

Global Dialogues 10

Ends of Critique

Pol Bargaés-Pedreny, Kai Koddenbrock, Jessica Schmidt,
Mario Schmidt (eds.)

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Introduction

Acknowledgements

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Our workshop *After Modernity into Complexity? Possibilities for Critique in an Age of Global Cooperation* and this global dialogue *Ends of Critique* originate in a diagnostic observation that all four editors share. It is an observation that awaits explanation in contemporary social sciences: in Germany and the Anglophone world, 'critique' seems to be everywhere but does not do anything. Playing around with a phrase from Bruno Latour, one might say that critique has run out of steam but is still running. The questions of spaces, possibilities and positions of critique have indeed been picked up with renewed vigour today.

The basis on which the current engagement takes place is fundamental and there are ongoing transformations in resistance politics, governing rationalities and critical perspectives. These transformations might be summarized as follows: first, resistant politics have evolved from the class struggle of socialist movements of the late 19th and early 20th century, to the culture wars of the New Left of the 1960s and '70s to today's acephalous bubble-up politics of Occupy. While it is too early to evaluate the rise of recent resistance movements like Podemos and Syriza in Southern Europe, thus far these have not translated into any movement of the kind seen in other parts of Europe and the US. Secondly, the trajectory of resistance politics has been met by shifts in governing rationalities from the liberal rule over the public of legal subjects, to the neoliberal responsabilization of the entrepreneurial subject to today's resilience approaches of governing through the learning subject. Thirdly, critical perspectives have shifted from the structuralist thought of orthodox Marxism, to its poststructuralist challenge of ethical deconstruction to today's nonstructuralist theorizations, such as actor-network theories, new materialism and 'life politics'. At the margins of this critical mainstream, Critical Theory in its Habermasian and more Marxist variants is trying hard to rejuvenate critique under labels such as 'justification', 'the right to justification', 'forms of life' or 'staging totality'. In essence, the terrain of sociological and philosophical critique is as crowded as ever. Yet, in Germany and the Anglophone world, its traction with political struggles seems to be weaker than ever before.

Critique, one could say, has become an aged boxer whose fists cannot hurt any longer but whose mouth still loves to praise himself (one might think of Jake LaMotta in Martin Scorsese's *Raging Bull*). Taking up the fight, the Dialogue's contributions aim to explore diverse vantage points for understanding this situation. They do not pretend to neatly verify their arguments in the same way that scholars are forced to do in high impact journals. The reader will not find boring literature reviews, long bibliographies and overly artificial politeness. A dialogue, we assume, is a direct and polemical fight with the dialogue partner as well as with the problem discussed. In fact, we

believe that only in arguing with each other will the problem(s) eventually take shape and become visible. Taken as a whole, however, the contributions exemplify that a multi-perspectival approach to the question leads to – how should it not? – a multiplicity of entry points into the discussion.

The dialogue is split into two sections, which are separated by an intermezzo. The two sections, 'Thought and Critique: Fun vs. Responsibility' and 'Society and Critique: Overcoming Anti-Foundationalism', consist of three short pieces each that revolve around similar issues and cross-reference each other. In the middle, an 'Intermezzo' offers a very timely sketch of the ideology of finance with immediate relevance to the current euro-zone crisis and Greece's position in it. It is placed in between the more theoretical parts as a reminder of the critical potential of empirically sensitive but theoretically inspired research.

The first three contributions all deal with the relations between thought and critique or, to use the boxing metaphor again, the relations between the aged boxer's fists and his mouth. Mario Schmidt's 'Critique as a Paratopical Joke: the Critical Acriticalness of Anthropology' assumes that losing his 'iron fists' is the only way to clear the ground for a situation in which the boxer realizes that the fists can be substituted by a gun. In a famous scene in *The Raiders of the Lost Ark*, the first Indiana Jones movie, an oriental swordsman shows off his fighting skills with his tremendous sword. The suspense builds upon the assumption that Indiana Jones will have serious problems fighting the swordsman. He, however, simply pulls his gun and shoots him. M. Schmidt, engaging with the concept of radical alterity, argues that this is the way to go. He proposes that thought should stop pretending to be more than a playful and ironic way to engage with a world in which real changes are made by politicians and not by academics.

A related defence of the academic ivory tower is performed in Jessica Schmidt's paper 'Worlds of Critique: Choking on the Joke?' Her paper, loosely inspired by Hannah Arendt's work on judgment, assumes that in the midst of a world that is perceived to be contingent, in flux and without entry points for substantial claims or substantial actions, the retreat into a disimpassioned (and most probably painful) analysis of the world is both advisable and possible. Precisely because we do not believe in the power of our fists any longer, we should listen more carefully to what our mouths are capable of saying. She ventures that the capacity to say something hinges upon the ability, as well as the structural possibility, to fall silent when expedient. Critique, in her analysis, depends on the ability to distance oneself and re-consider the parameters of good scholarship.

In sum, both papers assume that separating thinking about the world from critically engaging with the world is helpful. In

Mario Schmidt's paper it is a playful choice of irony of someone who stopped believing in the link between critique and academic analysis aiming at truth; in Jessica Schmidt's it is a benevolent boredom of someone who is beginning to 'get Nietzsche': approaching the liberating moment in the experience of absurdity. Kai Koddenbrock's contribution 'From Joke to Reality: Why Critique Needs a Social Theory' stands in contrast with the first two papers. Koddenbrock would disagree with both approaches. Instead of holding on to the promises of either building worlds that do not exist (M. Schmidt) or full disengagement (J. Schmidt) in the critical movement, he assumes that the genuine critical move implies that the boxer thinks about the skills of the mouth while still using the fists. Koddenbrock, going back to Marx, proposes to develop an empirically grounded social theory that is able to change things for the better. But this can only work if the social is understood as something specific, something that can be grasped as such as well as the possibility to move beyond it. Koddenbrock thus maintains that today, critique needs to be about a proper theory of contemporary capitalism including the project to move beyond contemporary capitalism. Let us assume that the aged boxer (=Koddenbrock) has regained belief in his strength because he now possesses a bullet-proof argument capable of knocking the opponent out. How can Koddenbrock be sure that his capitalist opponent did not pretend to be knocked out (to uphold its hegemonic position)?

By focusing on *social* theory, Koddenbrock's paper, tragic highlight of the dialogue we might say, prepares the reader for the section 'Society and Critique: Overcoming Anti-Foundationalism', which deals with the question of ideology critique; that is if or how we can be sure about the validity of our critique. Ideology critique has always maintained that ideology is of time and place and is thus specific to different societies.

An intermezzo – and in a way a prelude – to the critique of ideology is presented in Dimitris Sotiropoulos's paper: 'Financialization: Taking Stock and Moving Forward'. In light of the pervasiveness of financialization in contemporary economy, he dismantles finance's allegedly passive and ahistorical character. Literally and figuratively situated between Koddenbrock's call for a critique of capitalism and Oliver Marchart's contingent ontology, Sotiropoulos argues not only for a rehistoricization of the rise of finance but also an acknowledgement of its multi-layered and contingent roots, which need to be carefully researched in order to comprehend their consolidation into the current form of capitalism.

In his paper 'Wrestling with the Cheating Gene: A Post-Foundational Approach to Ideology Critique', Oliver Marchart acknowledges that we are all ideological to some degree because we continuously act *as if* there were foundations to our

intellectual and political projects. To deploy the truth, then, is fine, if we accept that there might be others. He thereby tacitly deploys a post-foundationalist ontology, which is based on one single truth: the contingency of the social, the 'necessary character of contingency'. Marchart's analysis does not answer the aged boxer's doubts about the strength of his fists. As in American wrestling, for him all boxing fights are staged. We have to know this and fight nonetheless.

David Chandler compares contemporary critique with the ideology of complexity. In his contribution, he laments a consensus on Critique – with a capital C – which understands the world and life as overly relational and complex. Today, Critique no longer uses the modern separation between subject and object, which had enabled purposeful human shaping of the world. He argues that this consensus or 'ideology' of critique has come about because of the 'attenuation' of social struggle. Chandler concludes by stating that destabilising this particular form of critique is 'the most pressing intellectual task of our time'. For him, a knock-out is a knock-out.

In the last contribution in the volume, Pol Bargaés-Pedreny analyzes the revival of utopianism in contemporary thought. Bargaés-Pedreny argues that the exuberance of the critical project of today is misleading: it is in essence feeble and satisfied with the impossibility to speak about structural changes. The issue with the current revival of utopian thought is its perversion of the knock-out: as an aged boxer, critique has lost the capacity to knock out its opponent, but re-sells itself as the new champion. For him, therefore, there is the need to resist a critical project that has turned its defeat into a complacent victory. In the last breath of the article – and hence of this Dialogue – Bargaés-Pedreny ends on a hopeful note. Without struggle, without a mobilized class that could contest the status quo, he argues that the only option for Critique is to imitate the old 'utopian socialists' of the early nineteenth century in the present contemporary conditions.

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Jessica Schmidt, Mario Schmidt

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Part 1

Thought and Critique: Fun vs. Responsibility

Critique as a Paratopical Joke: The Political Apoliticalness of Anthropology

Mario Schmidt

It was shortly before the workshop upon which this Global Dialogue is based that I realized I had misread the title of it. Whenever speaking about it, I had told people that I was currently organizing a workshop on the 'possibility of critique'. Some days before the workshop, however, I recognized that we claimed to be discussing 'possibilities for critique'. Reflecting on my misreading, I became aware that I am not interested in forms of critique, but in the question whether critique is possible at all. I was interested in critique's conditions and not in its enactment. Preparing for the workshop, I then realized that we are trapped in an intricate intellectual situation: While a few scholars still believe in the ability of the human subject to change its relation to the world deliberately and fundamentally for the better (Koddenbrock, this volume), most stopped having faith in this potential and renamed the faith hubris. While modernity believed in the human(istic) capacity to embrace the world in ways which would be either true or false, postmodernity does away with the finiteness of subjects by the introduction of multiple language games and a dizzying diversity of cultures that are loosely connected to a finite world (for a similar diagnosis Badiou 2013).

This difference is mirrored in how the two groups understand the relation between what there is, that is how they conceptualize ontology, and how we can perceive it, that is how they understand epistemology. While the first group upholds

the difference and thereby, following Kant (1974), can still hope that we will improve our epistemological access to the world (Habermas 1981), the second group is split into those who epistemologize ontology, for instance post-structuralism (Derrida 1976), and those who ontologize epistemology, for instance new materialism (Connolly 2013) and ecological as well as neuro-biological theories of the mind. The epistemologizers of ontology understand the human subject (its language, culture etc.) and the ontologizers of epistemology the world as an eternal construction site, as fluid places without fixed boundaries. In the first case, any change in the human subject leads to changes in the perception of the 'world', for instance whenever we cross cultural boundaries; in the second case, any change of the world leads to a change in the human 'subject'. The epistemologizer has no anchor to set up as a fundament for critique; the ontologizer has no one to put the anchor into the sea. In the first case the world died; in the second, it was the subject that died.

In such a delicate situation, critique becomes a problem of *if at all* and not one of *how to*. The question seems to be: Can we still criticize the world while claiming that no substantial difference between ontology and epistemology exists, and hence no difference between the subject and the world exists, without falling back into the trappings of modernity? One way to accomplish such a critique is the attempt to engage in hermeneutical forms of immanent critique (Stahl 2013). Although proponents of immanent critique deny our potential, as autonomous subjects, to radically distance ourselves from what is criticized, they retain the potential for 'internal distancing'. What can be achieved is a re-organization of elements of a culture, an economy or a society, for instance if they internally contradict each other (Honneth 2011). This critique, however, always remains after what was formerly known as the truth, as any unpacking of truth results in a new constitution of truth's fundament itself. It is about process but not necessarily progress: What is missing is an outsider's point of view.

The question I posed myself to answer is therefore the following one: is external critique possible and how can we engage in it? Reflecting upon this question, I realized that any neat defense of cultural anthropology as a science able to produce valuable and valid insights (truth) would at the same time catapult us into a position in which external critique becomes thinkable again: if that which is radically different can be understood (Kohl 2000), why should we, in an inverse move, not be able to understand ourselves as radically different, i.e. from outside of ourselves? The question that therefore has to be answered if one wants to regain control of critique is the following: how does anthropology produce knowledge of the radically other? Below, I will try to give an answer to this question by swapping the constituents of its grammatical object:

I argue that anthropology (1) does not produce 'knowledge of the radically other' but 'radically other knowledge' and thereby (2) performatively proves that external critique is possible. However, as we will see, doing so inevitably forces the anthropologist to accept an ironic stance on both herself and her object of study; in other words, external critique is possible but nobody can engage in it.

Anthropology as alternative metaphysics

When I was visiting the Kenyan Luo for the first time with my colleague Sebastian Schellhaas, we were troubled by the fact that some of our informants insisted that it is 'necessary' that men ate first served by women, and afterwards the women ate whatever was left. While we tried to analyze these statements as attempts to uphold gendered power relations on the male side and a result of ideological blindness on the female side, we became aware of a common problem of such an ideological critique (see Marchart, this volume): by engaging in it, we had to accuse our informants of not only having false representations of the world but also of themselves, i.e. of having a false self-consciousness. They, we had to diagnose, live in the poor state of utter alienation. As we were not satisfied with analyzing what our informants called a necessity as an ultimately unnecessary attempt to uphold gendered power relations on the male side and/or a result of ideological blindness on the female side, we started to reflect upon a more basic question, namely, what if what counts as 'eating' is itself at stake in the Western Kenyan ethnographic setting?

In combination with a reflection upon other ethnographic details, which cannot be reconstructed adequately in this essay, our attempt to take the statement that the separation is necessary at face value led us to a conceptualization of a form of sociality that is grounded in processes of simultaneously eating and feeding inside of one body: men and women do not eat after one another; one body just finishes its meal. Instead of proposing different extensions of the same concepts, i.e. different extensions of 'eating' and as a consequence of 'sociality', we had shown that the intensional meanings of the Luo concepts of 'eating' and 'sociality' differ fundamentally from the meanings of our own. We did not shy away from concluding that the world therefore might be populated by different beings than we had thought before: only one huge body that eats money, food and land (extensively Schellhaas and Schmidt 2015). However, by philosophically proving, i.e. by conceptualizing (Deleuze/Guattari 1996), that living with such a proposition is perfectly thinkable and reasonable, I, or should I say in my case the 'Luo-I', introduce, as a transcendental possibility,

a metaphysical alternative based on and not contradicting its empirical fundament.

Although it is clear that such a metaphysical approach differs from any type of colonial modernism that portrays the other as lacking 'essential' characteristics of rational beings, it might not be clear how it differs from the perspective of a cultural relativist or post-modernist. While the relativist analyzes the 'other as a function of anthropological concepts' (the eating group of the Luo has a different extension because gender relations *are done* and *are symbolized* differently by the Luo, that is because Luo men dominate Luo women) and thereby misses the otherness of the other, the metaphysician analyzes 'anthropological concepts as a function of the other' (in order to understand the Luo, my conceptualization of an eating group must become intensionally different from how I am used to conceptualizing an 'eating group' at home because Luo are radically different from me). However, if the other is understood as radically different, the anthropological concepts thus developed in the space between the anthropologist and the other are not a function of 'a specific other of an other type' (i.e. not 'an other of the same type' as in the case of cultural relativism) but a function of 'some other of an other type', i.e. of an other that radically differs as much from the anthropologist as it differs from the other that the anthropologist encountered in her ethnographic fieldwork (Viveiros de Castro, Pedersen and Holbraad 2014): anthropology, by attempting to conceptualize the other, thus does not grasp 'the other's (native's) point of view' but 'an other point of view'. Anthropology's conceptualizations are therefore not true in the sense of a correspondence theory of truth. They are true because they are coherently thinkable and adopting them would have consequences.

In fact, I am therefore not very fond of the term ontology, recently used to denote a form of anthropology interested in thus 'thinking savagely'¹. I would, be it just to ward off critique, prefer the term *metaphysical anthropology*. Metaphysical anthropology is not concerned with presenting a new grand theory of the world (contra Latour and Deleuze). It aims to analyze that which *potentially* grounds the worlds that other people *could* live in.² In other words: ontological anthropology analyzes specific structures of being that *give rise* to a specific world, while metaphysical anthropology analyzes structures of being that *would give rise* to a specific world.³ If we accept this, we are no longer caught in the problem of different language games in one world, but in the ineluctable possibility of different worlds, of a multitude of what one might call 'para-topoi'⁴ that challenge our own world by possessing radically different, but empirically experienceable metaphysical conditions.

¹ By seriously engaging in thus conceptualizing 'savagely' (Lévi-Strauss 1966), anthropologists would guard themselves from seeing African, Melanesian and Asian versions of Deleuze or Latour everywhere. Taking seriously the other (the generic other) means being open to the possibility that others might indeed be very similar to Cartesian dualists of the 17th century. It is very clear, for instance, that although Luo posit the existence of a single person, they do not conflate the distinction between human subjects and non-human objects at all.

² As much as Aristotle's metaphysics is an attempt to clarify, for instance, diverse meanings of the 'whole' in Platonic dialogues, I think anthropology is an attempt to clarify diverse meanings of 'sociality', 'person' and other concepts in the dialogues of anthropologists and their interlocutors.

³ The metaphysical anthropologist thus evades the problem of making the assumption that radical alterity exists. She merely has to assume that she can experience it. This has radical implications for the ethnographical goal to immerse into the other culture. The goal would instead be to uphold a moment of productive non-understanding.

Anthropology as paratopical critique

If, however, the idea that different metaphysics exist besides our own is thinkable, our own is marked as a 'choice' (Evens 2009).⁵ Accepting the possibility of alternative metaphysics thus already implies the potential to radically and afresh 'conceptually self-determine' ourselves (Hage 2012). If we can conceptualize radically differently, external critique hence exists too, not so much as an epistemological ability but as an epiphenal feeling of hope triggered by the conceptualization of that very radically different. From such a perspective, however, critique is neither a discursive undertaking aimed at laying bare a truth corresponding to the world, nor a detailed imagination of utopia (see Bargués-Pedreny, this issue). Critique understood as paratopical can only be a mere deictically pointing towards the possibility of difference accomplished by conceptualizing a metaphysical alternative, which, although potentially true, cannot be 'established' in reality. The consequences of a decision by all Germans to suddenly understand themselves as one body that eats food, money and votes cannot be foreseen. However, that something would happen, seems rather obvious. Anthropology is therefore non-critical in its content (it does not offer suggestions how to change the world) and hyper-critical in its form (it proves that the world can be changed). It is not political: it enables the political.

Engaging in such a form of formal critique, we become immunized to understanding the hypothesis that the world is contingent as a proven fact (contra new materialism). It might be; it might be not.⁶ Similar to what Schlegel has written about romantic art, a metaphysical anthropology accepts that it misses both itself and the other for the sake of experiencing the possibility to differ. This goes hand in hand with the feeling of irony that Schlegel described as an 'astonishment of the thinking subject about itself that often dissolves into a faint smile' (Schlegel 1830: 61, translation M.S.). Such irony could figure as a less politicized term for what Viveiros de Castro has called a 'decolonization of thought' (2009). Reading a good ethnography should hence make the reader aware of the fact that her own conceptualization are (1) as much of a joke as those of the 'colonial other' have been⁷ and (2) that her own ones could be different. Anthropology is therefore nothing more than a huge ironic joke and precisely therefore an academic discipline which should be taken deadly seriously. Therefore my modest contribution: Critique cannot be thought without irony triggered by radical alterity (even if that radical alterity is only a joke invented by some anthropologists).

⁴ The Ancient Greek *para* is an apt adjective because it denotes a relation of 'next to' and 'against' and thereby captures the process of ethnographic knowledge production that begins with the other causally challenging the ethnographer by its incomprehensibility (I against the other), tries to do justice to the other in the other's own concepts by using her own language (I next to the other), just to arrive at new concepts that can be fruitfully compared with her own (I against I).

⁵ I just want to assure the reader that I am aware that all of this sounds very Hegelian.

⁶ An empirical philosopher, i.e. an anthropologist, might just say: 'It depends on the facts'.

⁷ Which means that the other does not become like 'we', that is people with politics, intellectual capabilities that are to be taken dead-seriously, but we become laughable figures like the colonial subject.

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Worlds Beyond Critique: Choking on the Joke?

Jessica Schmidt

Although I am one of the co-organizers of the workshop that has led to this publication, I have always remained somewhat puzzled in the face of this topic of critique. My puzzlement circles around questions such as: Why is critique in such high demand and is it at all an issue for scientists, even if they are of the social kind? This puzzlement is aggravated by an epistemological development that leads to a certain self-evidence in the possibility 'of' critique. And such self-evidence seems to *a priori* pull the tooth of critique: the insight into contingency and multiplicity not only of social orders and worldviews but lately also of world(s) as such. As we have come to move on from capital Truth, Knowledge, History, Nature, Epistemology, Ontology and the like to lower-case truths, knowledges, histories, natures, epistemologies, ontologies and so on, it seems extremely difficult to intellectually eschew the received truth that there is no truth in the singular.¹

From this standpoint, critique – the challenge, based on radical doubt, to what is being maintained – is both always inherently possible and, by the same token, simply part of the world (similar observations are made by Bargués-Pedreny and Chandler in this volume). That is, contingency imposes the possibility of critique to the point at which critique is neither a particular achievement or capacity of the thinking being, nor gaining traction. There rests some banal truth in critique: if endless things can be added to, or pulled out of, the infinite plurality of the world, critique seems to be just another part of such plurality (see the post-foundational approach proposed by Marchart in this volume). Critique's external aspirations collapse into an internal trait of a contingent ontology. In other words, I entertain the suspicion that there is a problem to be tackled before we even get to the question as to whether

¹ It does make a difference whether it is acknowledged that singular, universal truth is not for earth-bound, contextualized man to receive or whether such truth is declared non-existent.

² Michael Carrithers has noted that at the end of the 1960s, epistemology in anthropological scholarship was welcomed as a liberation from big-O Ontology. While the world cannot be known, worldviews can (2010).

³ While this would lead too far, it is not only anthropology, with its research interest and its concomitant methodologies, that give it great weight in contemporary reworking of epistemology, but also its inherent self-reflexive drive (Crook 2009). There is a certain logic in turning the constant assessment of assessments – i.e. methodology – into the heart of contemporary knowledge production as such. Under conditions of deep uncertainty, in which it is uncertain whether certainty exists or not, folding this process of self-assessment into the end of knowledge itself seems to suggest itself forcefully as the viable form of thinking and acting (on the role of assessing self-assessments see J. Schmidt, forthcoming 2015).

critique is, can or should be internal or external. Since the possibility *of* critique is always given, in implicitly questioning the nature of critique, the workshop actually posed the right question: what are the possibilities *for* critique, critique that is not already part of the world?

My answer is: there aren't any. A development has come to rest in indistinction between ontology (the contingency and plurality of what is) and critique (pointing to the non-essential character of what is). In indistinction, a line of thought comes to rest. While critique is not possible under the contemporary guise of the epistemological problem, what has thereby indeed become a possibility is the moment of pause. Rest provides the opportunity for taking stock and for doing some thinking (contra Koddenbrock in this volume). I think the conditions are ripe for disengaging with the fatal activity of critique and re-engaging with the conditions of judging what is interesting.

Ontological Turn and the Conceptual Spook: Spinning Around Your Own Axis, Fast

I am, of course, not the only one who has come to the conclusion that there is something wrong with critique (for an astute summary see M. Schmidt in this volume). The fatality of critique has recently been attributed to a renewed crisis of epistemology that has found its apogee in deconstructivism. The central problem was that deconstructivist approaches sought to debunk all representations but firmly remained in the dualistic world of representation versus reality. The contention then was that all representations must be suspected to be false while they were still representations, and as such were representations of a residual version of a singular reality. In other words, deconstructivist critique got stuck in an understanding that direct access to the objective world was impossible while subjecting epistemology to eternal critique.

Current attempts to overcome this triple crisis of representation, critique and epistemology are subsumed under the 'ontological turn'.² The ontological turn is a critique of critique and as such its end. At the forefront of this turn is anthropological scholarship (importantly, however, without being limited to anthropology as a discipline).³ Turning to ontology, or more correctly, ontologies, means: if we have nothing else but meanings and representations, it is not meanings and representations that are wrong; rather, the error rests in thinking that they are meanings and representations of something 'beyond'. Representations are real; they have ontic status like objects and beings (seminal here Latour 1992; Henare et al. 2007; Holbraad 2012). Since there are a multiplicity of meanings among the peoples of the world there exists a multiplicity of

worlds. Moreover, since we make meanings, we interrogate meaning and we change meaning, every time we do so we construct another world that is possible. From an intellectual perspective, this world-making possibility is presented as infinite.

The ontological turn is thus borne by the deliberate adoption of a non-skeptical stance. It creates new realities through conceptual renewal instead of debunking the existing one(s). The central enabling condition for such world-making, in addition to the equation concept = object (and hence object = concept), is 'radical alterity'. For anthropologists, on the surface, this is a relatively easy task. Radical alterity is provided by its ethnographic material of the 'wholly other'. Yet radical alterity as a potential has been extended to any moment of puzzlement provoked during empirical research (Holbraad et al. 2014). It is therefore more of an 'attitude' (enabled, I would contend, by a larger social-epistemological predisposition). The concern for radical difference, however, must be an artificial creation of the empirical researcher so as to avoid essentializing what is (and is differently). So 'object' and 'material' in moments of radical alterity – moments of non-understanding, moments of wonder and puzzlement⁴ – here are meant to serve the heuristic purpose of eliciting radically new ways of thinking: conceptual renewal or neologistic conceptualizations that not only move the concepts, but in a recursive move, radically innovate what kind of thing 'analysis' and 'methodology' can be (Holbraad 2012). Advocates are at pains to emphasize that such ontography is not a description of the 'other' but a way of 'passing through' them, lest the 'dubious' assumption were to arise that one can actually access the ethnographic object (Holbraad et al. 2014; Povinelli 2012).

If the induction of 'alter-ontologies'⁵ (instead of critique) is what the ontological turn is about, its agenda houses an interesting problem that splits into untenable humility, on the one hand, and hubris through the back door, on the other. The issue is that neither of the two are errors that can be corrected if one tweaked or improved analysis conducted within the ontological turn but are essentially entailed in it. With regard to the former, if concepts and objects are ontically indistinguishable, as a result of realizing that we have nothing but meanings and representations such that for the human these are not 'representative' but real, the alter-ontology elicited by the alterity of the ethnographic material is not 'alter' at all. You do not pass through the other (how would you?), you actually and really make the world of the other through conceptualizing it.⁶ The resulting concept is what is real. Whether this description may not be the 'only' world and therefore not his world, it always is yours in which the other *is* like *this*. At times, attempts are made to avert this conclusion by maintaining that this is how it *could* be (Holbraad et al. 2014), but that is a possibility one can never be sure about and ultimately contradicts

⁴ Classic examples are: if the Nuer say 'twins are birds' and we take this statement literally and approach it with the principle of charity (i.e. that we can trust the interlocutor on this), the question follows what kinds of beings are twins and birds for this to be a meaningful statement? Or if it turns out that for Afro-Cuban diviners 'powder is power' and the concept (power) has the same ontic status as the object (powder) so that the latter cannot be said to symbolise the former, what kind of world must this be (see Holbraad 2010, 2012)?

⁵ Mario Schmidt in this volume defines the space created through radical alterity as paratopical.

⁶ This is the result of taking Deleuze's and Guattari's (2000) other as the enabling condition for conceptual invention literally, i.e. in anthropological research radical alterity, in having an initial equivalent in the 'real' world, takes on an ambiguous role between actuality and conceptual potential. Ethnographically speaking, radical alterity exists in a way that it can be experienced by 'going there' while the existence itself and what kind of existence of that which is radically other and hence beyond the faithfully graspable must be radically questioned.

⁷ Normatively, ethnographic ontologists may end up with the same conundrum from which they sought to liberate both the other and themselves: in the same way as before, multiple worldviews were accepted but 'we', the 'moderns', had ontology on top, the ethnographic interlocutor may inhabit a world of his own but it is only us who know that there are multiple worlds (or our world consists of multiple worlds whereas that of others does not. But with this we hit rock bottom: we would have to radically doubt that the 'other' exists autonomously as other but he would with absolute certainty exist as part of our world, which would be the same old circular reasoning known from epistemology, but now with a truth beyond doubt). Pinpointing the pending question of the meta-contrast and its nature when shifting from 'Western culture' to 'Euro-American ontology', Matei Candea has appositely asked: 'Is it purported to be a merely heuristic or is it a description of a state of fact? The shift from culture to ontology does not rid us of this question; on the contrary, it sharpens it' (2010: 179). The actual problem here is, I think, that it is both, displaced into the precipitation of alter-ontologies. My suspicion would be that this 'both' poses some difficulties for ontologists because it remains necessarily unclear what the ontography is about when form and content merge and hence on which terms it should be judged.

⁸ This line of thought lies behind Latour's *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence* (2013), in which different 'sectors' of society become worlds – or modes of existence – in their own right.

⁹ Karen Sykes found that the imperative of conceptual renewal in ontography seems like a 'somewhat semi-religious kind of project' (2010: 198).

the ontological impetus of 'concept = reality'. Moreover, as Holbraad is keen on emphasizing, the ambition is not just to come up with different concepts but to displace the inappropriate ones with better ones (Holbraad 2010: 180). The idea is that 'your' ontology thus shifts (it follows that your world in its difference was always *this* since anything then can and must be reanalyzed in terms of the new ontology with its new way of thinking or it itself splits up in an infinite number of co-existing other worlds). There is then no such thing as 'respect' or 'humility' in the face of what cannot be finally known. This is because access to reality is no longer in any way limited; it is just multiple, each with the same entitlement to truth.⁷

The second part of the problem is really intriguing. If we say by way of concept *that* world is 'real' but does not have an actual 'reality' status in the world (which seems to be the move ontologists are prepared to make) then there is something of a double ontology. The problem of concept and object divides into two different ontologies with two different forms in which things really exist.⁸ One is the real world created by the thinker living in his alter-ontology and the other reality is some shadowy, alien mass which exists like earth before Day 1 in Genesis 1. Again the 'other' reality is inaccessible, but now this is irrelevant because the conceptual thinker already lives in a world he has made himself for himself (a bit like God).⁹ The precondition for creating his world is that he really made it up himself (that is what it must be like in his world). Received philosophical wisdom and conceptual meanings are already constituents of the existing world and therefore cannot be constitutive of his new world. His is a world of perpetual creation and innovation. The question that would become unintelligible in his world is whether thinking is indeed infinite. Or rather, that ways of thinking may actually be finite in one world is the aporia he puts to productive use to create his (see Holbraad 2012). He is ontologically unreceptive to the fact that he might be fighting against straw men and windmills. In fact, that kind of fight is his *raison d'être*, which legitimizes him as being of his own world.

Hence findings resulting from recursive analysis elicited by radical alterity tend to strike the outside observer as somehow peculiarly banal and very 'this-worldly', scaled up through exoticization. The only difference seems to be that it is ontologically declared to never be the same and thus enabled to spin around its own axis. For instance, that culture was not convention but invention (Wagner, cit. in Holbraad 2012) or that truth was 'infinite' (a neologism which denotes – if an outsider is at all entitled to interpret this without immediately beaming himself into another world – the constant invention of new meanings; Holbraad 2012). Or we are confronted with concepts that indeed seem to be so radically detached from the symbolic register that they do not resonate at all,

¹⁰ That divination is a necessary part of knowledge that does not unfold within a representative 'episteme', as Holbraad's (2011, 2012) recursive methodology seems to suggest, bears resemblance to the pre-Classical system (see Foucault 2002). In the pre-Classical system, knowledge was not artificially produced through ordering concepts or ideas but existed independently in the world. It was brought forth through divinatory revelation without, however, ever reaching 'identity'. This in no way de-validates Holbraad's thought-provoking approach but it does put some limitations on the concomitant proclamation that it was both truly inventive as well as the methodological programme of never-ending invention.

¹¹ And in all fairness it should be acknowledged that even Martin Holbraad, a first-generation advocate of the ontological turn, in the end proposes a research programme that is considerably more conservative than his book-length presentation of recursive ontography seems to imply (Holbraad 2012). On the other hand, if what it comes down to is using all your best knowledge and judgment in analyzing empirical material and then, only if you have come across a logical breach or an unfitting element, seeing if this material can be thought about differently and whether this rethinking helps to understand what has not been understood before, then it did not really need a grand new 'ontological' programme. All sound research proceeds like this. As always with 'logical breach', a question arises: what kind of world must it be when a radical new programme of thinking can seemingly coherently call for what has always been – or used to be – the standard of good scholarship?

like 'Double Click' (Latour 2013). In this last case, a conceptual idiom based on data processing and information technology is being employed for an ontography of the moderns. Since this is quite obviously not the idiom used by Latour's ethnographic interlocutors, the reader wonders why such concepts are pressed onto them and why this methodological move remains unaccounted for. This kind of detachment displaces the entire analysis into an almost autistic project that does not speak to anyone but the author himself. 'I shall invent' is not the rare and lucky result of analysis but its alpha and omega: it will have happened – no doubt, full certainty. And we can already hear the distant roar of new inventions: what if culture was conventional invention or truth was 'de-finition'?

Moreover, despite the claim that it was the alterity of the ethnographic material that elicited this or that particular reconceptualization, contemporary 'inventions' always sound rather Deleuzian – but Deleuze, in turn, via Leibniz, rather like neoplatonic scholasticism (or whatever other, open or hidden, line of heritage). Radical, creative invention would have to assert itself against all that has come before and is systematically impinging upon contemporary thought before it can legitimately call itself an invention.¹⁰

Beyond the Ontological Joke

This is a bit of a joke, of course – an ontological joke. What needs to be taken seriously is that nothing is to be taken seriously. As an ontological joke, the analysis moves beyond critique: it does not criticize (it really does not care about what already exists) nor can it be criticized (because whatever it conjures up was not there before and does not exist anywhere but within its own creation). It promises absolute freedom of thought, however. Its utopian vision, shared by many, centres on a liberation from the baggage of the past and the desire to make a new beginning, perhaps unduly held back by the unwitty structural constraints of language (something I imagine ontologists are struggling with, some wishing they could overcome this last hurdle into a truly new being).

But jokes aside, there is a valuable lesson to be taken from the ontological turn by de-radicalizing or further radicalizing it. We take the ontological turn as an opportunity to indeed re-constitute the autonomy of an academic-intellectual world in which we simply focus on 'our thing', which is observing, thinking and conceptualizing.¹¹ And we do this properly, that is, through the suspension of judgment, instead of carrying petty political(-personal) agendas into 'theorizing' to then call this critique and declare this pre-politicization to be what we should all be doing as academics. In addition, we acknowledge that academic work is nothing other than a vehicle

through which we do work on ourselves, and that anything else is irrelevant because it is beyond our reach. This would be an acknowledgement that it is misguided to think that we care about the world through attempting to engage or that 'truth' and 'essence' play any part in this. In this case, solipsism is not a problem. Other worlds cease to exist and come into being of their own accord.

Benefits ensue. In accepting irrelevance *and* recognizing limitations lies an opportunity to pause. What this pause implies is some space to think, i.e. some space for reflection between and against both extremist and hubristic perpetuations: that of creationism and that of critiquicism. In other words, what is needed is the suspension of critique *as well as* the suspension of innovation. Both are self-defeating. Suspending both, however, creates some room for the possible: seeking to ask some interesting questions and aiming to provide an engaging analysis, by keeping in mind that 'novelty' may not be within the remit of the thinking being, especially not a single one. Deciding upon and exploring interesting subjects is then part of the project of working on the self. And part of this project is to interrogate whether others have not asked and explored this question (if the question concerns some fundamentals of being, we can, of course, legitimately assume that all humans, in their difference, have in one way or another asked and perhaps answered that question in various ways, but with the self-same legitimacy we can assume that humans we count as more similar – beings of the past – have also asked and perhaps answered them in various ways). One of the most enticing questions coming out of the ontological turn, without, however, being in any necessary way bound up with it, is what kind of different ways there are for articulating an understanding of difference (Ingold, cit. in Candea 2010) and implied in this question is the 'difficult problem of how this difference is to be located, situated, delimited' (Candea 2010: 176).

Hence my modest contribution: there is no possibility for critique; there is only the possibility for working on the self, and collectively, this work on the academic self consists in working on the ability to judge and explore interesting questions.¹² Taken seriously, this does not amount to a plea for radical retreat but rather is best understood as a call for a timely rethinking of what 'relevance' might mean for intellectual work.¹³ This call for a relocation of relevance is not necessarily directed against critique but rather follows an acknowledgement that fundamental wrongs, their origins, their totality and their manifestations, have exhaustively been established and interrogated. 'Boldness' in this rethinking is essential; but it must remain a heuristic device. This is difficult enough, and it calls for a modesty that does not turn into its amnesic opposite.

¹² I find myself in agreement with Sykes who disagrees that the ontological turn 'enables conceptual renewal' as it 'presumes the concepts are "ours" in the first place' (2010: 172) and instead suggests that the task is to find ways to 'pose new questions' (2010: 172). Yet, against this simple substitution of 'new concepts' with 'new questions', I insist on 'interesting' because it may also be quite revealing that what appears to be a new question or insight is not new, but still this might then be turned into an interesting derivation of an already existing question or exploration.

¹³ Dimitris Sotiropoulos's call for a meticulous and thorough investigation into the contingent origins of finance (see his contribution in this volume), to me, seems to be a good example of interesting intellectual work.

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From Joke to Reality: Why Critique Needs a Social Theory

Kai Koddenbrock

Our workshop and this dialogue originate in two observations. First, 'critique' seems to be everywhere but doesn't do anything. Despite all these workshops on critique, protests and actions putting them to work are hardly to be seen here in Germany. Second, influential theoretical currents like complexity theory or actor-network theory come with notions of the human and the world that might lead to the death of critique. Without the capacity for human thought and directed action on the world, critique can no longer exist. My contribution engages with these observations by focusing on the relationship of critique to thought and social theory. While thought and critique have been debated at length in these pages, social theory and its conception of the social whole have been neglected. This contribution aims to fill this gap.

One important difference between critique and thought is that critique is more prescriptive. Thought can be passive, distanced. Critique never is. Yet critique's prescriptive parts are often implicit. Michel Foucault, for example, was at pains not to impose a political program on his readers. But his obvious political prescription is a healthy dose of anarchism. 'Not to be governed' or 'not to be to governed like that' expresses his desire to get rid of the status quo and overly statist forms of Marxism (Foucault 1997).¹ Bruno Latour, a new guru of avant-garde social theory, on the other hand, is openly ecologist. He suggests that only by taking things and their agency more seriously and by reducing human hubris can we prevent imminent environmental catastrophe (2004).

¹ A less generous reading might of course turn Foucault into a neoliberal, a debate that has returned recently with force (Zamora 2014).

Thought has always been possible. Thinking about the world or the other-worldly is not impossible in even the direst of circumstances. A prisoner in solitary confinement is still able to reflect on her predicament and that of the world. The possibility of thought is universal and eternal. Thought is, in this sense, simple and never in doubt. Critique, however, is a much more recent invention. The contemporary use of the term originates in Kant's critiques and it is a much more difficult and specific human deed. Because of its roots in the enlightenment project, critique implies a belief in its own power and impact on the world. Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* served to advance the enlightenment project of the 'emergence from self-imposed immaturity'. Kant clearly assumed that his critique would help man on the road towards maturity and wisdom. With this material ambition, critique is always in this world and engages with the world. Philosophic speculation in a prison cell is not critique. Critique comes with a real-world agenda. It wants to do something to the world.

Responding to two of our questions at the workshop about whether critique is still possible and how it could be pursued, I will argue first that the possibility of critique is only in doubt if the possibility of human thought itself has come under attack. Second, powerful critique depends on an adequate social theory, i.e. a theory that is willing to engage with the contemporary contradictions of time and place.

Our debate

Our bewilderment with the differences between the possibility of critique and the possibility for critique before and after the workshop (see contributions by Jessica Schmidt and Mario Schmidt) depends on the distinction between thought and critique. If one acknowledges that critique always comes with a project, the 'of' and the 'for' of critique tend to collapse into each other because critique never comes without something it wants to work for.

From this vantage point, Mario Schmidt's interest in the 'if at all' at the expense of the 'how to' (p. 12) misleads us. Despite his announcement of not being interested in the possibilities 'for' critique, in fact, Mario displays exactly that kind of interest. He argues that critique is always possible because creative thought, even if it is an ironic joke, coupled with meticulous analytical engagement with the world is always possible. He proves this by engaging in the 'how to' of a metaphysical anthropology of the Luo and presents us 'that which *potentially* grounds the worlds that other people *could* live in' (p. 15). For Mario, critique is eternal because thought is eternal. Social conditions or ontology cannot foreclose them.

Jessica Schmidt, by contrast, argues simultaneously that critique is always possible but dead today (p. 18-19). Based on a definition of critique as 'radical doubt', in times of social 'contingency', critique is always already there because it is a representation or translation of this contingency in human thought. If nothing is certain and predictable any more, critique as challenge to this certainty is redundant, and, for this reason, it can no longer exist. For Jessica Schmidt, this dystopian situation has been a long time coming and constitutes a development that has 'come to rest' (p. 19). However, not all is lost. This predicament leaves us with the need to think and pause, which opens up a space to focus on the 'interesting' (p. 18 and 23) instead of the 'petty political(personal)' (p. 22). The 'ontological turn' and the assumption that we are overpowered by a complex world leave us no option but to reassert the 'autonomy of an academic-intellectual world in which we simply focus on "our thing", which is observing, thinking and conceptualizing' (p. 22). As a consequence, with the help of her particular understanding of critique, Jessica Schmidt gets rid of critique to replace it by thoughtful pause. Without the tacit distinction between thought and critique, however, Jessica's argument would amount to exactly the same as Mario's because, here too, thought is inextinguishable and a last refuge in difficult times.

Oliver Marchart, then, is less concerned with the possibility of critique: he seems to assume it can never die, but affirms that only a particular kind of critique is possible today. He asserts that only a post-foundationalist form of critique which no longer relies on single truths or foundations is still conceivable. Why, he does not say but his post-foundationalist ideology critique, just like Jessica Schmidt's, tacitly deploys a post-foundationalist ontology which is based on one single Truth: the contingency of the social, the 'necessary character of contingency' (p. 48). At the same time, Marchart acknowledges that we are all ideological to some degree because we continuously act *as if* there were foundations to our intellectual and political projects (p. 50). To deploy the Truth, then, is fine, if we accept that there might be others.

Dimitris Sotiropoulos and David Chandler are explicit about the social theory deployed for their arguments. Sotiropoulos' framework is based on Marx's fetishism and Foucault's governmentality. And his discussion of finance is firmly rooted in a Marxist understanding of capitalism. Chandler's world, too, has come about, not to rest. Chandler laments a consensus on critique which sees the world and life as overly relational and complex without the modern separation of subject and object which had allowed purposeful human shaping of the world. This consensus or 'ideology' of critique has developed because of the lack of social struggle or the 'attenuation' of struggle. The plane of thought reflects the materiality of

struggle and the lack thereof. 'Class defeat' (p. 58) has made possible this conception of critique in which we are to follow the complexity of life and the world – without purposeful human action or governmental intervention. For Chandler, destabilizing this particular form of critique is 'the most pressing intellectual task of our time' (p. 59).

Where does this leave us? Only Jessica Schmidt has maintained that critique has died; the others have clung, with varying intensity, to the possibility of and the possibilities for critique. Mario Schmidt sees the survival of critique in Schlegelian creativity and anthropological engagement, Oliver Marchart in a politico-ethical project of democratic ideology, David Chandler longs for the resurgence of struggle and Dimitris Sotiropoulos aims to provide conceptual ammunition to confront financial capitalism. In what follows, I want to defend a form of totalizing anti-capitalist critique complete with anthropological meticulousness. It links to the Kantian notion of critique because it aspires to contribute to a progressive project. This project, however, is not about poetic freedom or the separation of intellectuals from society. Instead, it is social critique which tries to understand society as a whole to open up a space for imagining other futures.

Critique, ontology and social theory

The relationship between thought and social change has been debated for centuries. Hegel maintained that philosophers were always late, as the owl of Minerva only flew at dusk (1820), and Marx argued that philosophers have only interpreted the world, so it was time to change it (11. Feuerbachthese). At the same time, both thinkers have passionately continued to think and philosophize despite their fear of irrelevance. Whether thought impacts on the world has thus always been uncertain but there is reason to keep believing.

If critique wants to work on the world, it has to try to understand it first. This can be done with varying levels of detail. To provide this understanding, one can either revert to essences and foundations or one can, like Marchart did, decline to do so. A mediating position is to capture essences and foundations as in flux. This is less than utmost contingency but more than petrified structures and eternal beings. In essence, this position is not far from Marchart's post-foundationalism but it is rather a process-foundationalism. Foundations can really exist but they change and it is the thinker's task to capture and explain these changes.

To make sense of the world, progressive thought has long been struggling with the three main axes of domination and exploitation along the lines of race, gender and class. Many a scholar attempts to engage in intersectional analyses but they

are difficult to put into practice (Buckel 2012). At the same time, the German debate has since the 1960s been about primary and secondary contradictions (Haupt- und Nebenwiderpruch), i.e. about what constitutes the main problem of contemporary German society: racism, patriarchy and sexism or capitalism. Not to antagonize strong anti-racist and anti-fascist and (trans-)gender activists, the place of capitalism has thus often been that of an equal (Interventionistische Linke 2014).

These intricate problems notwithstanding, one thing is obvious: For critique to move out of the trap of contingency and complexity, it seems paramount to reintroduce causality and simplicity back into the debate. Things might be much more straightforward than we think. Key to these simple truths is to openly deal with the fact that we live under some kind of capitalism, which we ought to understand properly if we want to move beyond it. In order not to dissolve it into some intangible web of networks, actors and processes, a method of critique is needed that allows this to be done. For this, the notion of something systemic, something that is whole is paramount. Society, capitalism and totality are totalizing terms which attempt to capture social relations as part of one dynamic whole. Without a conception of the social whole, dispersion and contingency reign.

Marx's strategy of 'concretization' as laid out in the *Grundrisse* is an approach to critique that is actively seeking to get at the social whole in a 'spiral process of totalization' (Kosík 1976: 23).² Concretization is an active human undertaking; however, it is shaped by the object of analysis and the social totality it takes place in (Adorno, 1972: 18). Concretization thus signifies a constant back and forth between the contradictions of the object that brings about reflection and the active role of human thought needed to gain some distance from this embeddedness (Adorno 1972: 22).

The idea of totality has a long history and has had wide currency in Marxist and Marxian debates since the 19th century (Kosík 1976: 17; Jay 1984). Simply put, totality denotes that the social world or parts of the social world can be considered a whole – either an always dynamic or a static one – and that whole is in some kind of relation with its parts. In Marx's understanding, totality is not a formal term but describes the objective fact that in capitalism, social relations are total; they are subsumed under or at least heavily influenced by the logic of capital. Next to being structured by this logic, totality is evolving and forming. This conception of totality is distinct from those that consider totality as the sum of its parts or which prioritize the whole over its parts (Kosík 1976: 23-24). In Marx, both parts and the whole are in a constantly evolving relationship that changes over time. Capitalism is a particular way of organizing the relationship between (wo)man and nature that is not set in stone once and for all.

² The following is adapted from Koddenbrock 2015.

In his discussion of the notion of 'critique' in Marx's works, Backhaus claims that Marx's critique extended to both the 'discipline of political economy' and to his analysis of the inherent contradictions of capitalism (Backhaus 2000: 43). In *Capital*, capitalism is presented as a system or set of processes that are inherently contradictory (Marx 1959). If not taken to its paralyzing extreme that we just have to wait for capitalism to destroy itself – which might take a long time as we have now abundantly seen – this introduces the notion that capitalism might be a problem in itself.

Situated at the end of long disputes about the promises and pitfalls of totality in Marxist discussions since Lukács' rather deterministic understanding of the term (Jay 1984), the 'positivism dispute' between Adorno and Popper reinvigorated the notion of totality against the background of post-war Germany (Adorno et al. 1972). For Adorno, just as for Marx, totality is 'not an affirmative but a critical category' (Adorno 1972: 19). That social relations under capitalism are 'total' is a problem to be overcome. There is something totalitarian about capitalist society in the fact that it compels and constrains people in the name of exchange value. It commodifies and abstracts from humans and their interactions and is thus far from Adorno's society of 'freedom' (1972: 20) and Marx's utopian 'community of freely associated individuals'. In Adorno, totality thus does not simply denote the dynamic social and historical embeddedness of human beings but renders *capitalist* embeddedness problematic.

The totalizing strategy of critique I defend here does not stop at acknowledging the role of capitalism for our social whole. It also comes with a methodological claim that is intertwined with this substantive shift. Since we live under capitalism, our thinking is influenced by it. We have to find methods to deal with this. To make a very partial inroad into that broad discussion of Marx's 'method' (Maclean 1988: 300) of 'dialectics' (Heine and Teschke 1996) and on the relationship between 'capitalism and philosophical thought' (Toscano 2008b: 59), I will stick to the claim that next to its inherent contradictions, what is specific to capitalism as totality is that it operates on abstractions like money, value, the commodity and abstract labor. Capitalism relies on 'real abstractions' to function (Sohn-Rethel 1978; Toscano 2008a, b). This focus on abstractions serves as an inroad into the critique of nonstructuralist, empiricist critique à la Latour because it is exactly these non-observable abstractions that empiricism is unwilling to grapple with.

Marx's 'method', based on his take on 'real abstraction', historicizes the social, is willing to 'stage totality' and has a dialectic conception of thought and the material world. Like Latour, interestingly, he maintains that 'what is to be asserted first has to be established by investigation' (Sohn-Rethel

1978: 18; see also Herborth 2011 for a similar approach). Empirically minded, Marx would thus not disagree that capitalism is a web of networks, as Latour exclaimed in *We have never been modern* (1993: 121). But Marx would maintain that this network takes on a life of its own with real effects on social relations, and that this life is both real and abstract. It is real because it does something to the world. It is abstract because this can only be grasped in thought.

The issue of reform or revolution lies at the heart of recurrent debates between an empiricist strategy of critique and a totalizing strategy of critique. If revolution, i.e. the fundamental transformation of some of the key tenets of our societies, is off limits, you don't need a conception of the whole. If revolution needs to be retained as a project or as a utopian horizon, however, the notion of totality plays an essential role. As Karel Kosík put it: 'There are clear practical considerations behind this theoretical argument: Can reality be changed in a revolutionary way [...] or are only partial changes practicable and real?' (1976: 34). Strategies of critique matter for the politics they allow for. Some strategies prescribe reforms, others revolution.

Next to the ontological claim that reality is a dynamic whole, the second component of a totalizing strategy of critique lies in its methodology, in the way it approaches research and cognition. Marx's very Hegelian 'note on the method of political economy' in the *Grundrisse* (2005: 34–42) on the research process as the ascending move from the abstract to the concrete epitomizes his approach to critique. In essence, to make sense of the world Marx allows for systemic factors like the logic of capital, itself historically formed, and for a role of human thought. Marx argues in the 'note on the method of political economy' that a starting point for a political economy analysis of a country might, for example, be its size, geography and population. The 'population' might appear to be a good beginning, a unit of analysis that does not need to be explained any further. Marx claims that 'population' is a pure abstract until it is seen in relation to the classes it is composed of. Class, in turn, depends on wage, labor, capital, etc. (2005: 34–5). In fact, even entities that appear as starting points are composed and determined by other entities or processes that shape its composition. The concrete as a 'concentration of many determinations' (2005: 34–5) thus depends on meticulous empirical analysis but is still allowed to form a unity beyond these determinations in thought. The concrete is a totality.

Next to this conception of 'concretization' in the process of research, for Marx the material conditions shape what kind of abstracts and concretes are able to surface at a given time and place. A term like 'population' is an idealist abstraction and not a real concretization if it is not investigated in its multiple elements and unless the material reality and historical

trajectory of the concrete are taken into account. Labor, for example, only becomes understandable in its modern sense in a world of increasing division of labor (1974: 39). Labor, as one of the cores of his entire analytical artifice, would have played a very different role if Marx had been a compatriot of the Ancient Greeks (1974: 38). This means that the thought process is not autonomous but tied to a certain degree to the material conditions of time and place.

If critique allows for a focus on the interplay between the practice of thought and the material conditions of the world, the sum can be more than, and non-identical to, its parts because thought is *allowed* to sum up, to concentrate the many determinations of the concrete. Thought itself is dependent to some degree on the contradictions of the object it gives voice to, but an element of human decision remains. For a totalizing strategy of critique, this means having a very practical and empirical look at the world, at the actors within it *and* allowing thought and critique to build a totalizing case about it. Finding answers to the questions of how exactly contemporary capitalism works and how its critique must proceed remains the ambition of this strategy of critique. While this has been a longstanding project, its pressing importance today is obvious. Dimitris Sotiropoulos' work is one attempt to reach this aim.

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Intermezzo
Economic Crisis
and Critique:
Undoing Financialisation

Financialization: Taking Stock and Moving Forward

Dimitris P. Sotiropoulos

Introduction

Financialization occupies centre-stage in contemporary discussions on political economy. It usually figures as part of the debate about the crisis of capitalism, notably in the wake of the 2008 financial meltdown. The literature on political economy presents changes in modern finance as a key facet of the transformation of capitalism in the developed capitalist economies. Coming up with a single definition of the term is difficult, but Geoffrey Ingham's description conveys the general sense: financialization, he says, has to do with 'the increasing dominance of financial practices and the fusion of business enterprise with "financial engineering"' (Ingham 2008: 169).

This definition is by no means theoretically unbiased. 'Financial practices' are viewed as both *exogenous* and *antagonistic* to 'business enterprise' and as capable of contaminating, or indeed dominating, all other economic (and social) activities. This perspective has served as an analytical point of departure for a series of research projects highlighting features such as: changes in the nature of capitalist growth, shifts in firms' investment decision-making and governance-models (i.e. to be geared to the maximization of shareholder value), and the boosting of financial profits through a range of income-expropriation mechanisms. Although analyses of the symptoms of financialization are many and varied, when it comes to identifying its roots (why the sudden rise in finance?), the focus is generally on one of two aspects: trends in capitalist profitability and/or

the dominant position of economic elites in the context of absentee ownership.

One problem with these interpretations is that they see modern finance, and related technological developments, as passive and adjustable. Finance is thus *ahistorical*, in the sense that its own history as a social domain is viewed as merely a reflection of external developments. And it is usually seen as a distortion of capitalism only because it passively fills the gaps resulting from external contradictions or organizational inadequacies.

This brief account seeks to challenge this perspective and offer an alternative approach to understanding financialization.

Underconsumptionist analytical narratives: Modern finance as a passive and adjustable factor

In the study of political economy, the majority of approaches to the social aspects of modern finance and its ramifications slot into one of two explanatory categories. In this section, a brief description will be given of these categories and of their shared analytical basis – namely, the perception of finance as a passive domain which is shaped and driven by causes external to itself.

The rise of finance as a response to trends in the profit rate

The first type of explanation views developments in finance as a by-product of trends in the profit rate. The latter is usually related to capitalism's inability to absorb final economic product. On this view, the rise of finance is an unstable (and therefore temporary) solution to capitalism's long-term problem of underconsumption. This explanation comes in two versions.

The first interprets financialization as a product of high capitalist profitability: if wages are relatively low compared with profits, and profits are mostly saved, the potential productive output cannot be absorbed unless there is an increase in final consumption. Capitalists are faced with a dearth of investment-outlets, resulting in a build-up of excess capital. From this perspective, finance appears as an unstable remedy to lack of demand, and one which, at the same time, favours capitalists as over-savers. Surplus capital can either be recycled to workers and other subordinate social classes in the form of debt or it can devolve into speculative activities. This is clearly an advantageous situation for the capitalist class as a whole, because it resolves the problem of surplus capital without jeopardizing capitalists' income-position. The only drawback is that financial recycling cannot be viewed as a permanent solution. This analysis appears in various forms in the accounts

offered by, among others, Husson (2012), Resnick and Wolff (2010), and Mohun (2012).

The second version of the profit-rate explanation cites the same problem of underconsumption but proposes low profitability as its cause: output cannot be absorbed, and profits cannot be realized, because low wages (rather than, as above, high profits) keep demand low. Poor profitability results in stagnant and excess capital because capital can only be channelled into production at a declining rate. In the absence of other solutions that might boost demand, financial recycling can become a crucial form of intermediation, decongesting the build-up of surplus capital. The argument here is essentially the same as in the previous scenario: finance bubbles and credit bubbles offer capital the easiest means of tackling declining output-expansion and profitability without incurring major costs. On this view, financialization is the unstable result of underconsumption based on poor capital profitability. Some authors, whilst remaining true to the overall spirit of this argument, link low profitability not only to low wage incomes (demand) but also to high values of constant capital already invested (overcapacity). Demand thus always lags behind productive capacity. This is merely another facet of the same idea. Even as profit falls, there will continue to be investment; this will add to the overall 'amount' of capital and the productive capacity thereof, which will exceed demand. This line of argument emphasizes over-investment of capital relative to realized profitability. It identifies an additional channel via which downward pressure is exerted on the profit rate: the numerator (decrease in realized profit) is not the only thing that counts; so does the denominator (the increase in the amount of constant capital and the creation of overcapacity relative to poor demand). Many of the current approaches to financialization can be viewed as falling within the theoretical tradition outlined here, in which long-term crises in profitability are followed by a 'growing reliance on credit bubbles to sustain economic expansion' (Callinicos 2010: 50). Summarizing with Foster and Magdoff (2009: 18): 'financialization is merely a way of compensating for the underlying disease affecting capital accumulation itself.'¹

¹ See also Brenner 2002, Harvey 2010, McNally 2009, Lazzarato 2012.

The rise of absentee ownership

Another long-standing theoretical tradition associates the rise of finance with the predominance of a particular economic elite. Keynes described this elite as a class of *rentiers or 'functionless investors'*. To him, these individuals were akin to Ricardo's landowners, enjoying incomes founded on scarcity without making any real productive contribution. The term used by Veblen to characterize this same group was *absentee*

owners – the class that had managed to subordinate the regime of ‘traffic in goods’ to that of ‘trading of capital’ (Veblen 1958: 75). Taking the same analytical line, Minsky introduced the term *money manager capitalism* to describe a version of capitalism that is ‘dominated by highly leveraged funds seeking maximum returns in an environment that systematically under-prices risk’ (Wray 2013: 245). There is a fast-growing body of literature concerned to provide a systematic analysis of the current financialization of capitalism in terms of the hegemony of this rentier group. Seen from this perspective, modern financial developments are not necessarily linked to trends in profitability; rather, they are a consequence of social conflicts being resolved in ways that favour absentee owners.

This is an idea that is by no means foreign to the Marxist tradition. At the start of the twentieth century – even before Keynes and Veblen had made their arguments – Hilferding maintained that a form of capitalism was possible in which the industrial sector was subordinate to the financial sector:

The power of the banks increases and they become founders and eventually rulers of industry, whose profits they seize for themselves as finance capital, just as formerly the old usurer seized, in the form of ‘interest’, the produce of the peasants and the ground rent of the lord of the manor.²

Although there is not the space here to give a proper account of Hilferding’s point of view (which was greatly influenced by the historical conditions prevailing in Germany at that time), it is fair to say that his ideas have inspired a number of recent approaches. Fine, for instance, views neoliberalism as a capitalist regime that lays stress on ‘financial-speculative activities as opposed to industrial investment as an increasingly important source of profit’ (Fine 2010: 113). One form of capital (interest-bearing) predominates over all others (industrial etc.). In a similar spirit, Lapavistas (2009) sees the financial expropriation of workers by capitalists and banks as an additional source of profit that has emerged in the sphere of circulation as a result of the poor level of real accumulation since the late 1970s.

The common ground: Was Harry Markowitz a prophet?

Changes in profit-rate trends may indeed affect developments in finance, but this process cannot be unidirectional or straightforward. Nor does it, of itself, explain the critical historical transformations that have taken place in finance. At the same time, the rise of financial engineering cannot be

linked solely to a particular class, or segment of a class, far removed from ‘real’ capitalist production. What unites the different approaches described above is their view of the nature of finance as a passive element ever amenable to adjustment by extraneous forces.

Finance in its contemporary version encompasses much more than accumulated liabilities and increased indebtedness. It presupposes substantial levels of analytical research and financial innovation and it is shaped by major institutional developments, economic strategies, and state regulations within distinct capitalist societies; all these have their own unique histories, institutional paces, and temporalities. The range of unique historical patterns of finance that have emerged in different societies cannot be reduced either to a mere reflection of a general historical trend in the profit rate or to the dominance of rentiers among other economic groups or classes. Approaches that regard finance as so ‘flexible’ that it is able, neatly and instantaneously, to fill the gaps created by underconsumption and/or the rise of absentee ownership actually fail to grasp the true nature of finance in capitalism.

If finance can be reduced to (and is contemporaneous with) either the trends in the profit rate or the dominance of rentiers, absentee owners, and/or money managers in social conflicts, then Harry Markowitz (the father of modern portfolio theory) and other important figures in the development of modern financial theory must be recognized as true prophets. They would, after all, have managed systematically to convey a message concerning the nature of financial markets years, or even decades, before there was any practical need for such an analysis. Developments such as subprime lending, asset-backed securities (ABS) (including collateralized debt obligations (CDOs) of various types and other forms of securitization), global capital-flows in the context of diversified portfolios, contemporary banking intermediation according to the ‘originate and distribute’ model, option pricing methods, and private insurance markets would be unthinkable without the theoretical and institutional groundwork done in the 1950s – that is, in the glorious era of ‘welfare capitalism’, long before the demise of the Bretton Woods regime.

Whatever the approach to financialization, it cannot ignore the fact that the theoretical and empirical foundations of practices that were to emerge fully in the 1980s were actually laid down, little by little, decades before. If modern finance is merely the byproduct of profit-rate trends and/or of the resolution of social conflict to the advantage of absentee owners, then we have indeed to believe that Harry Markowitz was able to address problems that would only arise in a distant future.

The point of this paper has been to suggest that the roots of financialization should be radically reconsidered. This is not to say that serious existing research on the symptoms of

² Hilferding 1981: 226.

financialization should be discarded, or that the study of trends in profit rates or of the conflicts between social groups is not important. My point, rather, is that the two most widely accepted approaches to financialization are unable to explain its rise because finance is already endogenous to (that is, it influences and is influenced by) economic trends in profitability and related class struggles.

New directions in the study of finance

Critical discussion needs to focus on the specificity of finance in the organization of contemporary capitalist societies. Such an analytical enterprise calls for a reorientation in the way political economy has been used to address questions concerning finance.

My own suggestion in this regard derives from Marx's argumentation in *Capital*.³ I propose a synthesis of two critical concepts in social theory: *fetishism* and *governmentality*. The first plays an important role in Marx's thinking (and is richly developed in Althusser – see, for example Althusser 2014). The second is an analytical loan from Foucault – though it should be noted that my interpretation of Foucault it is quite different from the one which Deleuze proposes (2012) and which has significantly influenced subsequent discussions.

Every form of debt, capital essentially appears as asset/liability, suggests a reification process. What is important is not the confrontation between the creditor and the debtor but the very fact that liabilities themselves bear a price. Calculation of the latter may be erratic and incomplete but always relies upon a particular representation of the capitalist economy on the basis of risk. Risk is not neutral and it does not simply transmit an informational content. Risk conveys an interpretation, which is in line with what Althusser called *ideological misrepresentation*: it is combined with the norm of behaviour it calls forth.

However, the idea of ideological misrepresentation cannot offer a complete explanation, because finance encompasses different social power-relations. So risk misrepresents capitalist reality in a way that is *detached from* and *commensurate across* different social relations. This type of articulation suggests a Foucauldian condition of governmentality: a regulation superimposed upon social power-relations with a view to organizing their workings and reproduction. Modern financial derivatives are of critical importance in allowing finance to exist as a governmental technology of power.

This type of reasoning invites a different analytical agenda. The rise of finance is not a threat to capital, nor does it indicate a weakness in the latter (its inability to secure proper accumulation patterns). Finance sets forth a particular tech-

⁴ But more importantly, the social whole is a structured and complex totality which cannot rely solely on this function of finance for its reproduction. For instance the central role of the capitalist state and the ideologies attached to it play a crucial role in the organization of the class domination of capital.

nology of power (along with a particular mode of funding economic activities), which is completely in line with the nature of capitalist exploitation. Financial derivatives are integral parts of this process to the extent that they unify into a single interpretation partial economic activities and ideological representations of reality. However, while finance is not extraneous to capitalist power, it does not coincide with it either. In other words, finance does not soak up capitalist relations and is not contemporaneous with their dynamics. The social geography of the latter does not fully overlap with the configuration of modern finance (despite its extending pattern).⁴

The above analysis places financial innovation in a different context. The latter is not a passive reflection of underconsumption, as usually argued. What really matters in contemporary finance is not so much the level of indebtedness but the multiplicity of relations that support it, in other words the social content of financial innovation. Thus the key analytical task when it comes to finance is that of explaining the complex linkage between financial innovation and the workings of capitalist social relations.

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³ For a detailed version of the argument, see Sotiropoulos et al. 2013.

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Part 2

Society and Critique: Overcoming Anti-Foundationalism

Wrestling with the Cheating Gene: A Post-foundational Approach to Ideology Critique

Oliver Marchart

Some years ago, it was announced that scientists had identified the gene responsible for sexual infidelity. Reading the reports on the 'cheating gene', I was painfully reminded of the struggle needed to secure research-funds in the humanities and the contrasting profligacy with which money is lavished on the life sciences. To a social scientist, the type of research involved here, and the research policies behind it, are manifestly 'ideological'. Whether something is considered 'cheating' or not is, after all, entirely dependent on socially accepted frames of reference, and the very idea of cheating is premised on a primordial hegemonic notion of sexual fidelity characteristic of hetero-normative societies and, in particular, of the bourgeois nuclear family. What is the point in searching for the genetic foundations of something that does not exist beyond this particular cultural and historical horizon? The quest to find the 'cheating gene' is thus not simply misguided but, it seems, profoundly *ideological* – but in what sense? Has ideology critique not been – justifiably – under fire for a good while now? Have we not abandoned ideology on account of its problematic epistemological baggage – notably, its assumption that those engaged in its critique enjoy a God's-eye view on the matter. And have some of us not now turned to less problematic concepts such as discourse?

The critique of ideology critique

What we need today, as the above example indicates, is a theory of ideology that circumvents the pitfalls of traditional ideology critique. The observations I have made so far perhaps already suggest a preliminary definition of ideology according to which a process can be said to be ideological whenever something that assumes meaning under particular social, cultural, historical – and therefore contingent – conditions is explained by reference to deeper causes. This working definition should not be understood in the usual terms of ideology critique, which, as conventionally practised, does not stand outside the realm of ideology. There is in fact a tacit complicity between ideology and its critique as conventionally understood. It is relatively easy to criticize the foundationalist premises of particular ideologies – the idea of a homogeneous people as the foundation of nationalism, for example, or the idea of God's will as the foundation of religious fundamentalism, or the idea of genetic predisposition as the cause of cheating. We should be aware, however, that the *critique* of ideology is not necessarily any less foundationalist than the ideology it criticizes – in fact it often turns out simply to be a variant of this approach.

If we consider the example of Marxist ideology critique – at least in its unrefined orthodox versions – it is obvious where the problem lies. This critique assumes a privileged vantage-point from which it is possible to determine the laws of history, devise a method of understanding these laws (science), and identify a privileged subject positioned at the vantage-point (the party). Ideology critique comes into play when the party is confronted with a populace unable or unwilling to see its own position from the party's vantage-point. A theory of ideology is needed that explains why people stubbornly refuse to recognize their own 'objective interests' and their world-historical role – as determined, with scientific precision, by the party. A similar pattern can be identified in most conceptions of ideology critique: as a rule, they imply the existence of a 'subject supposed to know' (by virtue of epistemological privilege) faced not only with a 'subject not to know' but also with a 'subject supposed to err' (by virtue of her structurally blocked access to knowledge).

There is no need for me to add to the many deconstructions already performed on this model. My purpose here is simply to flag up the fact that ideology critique, as conventionally understood, takes the form of a particular permutation of foundationalism – what we might term foundationalism in the *epistemological mode*. This model not only implies that one person knows less (or more) than another, as when a patient seeks advice from a doctor. There is a deeper asymmetry at work here, in that access to correct knowledge is granted in accordance

with a grounding order that is entirely distinct from the particular content or form of the knowledge involved. In the case of the Enlightenment, this order was Reason, in the case of Marxism, it was History (and in the case of the life sciences, it is the Genome). In the strict sense, this order is extra-worldly or extra-social, since it allows one to view all worldly affairs from a standpoint outside them. Banished in the course of the untiring 'critique of ideology critique', it had served as a foundation for the whole ideology-critique enterprise. It had served as its *epistemological* ground.

The epistemological horizon and its displacement

A *post*-foundational approach, as I would propose it,¹ would start by assuming that an epistemological ground of this kind is unattainable. But it would only do so because this would then offer us two directions in which to move. The first would be to give up on the whole enterprise of ideology critique. This is the *anti*-foundational alternative preferred by most champions of 'the critique of ideology critique', but it leaves us with the problem of having done away not only with an ultimate ground but with all penultimate grounds as well. This might soon result in an 'anything goes' attitude or in mere positivism and empiricism. In the second option, we try to engage with, and conceive of, ideology critique not in an anti-foundational but in a *post*-foundational manner. We do this by insisting on the necessity of having *some* notion of a ground, even though every ground will be partial and, by nature, always contingent. Choosing the second option, however, poses a problem. It would be naïve to believe we could engage in ideology critique without relying, to some extent, on the *epistemological language-game* so firmly established in our metaphysical imaginary.² It is hardly possible to talk about 'ideology' without employing concepts such as 'distortion' or 'misrecognition' and thus lapsing into the epistemological mode of foundationalism (nor are we free to reinvent the meaning of the term 'ideology' in our own private language). In light of this, what I suggest is that, rather than simply abolishing the epistemological mode of ideology critique (including concepts like 'distortion' and 'misrecognition'), we should try to refashion it in a *post*-foundational way.

How could we do this? Here we have the combined input of a whole series of thinkers to draw on and the argument I present here is a synthesis of the approaches to ideology developed by Claude Lefort, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek. The earliest formulation of Laclau's take on ideology critique can be found in his 1983 essay 'The Impossibility of Society'. The ideas presented there were taken up by the early Slavoj Žižek and integrated into his own Lacanian approach in the

¹ See Oliver Marchart (2007), *Post-foundational Political Thought. Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. The implications of political difference for democracy theory and for the notion of politics are discussed in the expanded (German) version of the book: *Die politische Differenz*, Berlin: Suhrkamp 2010. Some of these implications are presented in English in 'Democracy and Minimal Politics: The Political Difference and Its Consequences', *South Atlantic Quarterly* 110 (4), Fall 2011, 965–73.

² In fact, 'ideology critique' only makes sense after the displacement of the classical ontological horizon of metaphysics by the modern epistemological horizon – although the latter, if we follow Heidegger, is no less metaphysical than the former.

³ See Ernesto Laclau (1990), *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, London/New York: Verso; Slavoj Žižek (1989), *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, London/New York: Verso; Claude Lefort (1988), *Democracy and Political Theory*, Cambridge/Oxford: Polity.

⁴ See Carsten Strathausen (ed.) (2009), *A Leftist Ontology: Beyond Relativism and Identity Politics*, Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press.

seminal 1989 work *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. Both these theorists implicitly rely on the earlier theorization of ideology by Claude Lefort.³ I do not have the space here to present all these approaches in detail. What I shall do instead is to synthesize them and translate them into the more general matrix of post-foundational political thought. On the basis of this, I shall propose that a post-foundational form of ideology critique becomes conceivable if the epistemological horizon within which the critique of ideology is so firmly anchored undergoes a fourfold displacement: ontological, phenomenological, historical, and ethical.

In terms of the first displacement: the epistemological horizon must move in the direction of a more ontological form of theorizing. The importance of ontology – as documented in the recent ontological turn in political theory⁴ and as heralded in Heidegger – derives from the post-foundational decision to retain some measure of grounding and not to lapse into anti-foundational positivism or nominalism. From a post-foundational perspective, the social has to be instituted in one way or another, but no attempt at instituting it will ultimately succeed. There is an 'ontological' blockage which takes over the role of the ground ('Der Grund gründet als *Ab-grund*', as Heidegger put it). We can call this ground 'ontological' or, in Derrida's parlance, '*hauntological*' – though only in the qualified sense of indicating the ultimate failure of institution and the ultimate dislocation of the ontic (otherwise the possibility of at least one foundation assuming the role of ultimate ground would not be excluded and we would thus remain in the realm of foundationalism). The prime question here, then, is not one of epistemic recognition but of the ontological/*hauntological* grounding of 'reality'.

In relation to the second displacement: a narrow notion of 'knowledge' must be replaced with, or at least expanded into, a much wider one of *experience* – the experience of an ontological lack of ground. Of course, we do not 'know' that there is no ultimate ground, but we do experience its absence in moments of crisis, danger, dislocation, disorder, and so on – in other words, whenever we are confronted with the contingency of social affairs (that is, the fact that the social could be structured differently). Whenever this occurs, we encounter a *hauntological* lack of 'beingness' – the lack of a firm ontological foundation for society – which makes itself felt within the very field of ontic being (of social objectivity). What we encounter in these cases is not a positively given objective fact; it is the *presence* of a fundamental absence – a presence which, in turn, may prompt a process of re-grounding. So, while we do not 'know' the ontological status of the social with scientific certainty, we are able to draw conclusions from our phenomenological experience of incompleteness, negativity, and finitude.

The third displacement involves a degree of historicization of the argument. No more than a degree, because there is nothing new in the experience of contingency. It has always been at hand – in exceptional moments of war and crisis, as part of mystical experiences, and in theological and philosophical paradoxes. With the advent of modernity, however – and in the course of social differentiation, industrialization, and so on – it became universal. In fact, I would argue that ‘modernity’ is the name for an age that defines contingency as *necessary* (and hence concludes that ultimate dearth of ground is insurmountable). The absence of an ultimate ground no longer makes itself felt only in exceptional moments; but with the expansion of these moments, we are increasingly inclined to conclude that an ultimate ground is unavailable *in principle*, that *every* ground is premised upon contingent acts of power (Nietzsche) and denial (Freud) – and could therefore be different. (This makes post-foundationalism deeply modern and totally distinct from ‘anything goes’ variants of post-modernism or anti-foundationalism.)⁵

⁵ The proposed shifts to ontology (by nature supra-historical) and historicization (by nature sub-ontological) may seem incompatible, but this is not the case. Although granting trans-historical status to the absent ground and to the necessity of contingency is only possible from the vantage-point of modern subjects, this does not mean an ultimate ground was available in the pre-modern era. Pre-modern societies are as contingent as modern ones (they too, of course, are capable of being structured differently). What they lack is the sense of the *necessity* of contingency. In order to be able to make this observation, however, we need to have passed into modernity.

Towards a post-foundational theory of ideology

Before turning to the fourth displacement of the epistemological horizon, I will endeavour to show what follows from the three just described. The epistemological mode is, as argued above, to some degree *hauntologized*. We do not claim to have any *positive* knowledge of the objectivity of the social, but in the modern age we do register that social affairs are haunted by a ground that assumes presence only in the form of discomfiting absence. If this point is granted, paradoxical as it may sound, then the term ‘ideology’ no longer refers to a particular set of discourses (such as socialism, nationalism, or ‘bourgeois ideology’) but to a much more fundamental denial of the necessary character of contingency that can occur within every discourse – an interpretation that chimes with the post-foundational theories of ideology developed down the Lefort-Laclau-Zizek lineage.

As Laclau contended: it makes no sense to abandon the concept of misrecognition, because the ‘critique of the “naturalization of meaning” and of the “essentialization of the social” is a critique of the misrecognition of their true character. Without this premise, any deconstruction would be meaningless.’ For this reason, he goes on, ‘we can maintain the concept of ideology and the category of misrecognition only by inverting their traditional content. The ideological would not consist of the misrecognition of a positive essence, but exactly the opposite: it would consist of the non-recognition of the precarious character of any positivity, of the impossibility of any ultimate suture. The ideological would consist of those discursive

⁶ Laclau, *New Reflections*, 92.

forms through which a society tries to institute itself as such on the basis of closure, of the fixation of meaning, of the non-recognition of the infinite play of differences.’⁶ This argument by Laclau was, as I have said, prefigured in Lefort and later taken up by Zizek.

We can conclude from this that what is denied or concealed by ideology is not a particular discursive content, a particular (class) position or some ‘objective’ partial interest. The concept of ideology, as viewed from a foundational perspective, refers to nothing less than an *ontological* mode of denial. To be more precise, it amounts to a disavowal of the ontologically ungroundable nature of every discourse, social position, identity, or interest. A post-foundational critique of ideology has to shift from an ‘ontic’ to an ‘ontological’ notion of ideology. These reflections would seem to provide us with a fitting definition of ideology: we can define as ideological the denial of the necessary character of contingency – or, on an ontological level, the disavowal of the ultimately ungroundable nature of the social. Understood in this way, ideology does not give us a distorted image of objective reality (that is, of ‘ontic’ being), but there is still an element of ‘misrecognition’ involved – despite the fact that the only simulacrum ideology produces is the simulacrum of a firm ground, whether this be God, nature, subject, reason, historical necessity, the economic base, the people, the market, or genes. It is important to note that there is nothing in the particular ‘content’ or meaning of these terms that makes them intrinsically ideological; it is only when they assume the role of an unshakeable foundation that they shift into ideological mode, as it were. Of course, the point which the post-foundational thesis makes is, precisely, that an unshakeable foundation of this kind is ultimately unattainable and is effectively an illusion (which is why a term such as ‘simulacrum’ is an appropriate one with which to describe the ideological dimension of a given politics, even though this concept is clearly located within the epistemological horizon). But the defining aspect is not whether or not ideology is successful (we know that in the long run it won’t be). A particular politics is ideological to the extent that it presupposes the ontological simulacrum of an indisputable ground.

Here I would add – returning to my initial example – that it is not enough simply to assert that behaviour such as ‘cheating,’ is always embedded in a social and cultural context. If we were happy to confine our claim to this, we would be making an ‘ontic’ argument that could be just as empiricist as those advanced in genetic research. We would merely be inverting the foundationalist order by taking ‘the social’ as the new ground. The argument becomes post-foundational only if we link the ‘ontic’ foundations (social context) of a certain behaviour back to their own ultimate groundlessness – in other words, to the necessarily contingent nature inscribed into their ‘ontological’

being. It is not simply, as I pointed out at the beginning, that 'cheating' is an activity which only makes sense within a social context and therefore cannot have an ultimate foundation in a trans-social biological substance. That is only half the story. The other half is that the actual social context of bourgeois hetero-normativity, far from simply serving as just another ground, is ultimately ungroundable and therefore open to challenge. The ideology of research into cheating makes us forget not only the contingency but also the *political nature* of the hegemonic horizon which causes us to perceive 'cheating' as an undesirable practice. As a consequence, we also forget that the horizon of bourgeois normativity is open to political challenge and transformation.

The ethical displacement of ideology: Democracy

Having said all this, we need straight away to add that in politics it is not possible *not to act ideologically*. This kind of easy way out is only open to anti-foundationalists; for post-foundationalists, *some* foundations will always have to be instituted – if only provisionally. And in order for these foundations to be instituted, their precarious nature will have to be concealed, at least to some degree. When acting politically, we always pretend, in one way or another, to believe in unshakeable grounds. This is a necessary precondition of our establishing at least some (provisional) foundations of the social. This being the case, we have to admit that there is a moment of ideology in *every politics*, since every politics has to close itself off against competing political projects. Only if we were to abstain from all attempts at stabilizing our political projects would we be able to leave the ideological behind – but this would mean we would stop acting politically altogether. To act politically means to act *as if* the social were groundable. Political actors will therefore always be in search of some sort of simulacrum.

This brings me to the fourth and final displacement of the epistemo-ideological horizon. If we decide to criticize the foundationalism inherent in ideologies and ideology critique, what we need is not more or better 'scientific knowledge' but a specific *ethical* displacement that consists in *accepting* the ungroundable nature of the social. I use the term 'ethics' for want of a better word and because I am referring to a position that is specifically *not* political. Politics entails ideological closure and foundation; it does not, of itself, involve the acceptance of the ultimate impossibility of its aims. It will always, to some degree, conceal the abyss that yawns where one expects to find its grounds. On the other hand, a fully ethical stance is clearly also impossible from a political point of view: as indicated previously, anyone who deliberately refrains from any

kind of attempt to institute the social is no longer engaged in politics. Only a saint or a Zen master – in other words, someone who refrains from acting altogether – could be considered to be acting beyond the ideological. Anyone else is constantly involved, however negligibly, in the process of refounding the social and concealing its abyss-like character. This means that everyone is actually knee-deep in ideology. When I talk of ethics *and* politics, I am therefore referring to an ethical tendency *within* politics – a particular, but ultimately impossible, mode of doing politics in a tendentially unconcealed way. A political project is ethical to the extent that it is prepared openly to accept the ungroundable nature of social grounds and to allow the possibility of the refoundation of these grounds by competing projects.⁷

A political regime in which the ultimately ungroundable nature of every political claim is ethically accepted and socially instituted seems to me to be the definition of *democracy*. The etho-political project of establishing a precarious balance between the ideological and the ethical – between denial and acceptance of the ultimate groundlessness of the social – can therefore be termed *democratic*. Truly democratic claims aim to achieve this kind of balance: they are neither fully political nor fully ethical. On the one hand they assert the necessity of contingency – in other words, the absence of an ultimate ground as society's very foundation; on the other hand they claim to be based on incontrovertible grounds (such as freedom, equality, and human rights) and unassailable institutions (such as the rule of law and periodic elections). If these democratic foundations can be said to differ from other types of foundations, it is precisely because they remind us that there is no ultimate ground: the rule of law, for instance, reminds us that no one can base their claims on inherited privilege or social or political dominance; periodic elections remind us (as Claude Lefort famously concluded) that the place of power is empty and that the will of the 'sovereign' has to be counted out; the division of powers reminds us that those powers do not have a common ground and cannot be rooted in a single locus in society (such as a totalitarian leader). All these democratic institutions impose an ethical injunction on us not to ground the social in either a unitary will, a political substance, or a communal identity. And yet these institutions themselves have to be instituted, defended, kept alive, expanded, and radicalized in the face of competing anti-democratic or fundamentalist attacks and post-democratic regression. It follows that a radical democratic politics, whilst being democratic in the sense of acknowledging, to some degree, its own groundless nature, will also, to some degree, have to be ideological. Are we here touching upon the possibility – if only oxymoronic – of a democratic ideology?

⁷ Which implies that it is not advisable for any project to be fully ethical, as it would then cease to be political and consequently disappear under the pressure of competing political projects.

Critique: The Ideology of Complexity*

David Chandler

Introduction

Today there is a broad agreement in the disciplines of the social sciences regarding the new relational ontology of Critique. Critique is thus capitalized to distance it from its other: the former forms of critique. Capitalized Critique is the critique of critique. Critique finds its home in the 'ontological turn', in the new pragmatism, in actor-network approaches, in the posthumanism of the anthropocene, and in various new materialisms. Critique has new buzzwords such as 'emergence', 'complexity', and 'non-linearity'. Critique is also no stranger to policy documents and reports of institutional 'lessons learned' which highlight that the relationality of the world means that unintentional consequences are often more important than intended ones.

Critique rejects the linear, reductionist, and 'top-down' understandings of foundationalist critical theory, understood to deny the political and transformative possibilities of today's world. Critique is based upon the failure of liberal and neo-liberal modes of governance, and suggests that it fights with ontological truth on its side: that life is relational and complex. In challenging Critique as the ideology of complexity, it will be suggested that the claims of Critique depend not upon the 'reality' of complex or relational ontologies but upon the contingent attenuation of political contestation; the ideology of Critique is the reflection of the attenuation of this struggle in the realm of thought.

Critique seems to be ubiquitous in the academic discipline of International Relations, so much so that having 'critical' in the title seems essential for the acceptance of a new

academic journal or book-series. There is a good chance that not just any conceptual academic paper but also any reflective policy-document concerning international relations, development, conflict-resolution, or environmental degradation will take on board the assumptions of Critique, giving problematic traditional modes of governing a prominent role. This article suggests that Critique cannot be taken at face value and that the dominant and unquestioned assumptions of Critique pose a problem that requires critical analysis. The assumptions of Critique invite a reconsideration of how the world and the human subject are understood today (which is why this shift is given such an overt symbolism in the renaming or re-institutionalizing of 'critical' academic scholarship in the discipline).

It is worth pausing to consider the political implications of such a consensus around the ontology of Critique. Once the claims of relational ontology and emergent causality are accepted, Critique is no longer a matter of challenging what exists: there are no unifying principles, hierarchies of agency, or determinate chains of causality – any alleged criticism of what exists would thereby only reinforce the essentialized understandings of liberal modernity. If critical work is not to reinforce reified categories of thought – of what are in reality fluid social constructs – then the consensus is that critical academic work can no longer operate on the basis of revealing 'unifying principles' such as the inner workings of power or the supposed structures of domination. While relational assumptions close off the possibility of traditional forms of political critique, they open up a new sphere of critical understanding of the contingency of social facts and relations and the immanent possibilities that can self-reflexively be enabled.

Critique can be analysed in terms of an ideology because it appears to be over-determined or to be common sense. When policy-advocates and academics assert the methods of Critique, they open themselves up to the world as a site of empirical testing and understanding and claim that it is the world which dictates certain types of truths or policy 'lessons' entailing a reconsideration of liberal modes of thought. This reflective process is often highlighted when policy-problems are addressed in terms of their complex nature, an increasingly dominant issue in the field of International Relations with its awareness of a fluid, fast-moving, and interconnected global world.

Critique does not just allow the discipline of International Relations to adapt to a more complex and uncertain world. It enables analysts to understand this as a radically different world: a world in which everything that was assumed under liberal modernity needs to be re-evaluated. Foucault famously suggested that rather than critiquing discourses of truth as somehow based upon 'false' knowledge or as merely serving

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the interests of power, they should be critically interrogated to understand the practices and frameworks which enable a certain truth of the world to be constructed (Foucault 2010: 309–10). In a similar vein, I do not wish to argue that Critique today is false or wrong. It is all too real. Foucault suggests a sceptical approach to truth-claims as a specific set of assumptions about the world (Foucault 2010: 310). It is these assumptions, their form of articulation and the practical history of struggle and contestation which produced them, that this article is concerned with investigating. The challenge to Critique is not understood here as dependent upon disproving the discourse – for example, by denying relational embeddedness and interaction or by reasserting the modernist world of structure and agency or of Cartesian subjects able to know and direct events.

What this article seeks to analyse are the stakes involved in the ontologies of the world as apprehended in and through the ideology of Critique. If the long dead-and-buried classical Marxist subject of critique was conceived to be acting in a universal linear world of passive objects, open to knowledge, control, and direction, then today's subject of Critique is necessarily conceived of as acting in a complex, interactive world, where non-linearity is seen to constantly create possibilities for action in the world. In the world of relational ontologies, it seems life is too fluid and too interactive to be governed from above through systems of formal political representation. The research focus of the ideology of Critique therefore concerns the informal, the social, and the 'real' interactions of societal behaviour rather than our choices in the public sphere of politics and law. It implies a major shift in the location and meaning of politics, whereby the formal barriers of liberal modernist thinking – such as those between the international and the domestic, the public and the private, and the state and society – dissolve or are overcome.

The next sections briefly set out the ontology of Critique in political terms, building on the assumption of complexity – the assumption, namely, that the world is relationally interconnected. It will be suggested that the ontology of Critique, where formal political power needs to be guided by the 'real' processes of the production of relational life, stems not from the world of science but from a contingent shift in political subjectivity. It will be argued that this shift from the formal political sphere to the focus on the power of 'real life' itself only became mainstream, and then a dominant or 'common-sense' truth of the world, with the collapse of Left/Right understandings which gave content to liberal representative frameworks of the political.

Critique after liberalisms

Critique articulates a very different ontological understanding of the world – it sees the composition of the world in a very different way. At stake here is not merely different forms of being – giving importance to different facets of the world or different actors (individuals, families, firms, communities, states, inter-state organizations, NGOs, etc.) – but the nature of being itself. For Critique, the nature of being is complex, relational, embedded, and contextual. The world is not amenable to appropriation within liberal/Marxist frameworks of representation with their attention to the autonomy of distinct, separate, individual actors and their universalist understandings of causal connections, structures, and rationalities. For Critique, there is no problematic of the universal and the particular: there are neither fixed universals nor isolated particular subjects. There is no reductionist divide between subject and object, between culture and environment, between agent and structure, between public and private, between politics and economics, between production and consumption, or between facts and values: Critique works on a different and very distinct ontological basis.

Critique as a paradigm of academic understanding operates to provide a positive agenda through a radical reworking of the limits to liberal modernist frameworks of representation. The relational ontology transforms a critique of the rationalist promise of liberalism into a positive project of managing change (see, for example, Schmidt 2014; Wrangel 2014). Thus the distinctions between Critique and neoliberal discourses of limits need to be carefully drawn. Schematically put, classical liberal/Marxist modernist understandings articulated a discourse of sovereign power – a rationalist, top-down, state-based view of political dominion of humanity over nature where, with the growth of science and technology, the secrets of life would be revealed and natural laws put to the service of humankind. Neoliberal critiques of liberal universal assumptions questioned the capacity of human reason to shape and direct life, arguing that human understandings and responses to the world were shaped by embedded social relations, norms, ideas, and cultural path-dependencies and that there was no such thing as a universal rationality (see Chandler 2013a; 2013b). Where liberalism posited a linear understanding of the world, amenable to human understanding and capable of human transformation, neoliberalism argued that human social interaction was much less amenable to scientific understanding or social engineering and that policy-making led to non-linear outcomes, shaped by the specific rationalities and understandings of individuals and societies.¹

Neo-liberalism paid much more attention to social relationality than classical liberalism, embedding the subject firmly

¹ Neoliberal analyses, focusing on the role of institutions in reproducing path-dependencies, initially rose to prominence to explain the inequalities of international development in the 1970s and have since become mainstream in historical and economic analysis of development (see e.g. Forest and Mehier 2001; North 1990, 2005; Mahoney and Thelen 2010; Peters 2005; Steinmo et al. 1992).

in a cultural, social, and historical context producing plural forms of reasoning and understanding. Essentially this was an epistemological critique of liberalism, understanding human rationality as the barrier to universal progress. This epistemological focus on differential understandings and rationalities has been radicalized through Critique, which draws upon a different ontological understanding of the human and the world, arguing that the world is not amenable to rationalist approaches and understandings which set the human apart from the world and that our experiential, differentiated responses and rationalities serve us much better than attempts to transform these rationalities or adapt them to liberal reason. In effect, rather than adopting the liberal understanding of human political collectivities ruling over life, Critique insists that life has to rule or govern policy-making. For neoliberalism, the non-linearity of policy outcomes was held up as a limit to progress, for Critique, non-linearity enables radical transformation.

Critique transvalues liberal aspirations to constitute new understandings of what it means to act in a relationally interconnected and complex world. This transvaluation can be grasped as an inversion of liberal understandings which sought to construct an artificial human world of politics – of constitutions, representation, rights, law, and decision-making – over and above the relational complexities of the natural or real world. In frameworks of Critique, the world of politics cannot sit external to the world and cannot operate somehow over or above the complexities of our relations and embeddedness. The formal politics of the public sphere are therefore seen as much less relevant to governing – to power and to decision-making – than under liberal framings. The public sphere may be useful in terms of discussing and debating and reflecting upon our ethical commitments but not in terms of constituting a power over the world, a power of law-making and a power of directing or controlling social forces. Politics, it appears, is liberated or freed from the artifices of liberalism and is no longer seen as somehow separate from the spheres of culture, economics, and social life. Under the sign of Critique, politics returns to ‘the people’, to the sphere of our ‘everyday’ practices, interactions, and understandings.

Critique and the ontology of complexity

The problematic of Critique is the relational ontology of complexity: the contingent constraints on human freedom, creativity, and action, which are not recognized in liberal reductionist framings of representation. The limits to liberal aspirations for progress cannot be resolved in neoliberal framings enabling the poor or excluded to adapt to the ‘natural’ workings and rationalities of free markets and representative democracy. For Critique there is no natural liberal world or universal rationality operating somehow independently of real

living people and which can be somehow ‘adapted to’. There is no external rationality to which democracy and the market require obedience. In the world of Critique, reductionist representations such as the requirements of society, democracy, or the market no longer exist in any way separately from the reality of the complex social processes of everyday life.

Critique thereby constantly articulates the alternative way of governing/resisting through life’s vitality and creative emergent powers of possibility. This helps to explain why Critique can easily lend itself to reproduction across the field of radical social theorizing, as in assemblage theory and new materialisms.² The concern is not with rescuing modernist ‘anthropomorphic’ or instrumentalist understandings of fixed essences or properties but with the multiplicity of relations and processes, which are creatively productive of contingent outcomes (for a good overview, see Srnicek n.d.: 25–52). The radical ontology of Critique is concerned with understanding the fragility of objects and meanings rather than their fixity (see, for example, Connolly 2013). Critique understands that our everyday practices and experiences promise the immanent possibility of alternatives: always and already in the here and now. This is given form in Nigel Thrift’s non-representational theory, John Holloway’s ‘scream’, or Hardt and Negri’s ‘Multitude’ (Thrift 2008; Holloway 2005; Hardt and Negri 2005).

Real life in a relational ontology is a rich assemblage of complex, concrete, multiple interactions, never fixed or final, and thus necessarily immune to the power of representation. Drawing on the ‘reality’ of life thereby has a tremendous appeal, especially if reductionist short-termism is seen as palpably unable to govern the world today. In the life-politics of Critique – as in Heidegger and Nietzsche’s understanding of ‘the-will-to-power’ of life (for an excellent analysis, see de Beistegui 2007) or in the biopolitics of Hardt and Negri or in the pragmatism of John Dewey (his classic statement, Dewey 1954) – people rule through their constituent multiplicity rather than being ruled over through constituted structures, ideologies, states, or cultures. Life is always in excess of what was life and is now reified and mystified as having some power of its own – like culture, ideology, or markets (see further the critical constructivism of Berger and Luckmann 1979; Giddens 1984).

However, it would be a mistake to think that Critique, with its alternative ontology of the complexity of life-politics, rose to be a mainstream approach to governance because of the dynamism of radical thought. In the early 1990s, with the end of the legitimizing structure of Left–Right political representation, Critique appeared to be over-determined by the dynamics of the world itself: complex relational life immediately came to the fore in the problematic of ‘globalization’. Where once there was order, fixed meanings, and state direction,

² Critique, for example, in assemblage theory and new materialist theorizing, can be understood as heavily influenced by the political philosophy of Gilles Deleuze, in terms of self-organizing material systems, the importance of relational exteriority rather than fixed essences, and the refusal to subordinate difference to identity (see e.g. Deleuze and Guattari 2004; and, for an influential rereading, DeLanda 2006).

now life ruled through complexity and interdependence, allegedly minimizing the importance and accountability of power (see, for example, Rosenau and Czempiel 1992; Baylis and Smith 2006). In the mid-1990s the power of complex life, as the limit of liberal power, was articulated in terms of the birth of 'risk society' and 'manufactured uncertainty', where side-effects and unintended outcomes took precedence over the strategic instrumentalism of constituted power (Beck 1992; Giddens 1994), and it became clear to many that a globalized world was not amenable to liberal forms of progress, knowledge, representation, and intervention.

Today, it is hardly even a provocation to suggest that liberal modernity itself was a fiction (Latour 1993). Even governments appear to have bought into the power of relational ontologies and the consequences which this 'reality' has for reductionist ideas of liberal representation and linear understandings of policy-making. The final redoubts of constituted power, governments themselves, are much more reluctant to claim that they 'represent' 'the people' rather than being one constituent power among many. As a constituent power, government can no longer govern as liberal government but instead must partake in critique as governance: in the understanding and facilitation of life itself. Critique enables power to rule as the governance of life: enabling, empowering, facilitating, and capacity-building. Governments cannot rule over life but only through life. Ruling 'through' rather than ruling 'over' implies a much flatter ontological relation between governing and being governed. Policy goals – if they are not to be undermined – need to come from life itself. Life is the means and ends of Critique as a form of governance with practice-based policy-making, self-reflexivity, feedback-loops, reflexive law-making, and the inculcation of community capacities and resilience.

Conclusion

The key point about Critique as an ideology is that there is no outside to an interactive, interdependent, and interconnected world and therefore no way of imposing government as a form of direction and control over a complex life which will always escape its intentions. This removal or displacement of power is the product of a particular regime of truth-telling or veridiction which cannot easily be grasped within traditional liberal or modernist framings. The truth discourse of Critique is an ontological claim, in that the problem of relational complexity is understood to be a reality against which power is powerless. This 'reality' is not understood as a social construct or discourse of power or philosophical reflection of class defeat but as incontestable fact.

In this truth discourse, the content of political critique is transvalued and its form inverted. To attempt to critique power as hegemonic or as reflective of and reinforcing structures of economic and social domination would be seen as bolstering power rather than challenging it. It would be problematic, uncritical, and essentializing to ignore the radical resistance of life itself. This inverts critical Marxist or Foucauldian thinking, which tended to emphasize the reality of power, hegemony, and domination through the reproduction of hierarchical structures. For Critique, life is always in excess of power's attempts to control it. It is now common to argue that radical theorists such as Foucault and Giorgio Agamben, even though focusing on the importance of 'life' and the biopolitical for liberal regimes of power, failed to fully appreciate how life continually evades power's appropriation (Rose 2014).

Life ontologically, 'really', always forces liberal, linear forms of governing to fail. Life cannot be governed 'over' by liberal regimes of power. The truth regime of Critique is that governance can only govern through complexity, through the ontological unknowability of the constituent power of life. All meaning, fixity, and representation are to be 'destabilized' – but not the ontological truths of Critique. To me, the ontological assertion of the unquestionability of the claims of Critique is highly problematic. In fact, I would argue that the need to 'destabilize' the truths of Critique is the most pressing intellectual task of our time. This article has attempted to engage these truth-claims, to unveil their contingent production and resonance today. But this is not even the beginning of a substantial resistance to the ideology of Critique; it is merely a call for resistance to be initiated.

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The Betrayal of the New Utopianism

Pol Bargués-Pedreny

Criticism has plucked the imaginary flowers on the chain not in order that man shall continue to bear that chain without fantasy or consolation, but so that he shall throw off the chain and pluck the living flower

(Marx 1844: 1)

Utopias, understood broadly here as the visions of a different and better future society, can be used heuristically as indicators for understanding (or, at least, speculating about) the critical mood of a given historical time. For instance, at the beginning of the nineteenth century in Europe, the crude disillusionment with the Reign of Terror in France after the Revolution and the economic and social hardships accompanying the Industrial Revolution motivated socialist thinkers such as Henri de Saint-Simon, Charles Fourier and Robert Owen to imagine and depict alternative societies. They thought of these alternatives as realistic possibilities that could improve and be different from the current socio-economic model existing at that time (for an overview, see Geoghegan 2008: 23–38; Levitas 1990: 41–68). The first half of the century witnessed the experiments of numerous utopian communities of people who wished to organize societies differently. But the development of the capitalist system – e.g. the rise of the proletariat and its class antagonism against the bourgeoisie – out-dated the rigour of these ideas and these thinkers were soon given the derogatory name of ‘utopian socialists’.

In the mid-nineteenth century, Marx and Engels surpassed the visions of earlier socialists by introducing a materialist conception of history and developing a more precise economic analysis of the capitalist means of production. For Marx, critique aimed, first, to remove the ‘imaginary’ promises

of capitalism, showing that there was actually a ‘chain’ and, second, to remove the chain so that ‘real’ promises could be made. Critique of capitalism thus anticipated a revolution that would ‘pluck the living flower’ and culminate in a communist system (see the initial quote in this article). Like their socialist (utopian) predecessors, Marx and Engels believed that their vision was based on objective critical analysis of the inherent contradictions of capitalism, rather than in purely abstract speculation. For them, the possibility of overcoming capitalism was not a matter of merely imagining a new world, but was truthful, and historically and scientifically grounded (Marx and Engels 2002; for a comparison between utopian and scientific socialism, see Engels 2012).¹ The critique of capitalism and the bourgeois society, critique of ideology, had displaced the utopianism of earlier socialists: critique made the utopian impulse real.

Literally one century later, in the 1950s, after the Russian Revolution had evolved into Stalinism, left-wing scholars in Western Europe and the United States seemed to agree that socialism had lost its historical chance. The confidence in finding alternative visions to capitalism ebbed. These alternatives were increasingly difficult to defend without sounding like either a totalitarian or a traitor conspiring with the enemy in the dynamics of the Cold War. Although the second half of the twentieth century witnessed progressive stages inspired by socialism, such as the inaugural National Health Service in Britain or the May 1968 events, criticisms rarely prescribed revolutions. In the context of a retreat of socialism, utopianism also withered away. As I will explain below, two main critiques explain the demise of utopias. The first is that utopias have been compared to mere daydreaming and accused of political irrelevance. The second is that in implying totality or the telling of a final blueprint, utopias have been accused of leading to tyrannical regimes. In the 1990s, these criticisms dug deep and the possibility of a systemic change seemed more distant than ever. For liberals, mankind could no longer imagine a world order that was fundamentally different and better than liberalism (Fukuyama 1993). Socialists seemed to accept the reverse. For them, the dawn of the twentieth century also marked ‘the end of utopia’ (Jacoby 1999).

Until the new millennium arrived. In the past years, critique has come to the fore to highlight that nothing is working: neither the economy, nor environmental policies; neither the nation state, nor alliances like the EU, nor global governance. In this context of the rise of critique, which this volume is seeking to comprehend and critically analyze, utopias are on the rise. Hence my contribution to this volume is to speculate about the direction of the current critical mood by understanding how utopianism is being conceptualized and rescued from the backlash, pessimism and anti-utopianism of

¹ The ambivalent relation between Marxism and utopianism has already been substantially addressed elsewhere (e.g. Geoghegan 2008) and will not be reprised here.

the previous century. Since this is of course a rather ambitious contention for such a short paper, I will focus on two main points. In the first part, I will briefly account for the two critiques of utopianism: the danger of falling into totalitarianism or of being irrelevant. Then, I will use the work of Russell Jacoby, whose shifting views on utopia are useful to capture the transition to what I call here 'the new utopianism',² which will be critically analyzed in the second part. Utopian thinkers are now willing to save utopianism from its anti-utopian critics and have defended a 'utopianism without blueprints'. However, I conclude that the revival of utopianism is not reversing the defeat of the left or enlightening the path for an alternative world. Instead, the new utopian project reveals that the left has definitely accepted the overthrow of socialism and the possibility of envisioning better and different schemes for the future. Critique, like utopia, is back. But the exuberance of the critical project of today is feeble, distant from old socialist utopias and from ideology critique, as much as from revolutions.

Understanding utopianism today: exiting from naivety and totalitarianism

There are two main charges against utopianism that were prevalent throughout much of the second half of the twentieth century. The first is that utopias are naïve and politically irrelevant because they are almost by definition not realistic, impossible. Utopianism seems to please no one. For those who are satisfied with the status quo, of course, the proposal for a better world is viewed with scepticism and disdain, downgraded to literary fiction novels, rather than an element to be discussed in political science. Take, for example, the First Great Debate in the discipline of International Relations. The realist critique of liberal internationalism was based on the assumption that beliefs in international peace, freedom or justice were utopian and naïve. 'Utopianism' was a derogatory name for those liberals who did not see that the world was essentially marked by a permanent and repetitive cycle of wars (e.g. Carr 1946). The logic of the Cold War, with its emphasis on power, security and proxy wars, seemed to prove the 'realists' right.

For those in need of or for those aspiring for change, utopias were also irrelevant, detached from their everyday struggle. Take the example of Herbert Marcuse (1967), and his discussion of projects for social change amidst the revolutionary fervour of the late 1960s. He wanted to make clear that the projects for social transformation of the time were not unfeasible, that is utopian, but only 'provisionally unfeasible'. For Marcuse, the role of the agents of revolution was to mobilize

² By the term 'the new utopianism' I do not refer to the post-Iraq War debate on liberalism as utopianism (e.g. Elshtain 2005), but the form of thinking about utopias that dominates twenty-first century discussions.

the existing material and intellectual forces at hand and to reverse the factors that made that change seem momentarily utopian. For those who believed that an alternative system was necessary and possible, therefore, utopia was seen as a burden rather than a starting point that could galvanize dissatisfied people into action.

The second critique has had a devastating effect on utopian thinking, which has lasted until today: its connection with totalitarianism. The idea of designing an all-encompassing plan for the future generates suspicion. This is because accomplishment of this ideal requires obedience to a single pattern of thought and a certain degree of imposition. This logic of utopia seemed to go against a widely accepted political creed during the Cold War: it undermined difference and pluralism, leading towards the creation of a totalitarian regime. Liberals like Isaiah Berlin (1969), for example, criticized the notion of 'positive liberty' underpinning utopian projects that had a predetermined scheme to be acted upon. Instead, he praised 'negative liberty', which was based on the freedom from interference by other people, intended to preserve pluralism. Friedrich Hayek's (2001) critique of socialism was also founded on the premise that any socialist system had to be necessarily totalitarian because of its adherence to a particular idea of freedom. His conclusion was that the socialist 'Road to Freedom was in fact the High Road to Servitude' (p. 27). For Hayek, it was utopic and terribly dangerous to think that socialism could be combined with freedom or democracy.

During the Cold War, the anti-utopians' biggest triumph was to establish an automatic link between socialism, utopias and totalitarianism (for a critical analysis of this argument, see Levitas 2013: 7-19). It was enough to point out how socialism had evolved into Stalinism in the USSR to win the argument; to identify elements of utopianism in Nazi or Fascist speeches; to refer to dystopias as utopias' logical evolution; or merely to see how the working classes had abandoned the faith in the revolution. Later, in the 1990s, utopianism was also related to bloodthirsty nationalist dreams of territory and ethnic unity. It came to be seen negatively as everything but liberalism and respect for diversity. When the critique of liberalism came in, with the rise of poststructuralist theories, critique recalibrated. The tendency was to criticize the totalities of universal discourses rather than jettisoning liberal principles. Within poststructuralist frameworks, both liberalism and socialism were critically reappraised at once (see, for example, the defence of a post-foundational approach to ideology critique by Oliver Marchart in this volume). At the end of the century, the ideal of socialism had suffered an attack from two fronts: liberals and post-structuralists. Utopia was under siege.

It is not my intention here to refute the argument that draws a correlation between utopia and totalitarianism,

even if this argument seemed more tenable in the light of mourning for the tragedies of the mid-twentieth century than it is today. Neither do I wish to challenge that, to recall the first charge introduced above, utopias are naïve and do not have immediate political consequences; even if this argument contributes to the maintenance of the status quo and this is problematic in times of crisis. Instead, I seek to argue that these two critiques of utopianism have been deeply assimilated in the twenty-first century. Rather than witnessing the disappearance of visions for the future, though, today there is the rise of a new form of utopianism, which seeks to eschew the risks of being either naïve or potentially tyrannical. In order to examine the transformations in utopian thought, I will briefly draw out the paradigmatic trajectory of Jacoby's work. The paradigmatic character of his work comes from the fact that he once defended socialism and utopianism against the accepted wisdom, yet his thoughts have evolved and now herald what I call 'the new utopianism'.

In his *The End of Utopia*, Jacoby (1999) laments that 'radicalism no longer believes in itself' and that critical analyses and visions for the future have faded away:

Today the vision has faltered, the self-confidence drained away, the possibilities dimmed. Almost everywhere the left contracts, not simply politically but, perhaps more decisively, intellectually. To avoid contemplating the defeat and its implications, the left now largely speaks the language of liberalism – the idiom of pluralism and rights. At the same time, liberals, divested of a left wing, suffer from waning determination and imagination (pp. 10).

Jacoby bemoans the fact that radicals embrace culture and pluralism, rather than economics. He regrets that intellectuals have abandoned the search for knowledge and Truth to become skilled doubters, cynics and ironists (for instance, see M. Schmidt in this volume). He criticizes the tendency to celebrate relativism and mass (bourgeois) culture to the detriment of the search for a superior and unique culture (e.g. like the working-class culture defended by socialist writers). One of Jacoby's aims is to rescue the left from its defeat, or worse, from its unfortunate conversion, since now leftists, under a postmodern guise, have embraced the sentiments of liberalism.³ Rebellious against the lack of forward-looking ideas in 'an age of apathy', he emphasizes the need to envision a new and different society.

Writing in 1999, at the pinnacle of anti-utopianism, Jacoby defended utopian thought. For this, he dismissed the arguments that utopian sympathizers are either 'foolhardy dreamers'

or 'murderous totalitarians', as he put it a few years later (2005: ix). In a challenge to the wisdom of the past century, he undid these links (between utopia and naïvety and utopia and totalitarianism) by developing an account of great utopian thinkers as precursors of social change, rather than harbingers of horror. For instance, why are visions of an egalitarian city, of socio-economic harmony or the reduction of the workday to three hours either naïve or totalitarian? The answer, he argues, is the fear of 'totality' and the preference for pluralism of dissident socialists and accommodated liberals (1999: 29–66). This historical fate, the exit from totality, has led to the poverty of ideas, the irrelevance of critique and the lack of visions from contemporary intellectuals. Swimming against the current, Jacoby nostalgically defended the search for Truth and the need for universal visions. He appealed to the design of utopias that could stimulate the progress of humanity. He spoke out loud 'the end of utopia' to awaken a future revolution of thought. The book was received as a 'call for a revival of Western Marxism' (Cmiel 2000: 456). A few years later, in 2005, Jacoby wanted to go a step further. He finally wrote how utopianism ought to be in order to be saved from its extinction. However, constrained by the burden of an enduring critique of utopia, overwhelmed by the conjecture of a postmodern age, Jacoby's writing betrayed his earlier hopes.

The rise and betrayal of the new utopianism

In the first years of the twenty-first century, a lot of ink has been spent on the critique of approaches informed by liberal principles. After the bundle of international peace missions, from Bosnia to Iraq, scholars have dismissed humanitarianism and questioned democratization. The current economic crisis has spurred the critique of the economic system: from arguments that merely advocate a financial system reform to the spectre of a 'new new left' – reinforced by the electoral victory of *Syriza* in Greece and the rise of *Podemos* in Spain – that promises more structural changes (see Sotiropoulos for a critique of financialization in this volume). Now, there is hope for change. There is an increasing appeal to imagination and a demand for utopias. But what kind?

In his book, *Picture Imperfect: Utopian Thought for an Anti-Utopian Age*, 2005, Jacoby heralds a new direction for the thinking of utopia in the twenty-first century. Following the iconoclastic tradition represented, for example, by Ernst Bloch's classic piece, *Spirit of Utopia*, 1918, Jacoby invokes a 'utopianism without blueprints'. This form of utopianism, unlike other traditional forms (see Campanella 2009; More 2009), consists in refusing to map a specific place or depicting the details of an emancipatory future. It is about the

³ It is fair to clarify that Jacoby (1999) is not defending a return to socialism. He is criticizing the 'collapsing intellectual visions and ambitions' of both left and right. Jacoby wants to revive thought and critique because 'radicals have lost their bite and liberals their backbone' (p. xii).

commitment to imagining a different and better future of happiness, but declining to say, pronounce or write concretely about this future. A utopia, as Jacoby (2005) puts it, is 'a longing that cannot be uttered' (pp. 113–44). Why? Because the portrayal of an exact dimension for the future, he argues, is sacrilegious and violent. It settles a plan for those humans in the future, as if this was the best imaginable proposal or as if those in the future 'could not figure this out for themselves' (p. xv–xviii). By refusing to come up with an accurate design for how the world ought to be tomorrow, Jacoby avoids the political censorships of his critics: utopianism is no longer about the search for and finding of a new and better totality; it is a mere 'whisper', an 'allusion' to betterment (pp. 141–3), a utopianism that 'pines for the future, but does not map it out' (p. 119). As such, this utopianism defends itself from the accusations of totalitarianism.

After reading the book, one has the impression that Jacoby's understanding of utopia has shifted and that he has reconsidered his thoughts of 1999. For instance, he now greatly admires non-traditional 'iconoclastic' utopian writers like Ernst Bloch and Gustav Landauer, but these thinkers were only tiptoed around if not ignored in the previous book. Heretofore Jacoby (1999) analyzed with frustration how contemporary intellectuals had dismissed the quest for universal truths and human perfection, taking refuge in the overproduction of ironies, cynical notes and the suspicion of every claim to knowledge (pp. 101–54). Yet, in 2005, as if he had lost the argument against the critics he dismissed, he felt much more comfortable with the decay of universal principles when he advocated a 'utopia without blueprints'. Although the earlier Jacoby was prudent in the sense that he never sketched out how utopias should be, he had the brave and ambitious goal of both resisting the lack of grand visions and fighting for the revitalization of utopias, 'the essential precondition for doing something' (1999: 181). Later, much more assertive in guiding utopian thought, Jacoby's approach lost all its hubris: Jacoby lost his 'boxer fists' (see the metaphor in the introduction to this volume).

If Jacoby was practically alone in his initial defence of new ideals that could usher humanity towards a better future, the soul of his latter iconoclastic 'new' utopianism pervades contemporary critical thinking. Ruth Levitas (1990), for example, one of the most respected scholars in the field and co-founder of the Utopian Studies Society, widened the concept of utopia so as to mean 'a desire for a different way of being', which does not necessarily imply a willingness or an effort to implement this desire (p. 230). The underlying reason, we learn from her, is to release utopias from being devoured by their anti-utopian critics: the new utopianism dodges – if not falsifies – any link with totalitarianism. It is in this sense that

Levitas (2007) argues in favour of the necessity of utopias, 'but only in so far as utopia is understood as a method rather than a goal, and accompanied by the recognition of provisionality, responsibility and necessary failure' (p. 290). The argument that utopias are not specified goals or ends that one shall strive to fulfil, but 'methods' or 'hypothesis' to merely stimulate political thought and enrich debates, seems to suggest that the new utopianism desists, it belittles itself. It appears as a cautious approach that starts from assuming its failure and thus its ephemeral character.

In parallel with the defence of utopias against the accusation that these are potentially tyrannical plans, utopian thinkers have also had to tackle the challenge that visions of the future are politically irrelevant to the struggles of the present. For this, they have made a radical conversion of utopianism and, rather than imagining ideal solutions to the current problems, they have embraced reality itself. This seems to be the general motif behind the edited volume *Existential Utopia: New Perspectives on Utopian Thought*, 2012, in which the authors defend an 'existential utopia', rather than offering another essentialist scheme for utopia. This utopia relies on 'a hope detached from its divine or messianic roots and placed in the hitherto possibilities of human togetherness' (Marder and Vieira 2012: x). The underlying assumption is that life exceeds any particular understanding of politics or any project that seeks to shape the world towards a given direction (as in traditional utopias). It is within this 'excess' or this 'surplus' between human projects and the unapproachable life that the potential for utopias resides (see Kellner 2012; Levitas 2012). Instead of imagining a 'place', therefore, existential utopia enables 'placelessness' so that life becomes liberated from the artificiality and illusory closure of the present structures or futurist static utopias (Marder and Vieira 2012: xii).

The new utopianism is vigilant about the concealed possibilities for emancipation that pervade in the here-and-now. Following Bloch, who saw elements of hope for a better life in the existing everyday expressions and cultural forms, Douglas Kellner (2012) tells us to look for the progressive and utopian elements within capitalism itself. Rather than developing ideology critique to identify the errors of capitalism, therefore, the way forward is to use its occluded progressive elements and orient ourselves towards a better world. The new utopians, thus, are reconciled with the present historical conditions, with the capitalist system, with global contingencies and the expansion of globalization (see also Hayden and El-Ojeili 2009). This is because these authors give priority to the world and its not-yet-seen possibilities, rather than relying upon the artificial and rational constructs that can shape, decipher or organize this world. Utopia, as critique, has

abandoned 'stupid materialism' (Levitas 2012: 109–12). In so doing, it has circumvented the risks of being accused of totalitarianism and of becoming an irrelevant and unreal dream.

While the philosophical orientation of the new utopianism offers an escape from the 'problems' of traditional utopias, it also speaks of the insufficiency of contemporary utopianism when it is applied to political debates. Shannon Brincat exemplifies the trend. He has explicitly imported the lessons taken from Utopian Studies, abandoning the notion of utopia as a perfect and static place disconnected from the present, to renovate International Relations. Brincat's approach relies on the ontological assumption that the world is open, overwhelming and inaccessible to human appropriations. Based on this supposition, utopianism starts here and now, it embraces the world: 'utopianism should no longer be assumed to be a blueprint for a future society but a critical imaginary that acts as a heuristic device to reveal the fissures in existing reality, an ideational motivating force for progressive change towards "betterment"' (2009: 584). That is, Brincat vindicates 'an open-dialectical approach' that does not seek 'perfection', but a gradual and reflexive process that recognizes its 'provisionality and partiality' (p. 605). What really counts is the process and its repetitive 'failure', rather than its goal and its potential success. This approach, which is endless and irreducibly plural, is intended to give a critical edge to International Relations theory.

However, the liveliness of this project is deceptive; its self-congratulatory 'critical' stand is false (for two acute analyses and critiques of this Critique, see Chandler and J. Schmidt in this volume). The radicalism of utopia has disappeared. At best, the open-dialectical approach that thinkers like Brincat propose has become similar to popular critiques in political theory and international relations that call for respect for the diversity of life, against the reductionism of Liberalism and Marxism (e.g. Connolly 2005). At worst, this utopianism resembles current development or state-building policy frameworks that emphasize the need to use culture and local particularisms to cultivate resilience to the adversity of disasters and conflicts (see, for example, UNESCO 2010, 2014). In its urge to escape from totality, from the risk of imposing a plan for the future, the new utopianism has lost its punch: unable to dissect the errors of the present political socio-economic machineries, let alone to depict new structural settings, now utopianism revolves around praxis, enabling dialogic processes that might bring limited and provisional changes. It only retains a spectre or a spirit of the "old" utopianism: imagining utopias serves as a modest '*tone* of what life in utopia *could* be' (Brincat 2009: 602, emphasis in original). The new utopians, as the later Jacoby (2005) poetically put it, 'open the window to let in the breeze. In the rustling of the objects and cooling of

the brow, the breeze can be heard and felt, but not seen' (p. 144). The pertinent question at this point is whether this shift towards the new utopianism, which is increasingly becoming commonplace in the social sciences, is sufficient to harbingering the critical animus of today. I conclude: probably not.

Perhaps my biggest concern is that contemporary utopianism contents itself with being a mere 'tone', an anathema to the old utopianism. It is a project that boasts about being humble. It has succumbed to the arguments of the critics of utopia and now it has learnt to enjoy this defeat. The shadows of totalitarian regimes, the risks of thinking of a 'totality' are still reasonable concerns, but they cannot collapse our imagination in the twenty-first century. There is the need to start thinking again. Two steps are imperative. The first is to resist the ontological and epistemological assumptions of the new utopianism. In other words, as Chandler has written in this volume, "'destabilize" the truths of Critique is the most pressing intellectual task of our time' (p. 59). This volume has contributed to this task. But contemporary critique cannot conform itself by being a critique of the critics: there is the need to go a step further, to move forward after analyzing and criticizing the 'whole' (see Koddenbrock in this volume). This is the second step: to point towards new directions and find new shores. But how this is to be done if liberalism and its postmodern allies have seduced the hearts and minds of contemporary societies? How, if the struggle is over for the immense majority of the people and critics are sceptic, cynic, soulless and fearful of change, utopias or Truth? In other words, how is critique to imagine a way forward if the spectre of communism no longer haunts Europe? It is at this point where the vision of alternatives to the status quo are pressing, even if these do not generate traction yet. There is the need to imagine blueprint utopias, which question and delegitimize the present system and show a direction for the future. This would perhaps be to imitate the 'utopian socialists' of two hundred years ago: critically analyze contemporary problems and experiment with (un)feasible alternatives. Although most surely these alternatives will be pejoratively labelled as 'utopian', they could inspire the revolutionary subject of tomorrow.

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