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“What More Am I to Do?” A Review of Bernard E. Harcourt’s *Critique & Praxis: A Critical Philosophy of Illusions, Values, and Action*

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*Critique & Praxis: A Critical Philosophy of Illusions, Values, and Action*  
Bernard E. Harcourt  
Columbia University Press, 2020  
696 pp.

### Setting the Stage

Bernard E. Harcourt's *Critique & Praxis: A Critical Philosophy of Illusions, Values, and Action* (Columbia UP, 2020) proposes a new twenty-first century critical theory. Pinpointing its three dimensions in the title (illusions, values, and action) is useful, especially given the book's focused yet substantial reach. Following two introductory chapters, *Critique & Praxis* spans nineteen chapters, divided into four parts, and ends with a conclusion and postscript for a total of 539 pages, excluding notes, a bibliography, acknowledgments, and indexes.

The two introductory chapters summarize context and the three elements of a new critical theory, clarified by straightforward language, instructive explanation, exhaustive references, and illustrative examples. While the first two chapters of *Critique & Praxis* frame and sketch Harcourt's proposal, Parts I, II, III, and IV unpack the details to make a clear and compelling case for a twenty-first century reconstructed critical philosophy.

This book review will attempt to represent the scope and finer points of *Critique & Praxis*, starting with a précis of the author's critical theory. This will facilitate an understanding of my brief outline of Parts I, II, III, and IV. In this way, I represent the book's organization in its original format to set up my departure from its skeletal structure. That is, I patch together certain repeated references, concepts, conditions, and examples from various corners to clarify and condense the development, details, and relevance of Harcourt's new critical philosophy. The review will end with anticipated responses to and my own reading of *Critique & Praxis*.

In brief summation, the author's reconstructed critical philosophy emphasizes *action* for the benefit of human emancipation. More precisely, actions do not dictate theory, and theory does not command actions. Rather, they coexist in tension. In the author's words, "It is the unity in constant confrontation that ends up creating, in effect, a unified space" (23). Frictions between theory and practice are a constant. The way practices adapt to time and place represent another flexible yet consistent dimension of a reconstructed critical theory. Along the same lines, Harcourt rejects the prospect of a political economic utopia and instead proposes a set of *values* such as equality, social justice, and autonomy as a yardstick, albeit with different emphases according to context, by which to interrogate our actions and social, political, and economic systems and structures. This work consists of struggle and even a certain degree of violence, ushered forth by revealing accepted "truths" (e.g., the fairness of free markets or liberalism's rule of law) as *illusions* that require unmasking and will yield an endless array of replacement "truths" that will also demand exposure as illusions.

A preliminary understanding of Harcourt's argument makes it easier to understand how *Critique & Praxis* unfolds through an explanation of critical theory's foundations, the

development of divisions, and an explanation of how and why a twenty-first century radical critical theory must overcome and stand apart from the past. Specifically, Part I spans seven chapters. Chapters 1-4 describes the development of and a current standstill in critical theory that has prevented coherence around a shared mission of fracturing an endless corridor of illusions about the distribution of material conditions as a means to emancipate humanity. In Chapter 5-7, he excavates the root of the standstill, severs problematic elements of the critical philosophy (rooted primarily in immanent critique and but also defetishizing critique), and proceeds with a way forward under the banner of a radical critical philosophy of illusions.

Grounded by Part I, Part II consists of six chapters that consider a “horizon,” what Harcourt seems to use a shorthand for an aspirational vision and practical guideposts—for a new critical theory. Chapters 8-9 consider how political utopias and liberalism’s rule of law have offered and replaced a horizon for critical philosophy. However, Harcourt contends that both lead to dead-ends. In place of a political economic utopia or liberalism, Chapters 10-11 suggest a set of values attached to a practice of endless struggle that represent a different horizon to guide a reconstructed critical theory. At this stage, Harcourt considers how unremitting struggle invites questions about violence; Chapters 12-13 take up this issue and acknowledge that violence is an inevitable part of a new critical theory.

My main point of contention with *Critique & Praxis* stems from the author’s inadequate engagement with Gandhi’s practice of non-violence in Chapter 13. When addressing theories and examples of non-violence, Harcourt’s dismissal of Gandhi’s practice may be warranted in the context of a modern European and American landscape. However, Harcourt does not take into adequate consideration the religious-spiritual-philosophical beliefs and practices that informed Gandhi’s path and that differentiate it sharply from Harcourt’s understanding of the way violence is embedded in culture and theory. He only offers a perfunctory gesture in this direction. Thus, his discussion of Gandhi is productive in that it hints at the largely European and American historical, philosophical, cultural, political, and economic ecosystems that situate his imagination.

After the buildup of Parts I and II, the three chapters of Part III move to praxis, describing options that run the gamut from reform to revolution. Chapter 14 begins with historical context that Harcourt rehearses in other parts of the book. Chapter 15—by far the longest chapter of the book at 90 pages—parses out a spectrum of praxis. Chapter 16 advocates *against* upholding one form of practice as a universal model. Instead, the author favors approaches suited to context.

Part IV narrates a series of examples of personal critical praxis based on the author’s experiences. Chapters 17-19 suggest that a new critical philosophy avoids dictating a paradigm of strategies and tactics. Instead, it invites a self-reflexive process of questioning that has compelled the author to sharpen his actions and theory. This has motivated Harcourt to push his actions and theory on behalf of challenging the concentration of material resources and punitive dynamics, institutions, and illusions. The book ends with a conclusion and postscript that reiterate ideas he takes up in other parts of the book.

## Reading Through the Details

Equipped with the above outline, I will piece together and paraphrase key details that help to clarify how Harcourt develops exigence for a reconstructed critical theory. To put it differently, Parts I, II, III, and IV offer overlapping but differently accented critical and historical contexts that are worth deeper attention because they suggest why *Critique & Praxis* is relevant and urgent. In fact, a key premise of the book is to plumb the depths of discourse and history to take a step a part from them and offer a reconstructed critical theory that stands on its own. This functions as a “counter-critique” that, as the author explains, entangles and disentangles itself from the contested knot of critical philosophy *without* opposition and *with* the promise of something new.

For example, Harcourt details at great length in various parts of the book critical philosophy’s development into a standstill to suggest a way forward that will intervene in the egregious unequal distribution of resources. For the sake of brevity and clarity, I have reorganized and merged details of Harcourt’s interpretation of this narrative. It begins with the development of critical theory. Harcourt traces its origins to nineteenth century European philosophy, a discourse that sought to change the world by translating theory into practice. This emphasis on practice was a response to earlier Greek, Medieval, Enlightenment, and modern rationalist philosophies. He acknowledges Marx as originating a shift to a “practical attitude of modernity” where action gained significance (19). Moving forward, Harcourt describes how Marxian origins of critical philosophy continued to develop through the Frankfurt School. The Frankfurt School was not a monolith but contained contradicting impulses of embracing the subjective nature of history and the objective methods of scientific inquiry that progress to an end point, which Harcourt tracks through a summary of Max Horkheimer’s, Walter Benjamin’s, and Theodor W. Adorno’s work. Despite some unevenness in the discourse, during the nineteenth century to mid-twentieth century, Harcourt notes that there was general consensus on class struggle as the means to social revolution.

The foundations of critical philosophy began to crack under the pressure of alternative examples of revolution, discourse that de-naturalized putative universalisms, and the New Right. Examples of resistance different from the model of Marxist class struggle and social revolution proliferated in colonial contexts as informed by Maoist models of peasant uprising. A Maoist turn from Marxist historical certainty of proletariat revolution inspired European militants who then left an impression on critical philosophy. In fact, Harcourt adds that resistance in practice did not surface as waves of proletariat or peasant revolution but as small scale insurgencies.

Along with conceptual shifts about historical inevitabilities, challenges to the Marxist foundation of the Frankfurt School were leveraged with the weight of Nietzsche’s inquiry into the value of values and denaturalization of truth. While Michel Foucault receives emphasis in this regard, Harcourt mentions the contributions of poststructuralists, postcolonialists, and queer theorists such as Gilles Deleuze, Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Judith Butler. Harcourt reminds us that this discourse intersected with struggles over inequalities based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and religion that

gained momentum from the mid-twentieth century onward. Despite the potential of folding the energy of these movements into an overarching class struggle, the New Right leveraged a set of values such as freedom to attract the allegiance of the poor white working class and thus weakened possibilities of class solidarity across race and ethnicity in support of social revolution.

The emergence of the New Right dovetails with Harcourt's nod to a long legacy of U.S. institutionalized racist and xenophobic violence, dispossession, rejection, surveillance, and xenophobia that merged with twenty and twenty-first century efforts to translate "counterinsurgency warfare theory" abroad to the domestic landscape. Those counterinsurgency tactics involve demonizing non-white humanity (a phrase I use to summarize Harcourt's examples) to justify their surveillance, suppression, torture, and death. He observes that counterinsurgent tactics are now so pervasive that they have become normalized, paving the way for Donald Trump's authoritarian executive reign that undermined social institutions, defied political norms, and installed members of his family in positions of federal power. Given these conditions, Harcourt declares that every action, even the small ones—from ignoring panhandlers to the steps we take to achieve retirement—are part of the struggle that critical theory must help shape by emancipating humanity.

When Harcourt traces parts of this history back to World War II and the Cold War, he points out that critical theory splintered, forking into two streams: a Marxist bent of connecting theory to practice and a retreat from practice in favor of theory. A standstill emerged, not just between these sides but also internal to each of them. For example, Harcourt observes that the loss of a steady guiding light for critical philosophy might be registered in the way poststructuralists and postcolonialists have expressed hesitations to claim coherence for praxis and have avoided the risk of oppressing those they seek to support. In addition, he notes that those who recuperated the Frankfurt School regressed back to certain fixed formulations of truth, progression, and foundations that revise old models with new ones and thus fail to unravel the endless array of illusions that enable inequality and oppression.

In place of critical philosophy that was unable to suggest a practical way forward, the liberal Left has offered the rule of law. Harcourt reminds us that the rule of law solidified with Thomas Hobbes who supported the belief that laws guaranteed a pursuit of self-interests and possessions, protecting against intrusion. In this regard, laws seem like neutral fencing that liberates rather than indoctrinates. Harcourt cites Marx's intervention only to point out that it exchanged the selfish individualist with a community oriented social being vis-à-vis Jean Jacques Rousseau. In short, one illusion was replaced with another.

For Harcourt, the objective is not to deal in debates about which is the true self (the individualist or humanitarian) but to scrutinize how the concepts of the self and the rule of law become constructed through a series of laws and legal structures that have the appearance of fairness. To put it differently, faith in liberal legalism has become an attractive alternative to pursuing critical philosophy, but Harcourt cautions against yielding to it because the fairness of rule of law is an illusion that renders people docile by convincing us to accept concepts of laws and legal structures without contest. Abiding by rules and laws that seem to support our self-interests makes it difficult to then question them when, in fact,

they favor the interests of the some and marginalize others. In this sense, it runs counter to the heart of critical philosophy.

In response to these circumstances, critical theory is in a good position—if it abandons certain unproductive critical habits and internal disputes—to challenge the unequal distribution of resources that shore up the interests of some at the expense of others. After all, emancipating humanity has been the overarching objective of critical theory since its origins and even throughout its squabbles. First, a reconstructed critical theory includes “*a radical theory of illusions*” wherein “reality” is exposed for an illusion that serves to funnel resources in a certain direction that perpetuates unequal material conditions. However, as it un.masks old illusions with new ones, the new illusions will also require assessment.

Second, a reconstructed critical theory requires an “*unswerving evaluation and assessment of values*” that refrains from blanket endorsements. As a radical theory of illusions releases us from the grip of certain accepted conventions of revolution and political economic utopias, this freedom means that there is no ultimate condition to which radical theory progresses. For example, political economies that function through either a nationalized economy or the private ownership of enterprises are not inherently equitable or just. Rather, a set of beliefs and second-order rules within them determine the distribution of wealth. The upshot is that critical philosophy must not be bound to a particular utopia or political economic system. Harcourt insists that “What matters are the values that infuse those structures and the ways in which they are interpreted and implemented” (256). After giving voice to discourse on the topic of values, he lands on a Leftist-based definition that is subject to context-based amendments. In his words, these values are “to create a more equal, compassionate, and just society where there is less oppression, marginalization, and domination, a lower social differential, and a greater possibility for everyone to achieve their fullest potential and autonomy” (259).

Third, a reconstructed critical theory presents “*a radical critical philosophy of strategies and tactics*” that moves away from privileging old ways of participating in change through parties and proletariat revolution. These options have been losing ground to small scale, leaderless uprisings and the New Right’s evisceration of class solidarity. Instead, a new critical philosophy approaches circumstances with time and place sensitive tactics, tactics that strive toward a common core of values accented differently according to context. The specifics of practice exist on a spectrum, and Harcourt describes it by first pinning down two extremes: revolution (i.e., Leninist strategies of toppling the establishment) and legislative reform (e.g., Bernie Sanders’ political revolution). Examples of practice continues with a discussion of the populist left, #BlackLivesMatter, occupations and assemblies, political and civil disobedience, hacking and whistleblowing, killjoy politics, autonomous zones, the common, socialism, legal transformation, peaceful secession, insurrection, the undercommons, weaponizing life, sacrifice and penitence, and polyvalent approaches.

In summation, a reconstructed critical theory consists of three dimensions that disturb perceptions of reality, uphold a Leftist tradition of values instead of unconditional solidarity to any political economy even when reformulated in the wake of revolution, and enact a

variety of strategies and tactics that are specific to time and place. Throughout, there are tensions between theory and practice that hone each other.

Harcourt offers personal examples of how this radical critical philosophy plays out and the examples are clarifying. For example, he describes the process of continually questioning, testing, and sharpening critical praxis through a self-reflexive narrative about the Yellow Vest Movement's Act IX protest, implemented in the center of Paris on January 12, 2019. As Harcourt observes, the Act IX protest was staged to question the concentration of wealth in France, and the Yellow Vest Movement more generally represented one of the only counterpoints to President Macron's regime and won the majority of the French public's support. While bearing witness to the protest and engaging in public and private reflections on the matter, Harcourt refrained from active involvement. This was a pivotal moment because it forced him to rethink old habits. It compelled the question "what more am I to do?" In light of this central question that he asks throughout the book, Harcourt offers another narrative about his development as an advocate for those charged with the death penalty and its evolution into contesting the punitive system writ large by way of fighting the Muslim ban and racial profiling. Pushing further still, he strives to align his work with abolitionism and ungovernability.

### **Anticipated Responses and a Recommendation**

Concerns about Harcourt's proposed critical theory may arise around his selective flexibility and inflexibility. For example, he invites buy-in by appealing to critical philosophy's long-standing goal of emancipating humanity. Struggling on behalf of less oppression is as close as Harcourt gets to a constant. The methods for bringing about material equity and systems for managing it are malleable as long as they uphold Leftist values contingent to time and place. This might be a sticking point for those who deploy scientific methodology to reach reasonable conclusions about optimal strategies and institutions for the benefit of humanity. Harcourt jettisons this kind of determinism from a new critical theory, and he is adamant in this regard. His position on this matter is also reflected in assigning critical philosophy the endless task of unmasking "reality" as an illusion. Nothing is set in stone, an openness that is at the heart of a new critical theory.

Some readers may object to the way Harcourt seems to pick and choose when critical practice is fixed and when it is fluid. Readers may turn Harcourt's rejection of extreme immanent critique against himself, charging *Critique & Praxis* as a form of scientism and rationality that develops its own foundation of truth in order to stabilize correct judgments. Harcourt anticipates and even welcomes this and similar concerns throughout the book, acknowledging that his work no doubt perpetuates illusions that will require contestation for the way it too promotes inequities.

Bearing in mind the limitations of *Critique & Praxis*, my review intends to suggest that it strikes a balance among the considerable tasks of presenting a trajectory of critical philosophy; stringing together historical events and conditions into a narrative that would otherwise be normalized into invisibility; and proposing a relevant, concrete, and flexible reformulation of critical theory. His suggestion for revivifying the discourse feels urgent because, as he describes it, an acute and skewed consolidation of wealth has only worsened over time and the reigning response of liberalism has invited complacency. Critical

philosophy has the ability to offer a productive and inclusive way forward, but it must shrug off its internal disputes and problematic legacies. These choices in developing a new critical theory seem to uphold values of creating more equality instead of less of it. When that is clear and when his proposed critical theory seems to support this premise, his argument feels compelling. Based on these reasons, I would recommend the book to readers interested in the past, present, and future of critical theory.