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There is Always Time for Critique

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A Time for Critique (New Directions in Critical Theory)
Edited by Didier Fassin and Bernard E. Harcourt
Columbia University Press, 2019
320 pp.

In literary studies, critique is defined as

... [A] literary technique that means to critically evaluate a piece of literary work, or a political or philosophical theory in detail. A critique could be a critical essay, an article evaluating a literary piece, or a review. It may be just like a summary that identifies the central issue, raises questions, takes notice of theoretical and experimental approaches, and reviews the significance of the results. Apart from that, its purpose is to highlight both the shortcomings as well as strengths of a literary piece or a work of art. Moreover, critical evaluation or assessment requires sufficient knowledge about the subject matter (<https://literarydevices.net/critique/>).

In this sense, the present review essay is a form of critique, just as the anthology under review comprises of fourteen critiques and as a whole is a meta-critique. In philosophical circles, critique dates back to Socrates whose dialogues are exemplary for their critical insights, their rhetorical prowess, and the ingenuity of their presentation. For Kant, critique was about enlightenment, one that ought to release humanity from its self-incurred (intellectual) immaturity. By the time we come to Marx, enlightenment is coupled with emancipation and can be achieved with an immanent critique of political economy whose dialectical force is progressive.

By the early 2000s we have Bruno Latour asking us “why has critique run out of steam?” (2004), and Wendy Brown reminding us of the importance of critique in the face of crises and its denigration in public discourse (2005). Latour worries that perhaps critical engagements have flooded the “marketplace of ideas” to such an extent that they could give rise to the recent age of post-truth and fake news, where facts are no longer trusted or even collected in order to make an argument. Brown, by contrast, takes us back to the origins of the word critique from the Greek *krisis* and in a hopeful register suggests its aim has been to allow for deliberations for the sake of bringing the *polis* together. Of course, metanarratives and ideological declarations deserve careful analysis, whether undertaken with immanent, transcendental, or genealogical critique. “Critique,” says Brown, passionately reengages the text, rereads and reconsiders the text’s truth claims” (16). I hope my own review stands up to this standard, especially because I think the anthology under review is well written, well organized, and updates some of the debates over the domains where critical intervention should be, wondering if its reach should be theoretical, political, personal, ideological, or pragmatic.

What is Needed

The present anthology, brilliantly put together by Didier Fassin and Bernard Harcourt, directly responds to the present challenges from the political right and left, asking, “What sort of critical thinking is needed in a time when its very existence seems threatened?” In line with Brown’s lament over the “untimeliness” of critique—too early or too late—the editors concede: “critique must allow time for consideration.” And, they continue: “to be faithful to its core principle, critique must involve its self-critique. This is the only way, in these critical times, to move forward.” The times are “critical” from the standpoint of global and local crises (this review is written during the COVID-19 pandemic) and self-examination must be “critical” of what perspective it adopts, what context it chooses, what secrets it uncovers, and what constructive features it offers. In short, critique is in this volume either “critique as practice” (Part I) or “critique in practice” (Part II). The introductory essay by the editors summarizes each of the fourteen essays and thereby allows the reader to focus on the topics or areas of analysis of their choice. I will briefly summarize some of the salient points in each chapter.

Though Didier Fassin, in chapter one, grants that critique has been “affected by relative loss of leverage and decline in legitimacy both in the public sphere and in the academic realm,” there is a sense in which it is alive and well and regularly practiced. Relying on Michel Foucault, John Dewey, and Pierre Bourdieu, Fassin offers many answers to her title question: “How is Critique?” The question is telling because the chapter is less about *what* and more about *how* critique is doing, reminiscent of the standard rebuttal to the seething dismissal of postmodernism: it is not about what it is, but about what it does.

Unlike Fassin, Linda Zerilli in chapter two explains that critique is a “political practice of freedom,” one that ought to be in the public sphere. Relying on Hannah Arendt and Michel Foucault, Zerilli insists that critique can only be invigorated outside the academy, where it can spur a dialogue among citizens (4, 36ff). Ayse Parla, in the third chapter, wants to bring back the “politics of hope,” and uses the political upheavals in Turkey to interrogate this possibility (5, 59ff). She offers a fascinating contrast between the futuristic look of James Baldwin and the backward-looking view of hope articulated by Ta-Nehisi Cotes (63-65). The worry, either way, is not so much about which method of critique to use, but more alarmingly the potential for critique to be blocked or dismissed depending on who is ushering it into the public sphere.

Whether deployed to deal with global health, as Peter Redfield does in chapter four, or with human rights, as Karen Engle does in chapter five, there are cases when critique is thought of as an academic exercise not worth pursuing or as an attempt to question the legitimacy of what should be condoned as such without any critique. The defense of critique can never rest, so to speak, for its effectiveness in the practical domains remains suspect, even morally questionable: how can anyone question global health initiatives? Why would anyone bring up problems with the application of human rights rather than endorse any attempt to bolster their legal status? Redfield refers to a lovely essay by Abraham Flexner from 1939 titled “The

Usefulness of Useless Knowledge” and concludes that “critical anthropology might reimagine itself as uncertainly useful, and pursue a project of being usefully uncertain” (84).

The standard binary of useful/useless is problematized here in terms of degrees of certainty and the prospective usefulness of one’s knowledge claims in the public domain. In a similar manner, Engle explains that when critical legal theorists challenged rights discourse in general, “they largely gave human rights a pass” (91). If critique is disconnected from advocacy (103ff) and if human rights have been transported from rights discourse to other domains, then following Gayatri Spivak’s “emancipatory struggles” and “moments of liberation” insinuates that the “productive unease of persistent critique should not be left behind” (108-109.) In short, however misguided and therefore discarded certain forms of critique have been in the past few decades, their ineffectiveness or even absence should not discourage future critics from fully deploying them in the present. Critique, then, may need, according to Massimilino Tomba in chapter six, to be thought of in different temporal registers, moving towards the geological metaphor of “subduction” which is the “movement of the edges of the Earth’s plates, as a way to think about history’s overlapping historical-temporal layers” (6, 114ff).

The metaphor of subduction may be helpful in rethinking the limits of our knowledge, the topic on which Vanja Hamzić focuses in chapter seven. His contribution refers to the Kantian project of enlightenment that was intended to search for the limits of human knowledge and thereby protect and legitimate those things humans could know, perhaps even with some certainty. Was it the Cartesian and scientific certainty of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries? Was it, by contrast, a more circumscribed one? The Frankfurt School, following the Marxian critical tradition, insisted that one could unveil untruths and get to the bottom of it all, so to speak; critique, in their hands was the perfect tool for increasing human knowledge and establishing criteria of credibility.

By the time we get to the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the focus switches to the reality of the “unknowable.” According to Hamzić, “a critique of the unknowable makes sense precisely inasmuch as it can reveal the failures of structuralism to account for reality’s ostensible clusters. Reality is messy and so is the unknowable” (133). Working with both Jacques Lacan’s notion of the *real*, Slavoj Žižek’s reading of Lacan, and Susan Buck-Morss’ reading of both, Hamzić explains that what is at stake in his exploration is “the potential salience of acknowledging the conceptual and methodological boundaries not only of a particular discipline, but also *meaningfully* taking into account the limits and conditionality of disciplinary knowledge” (134-135). There you have it: the limits of knowledge-claims and disciplinary boundaries are reconfigured in light of the messiness of reality and the recognition that the unknowable is not a source of frustration and potential conquest but a black hole with enough energy and force to bring about new realities and situations unknown before.

Regarding “Projects of the Left”

Before I continue in reviewing the rest of the volume, I should pause for a minute to register a protest about the casual designation of critique as “the project(s) of the left.” It makes no sense to paint critique with political coloring, as both its various techniques and operations can and perhaps should be ideologically blind in the Socratic sense of searching for the truth, the kind of truth that holds no matter who is in power or how power tries to manipulate it. Some of the contributors to this volume keep on lamenting the left’s loss of the critical luster it had in the past or that its project(s) might be suffering from an intellectual fatigue or irrelevance. I would suggest, instead, thinking of critique as a practice worthy of any thinking person regardless of institutional affiliation or national border, it is what defines our humanity; to be critical is to breath the air, however polluted it may be, and engage in deliberation with your community members. As awful as the neoliberal attack on the life of the mind and the state has been in the U.S., it, too, had a critical dimension, one so poorly defended that the public tends to gloss over its logic and instead debate its practical efficacy. This volume’s major contribution is to remind its readers that critical analysis moves from the academy to the public sphere and back again, informing policy makers and legislators as much as academics whose disciplinary boundaries may be too narrow or not dynamic enough to incorporate new, messy realities.

Contexts of Critique

By the time we move to the second part of the anthology, with Lori Allen’s chapter eight, the importance of critique lays at the feet of laypeople and those, like the Palestinians, who are affected by the brutal military occupation of Israel. Her “Subaltern Critique and the History of Palestine” deploys the Foucauldian variant of critical history; namely, the genealogical, and digs a bit deeper into the very conditions under which the narrative of the Palestinian experience is undermined, deconstructed, and reconstructed (155ff). Allen carefully reminds us: “if we consider the epistemological scene as it functions in a concrete political context”—and here she refuses the abstraction of epistemological debates—the Palestinian discourse “becomes apparent more as a mobile Venn diagram of truth-claims and the assumptions upon which they rest, with certain categories of thought being more or less relevant to the contest at hand” (161). Critique, in her hands, just as was the case with previous contributors, is context-dependent; and this dependence must be made explicit to enjoy the epistemological fruits it bears.

Referring to the work of Faye Sayegh and Edward Said, Allen concludes her chapter by saying: “The question is what kind of institutional, political, organized solidarity can turn critique into a tool of liberation today” (170). One could add: indeed, the question of solidarity is important, but perhaps not the only question. As Allen knows all too well, numerous other questions inform the deep prejudices that overwhelm the Palestinian-Zionist debate over territorial rights and human rights, over the current debilitating and humiliating conditions of occupation, over the aspiration of the occupied to be liberated, and of the international community’s collective irresponsibility to legitimate the independent status of a people. Can critique carry this heavy burden? Can it carry it alone?

In chapter nine, Fadi Bardawil thinks through the Syrian revolution along similar trajectories, especially when he uses Edward Said's work and the potential for words and ideas to influence political upheavals. More specifically, Bardawil wants to make "the conceptual point that one cannot determine in advance the uses to which a critical work [like Said's *Orientalism*] can be put. Actors, as different as secular Arabs nationalists and Islamists, can appropriate critique and transform it into ideology and an instrument of power" (175). We are back to Latour's lament over the overuse of critique in the poststructural and postmodern age to the point when skepticism turns into cynicism and cynicism into "anything goes." The warning in this chapter, following Said's, is about the extinction of the "insurrectionary fire," and the neutralization of "oppositional capacity" to act in the political sphere. (186) More generally, Bardawil insists on "a theoretical practice that resists making leftist ideology into transcendental principles [Marxism?] and critical theory's inclination toward totalizing accounts [patriarchy? Colonialism?]" (188). Quoting Aimé Césaire, Bardawil ends his chapter averring that doctrines and ideological movements should fit people where they are rather than people trying to fit into principles and ideals the value of which in their particular context is questionable.

Nick Cheesman, in chapter ten, proposes to approach police torture in Sri Lanka with "pragmatic critique." This critique consists in "exploring, through methods of relating to the world via observation and experience, the conditions for the existence of a particular instituted practice—an established activity, learned and repeated over time" (193). What makes this critique pragmatic is that doubt is directed not at the principles underlying a practice but at the "conventional explanations for the practice" and the search for "alternative explanations with a political imperative for action" (193). Following Seyla Benhabib, Cheesman combines an "explanatory-diagnostic aspect" with an "anticipatory-utopian dimension" in order to ensure a pragmatic intervention.

Allegra McLeod, in chapter thirteen, focuses on the prison system and protest movements in the U.S., following Fred Moten and Stefano Harney rather than legal scholarly critiques. In a parallel manner, she explains that "shifting where we look for critique, new subjects and objects of critique come into view. Inside US prisons and in the movements protesting the violence of American policing, powerful critiques of law have emerged" (253). Organizationally, I would have placed this chapter right after chapter ten as a useful comparative exercise.

David Kazanjian, in chapter eleven titled "Dispossession, Reimagined from the 1690s," and Andrew Dilts, in chapter twelve titled "Crisis, Critique, and Abolition," formulate "subaltern critiques." The former undertakes a "speculative historiography," while the latter attempts to overcome "the current crisis within the left and to counter the recurring critique of critique" (9). Kazanjian writes that "critiques of dispossession [of "primitive" or "original" accumulation] do not need to presuppose that the dispossessed previously owned what was stolen from them," so as to "suggest that other forms of anti-possessive politics might follow from such critiques" (210). Using an imaginary subaltern, Adam, Kazanjian pleads for a critical imagination that would allow his readers to "glean from its extant fragments an alternative theory of dispossession." This means that "perhaps Adam can teach us to read

and to act not only with outrage for the loss of all that we think we had and knew, and not only with hope for efforts to restore or repair our stolen prior possessions.” Instead of outrage or hope, he concludes: “perhaps Adam can teach us how to live exorbitantly, to wander deviantly from possession as such” (224).

In short, the critical intervention here is transformative of the logic of the discourse about possessions and ownership, about capitalist-like formulations of accumulation (primitive or other) whose affront runs deeper than theft and exploitation. Dilts follows Robin Kelley’s series of essays that illustrate the crisis within the political left after Trump’s election, and suggests that a radical critique can be revived in the footsteps of both W. E. B. Du Bois and Angela Davis, and more specifically Davis’ notion of Abolition Democracy as a framework for analysis (232ff). “Abolitionist critique offers us an alternative to the seduction of retrenched liberalism and reformism,” an alternative that could spur an “immoderate and insurgent political action” (247).

Collective Action

The last chapter is by one of the co-editors, Bernard Harcourt, and is devoted to the “genealogy of contemporary critical praxis” (10), acknowledging a “disenchantment with the Marxist philosophy of history and the exhaustion with the notion of proletarian revolution” in the twentieth century (274). Without going into details here, I would like to enumerate the strategies Harcourt outlines for the “Future Directions for Critical Practice.” They are: Return to Vanguard Practices, Continue with Insurrectional Practices, Autonomous Zones, Civil and Political Disobedience, Gather Assemblies, Occupations, and Movements, Jam the System, Political Organizing, and Polyvalent Approach. The last one, as an example, contests political power relations by “finding allies, embracing different strategies, triangulating praxis” (287).

As we are going through the hysteria of the COVID-19 pandemic and recalling Naomi Klein’s “shock doctrine” (2007), Harcourt’s final chapter is a useful guide for political and collective action, whether locally, nationally, or internationally. Should we worry about crises as opportunities for the usurpation of power more permanently than is admitted at first? Should we worry about the neoliberal concern with and focus on individuated agents that undermines collective acts of resistance? Should we be suspicious when hearing “it’s for your own good” instead of “what do you think is good for you”? Critical thinking and acting, critical analysis and reflection as part of our daily encounters with our communities and the state, should be foregrounded, taught at all levels of schooling, and modeled by everyone who has an inkling, even if flawed, of how to be genuinely critical. This anthology’s contributors seem at times more sanguine and hopeful than one would reasonably expect in the age of Trumpism. Kant famously credited Hume for waking him from his “dogmatic slumber.” I hope that readers will be inspired even when not fully persuaded about the value of critique to wake them up from their dogmatic slumber and embrace it as a way of life and not only as part of the life of the mind.

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