine Koekoek, Jan Overwijk, Giles Douglas, Lizabeth Dijkstra, Onni Hirvonen, Peter J. Verovsek, and Jake M. Parkins.

Of the submissions we here publish short versions of three of the papers. The topic is an important one, and indeed a current one, in on-going discussions in critical theory. Much of the current methodological debate was inspired by Axel Honneth's revival of the concept of social pathology in his 1994 essay 'Pathologien des Sozialen. Tradition und Aktualität der Sozialphilosophie'.

Much of the existing literature takes its point of departure from that seminal essay, and another essay 'A Social Pathology of Reason: On the Intellectual Legacy of Critical Theory' [*The Cambridge Companion to Critical Theory*, ed F. Rush Cambridge 2007: 336-61.] For example, both Christopher Zurn's important essay 'Social Pathologies as Second-order Disorders' and Freyenhagen's 'Critique' of Honneth, focus on Honneth's work.

The focus social pathologies, and the approach of criticizing by diagnosing social pathologies (DSP) coincides with a turn in contemporary critical theory away from the predominant liberal paradigm of political philosophy, which focuses more or less exclusively on norms of justice as the appropriate standard of appraisal of societies. Rawls sums up the liberal paradigm perfectly when he claims that 'Justice is the first virtue of social institutions, as truth is of systems of thought. A theory however elegant and economical must be rejected or revised if it is untrue; likewise laws and institutions no matter how efficient and well-arranged must be reformed or abolished if they are unjust' (Rawls 1972, 3). The idea, which is now almost commonplace among contemporary critical theorists is that if critical theory is to earn its corn by making a contribution to social theory that is distinct from justice based conceptions of political philosophy, it needs to widen its focus. At the same time, if it is to remain a genuinely *critical* theory, rather than, say, empirical and descriptive, it needs a normative basis, one that is distinct from the liberal preoccupation with justice.

However critical theory's recent attempt to differentiate itself from liberal conceptions of justice is not the only defining characteristic of the genre. It is shared for example, about three decades ago, by communitarian republican and perfectionist criticisms of Rawlsian and Kantian versions of liberal political philosophy. True, such theories do not have the primary concern with malfunction, dysfunction, disease or illness that characterizes 'social pathology' approaches to critical theory. Indeed, a conception of the good is not itself apt even to provide the relevant contrast class for a conception of social pathology, because a social pathology is not just any old kind of social bad. Rather, to the extent that a contrast class is needed at all, which is a matter of ongoing debate (see for example Freyenhagen 2013) the relevant contrast class has to be a conception of a society as healthy, whole, properly functioning, or normal.

Honneth has recently argued that such a view of a good society as healthy that one finds in classical theories of the body politic or society from Plato and Aristotle right up to Hegel, presupposes an outdated metaphysical idea of a 'social organism', one that

it is 'almost impossible' to rehabilitate in contemporary theoretical idioms that eschew such metaphysical extravagances (Honneth 2014). It is not, however, generally accepted that the idea of a social pathology requires such a metaphysically and normatively rich presupposition as the notion of a good functioning or healthy social organism.

The three speakers at the Studies in Social and Political Thought conference whose papers are published here, while not rejecting Honneth's argument, deny that this is the only way in which the notion can be rehabilitated. For example, as Hirvonen argues, the contrast class in question might just be extant social norms, or a normative structure of some kind, relative to which deviations can be identified and assessed. Alternatively, it might be some kind of disturbance or deviation in a developmental process.

Aside from the question of who is ill, when society is ill, various other questions posed by the idea of a social pathology are addressed by our authors. Is the idea of pathology metaphorical or literal: if metaphorical, what stands at the open end of the metaphor? (Freyenhagen, this journal) How literally should the naturalistic idiom be taken? (Laitinen and Särkelä, this journal) Is there a family or cluster of different pathologies, or do all social pathologies, as Zurn (2011) argues, share a common structure? Finally there is a version of the 'Euthypro' problem: is something a social pathology because it is wrong (as the normativists claim); or is it wrong because it is a social pathology (as the naturalists claim)? All of these important questions are addressed here.

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