

Facing Our New Monster: On Critique in the Era of Affirmation

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I work in the field of philosophy of technology with a focus on digitalisation, and this is a perspective from which the question about the current status of critique can't be avoided. 'I like'-buttons and recommendation-algorithms are a characteristic shaping our new public space, the online environment. For theoretical concepts, this is interesting. Firstly, you can't help but notice that critique in its classic sense of questioning or even negating the existing world is online rather absent (or has morphed into the non-reflective forms of trolling and flaming). Secondly, big corporations like Facebook or Google don't act to exploit their users – well, only partly – but also support important critical causes from the Arab Spring to Open Education. In short, they act like 'frenemies'.

In the following paper, I'll read this specific type of power as a shift that is exceeding the digital area; to exemplify this, I'll turn to Rupert Murdoch and the phone hacking scandal that in 2011 shook up one of today's Western regimes of truth, journalism. Discussing the use of acknowledgment and affirmation as a response to and neutralisation of negative critique, I'll try to make the following apparent: to escape the politics of negation becomes more than it ever was a political necessity. As power operates in new ways, 'what becomes of critique?' is a question indeed at stake.

1 Negation & Critique

To whatever extent it has been challenged, when we think of the concept of Western societies, negative critique has been at the centre pushing our societies forward. In modern thinking, Hegel's dialectics fortified its central role¹ when describing how an existing condition is enhanced by its negation, and both are synthesized and 'sublated' to a new level:

'That which enables the Notion to advance itself is the already mentioned negative which it possesses within itself; it is this which constitutes the genuine dialectical moment.'²

In the 20th century, this notion of the negative that 'enables to advance' has frequently been picked up, albeit sometimes critically: challenging critique is central to Adorno and Horkheimer ('Dialectic of Enlightenment'), Sartre ('Critique of Dialectical Reason'), to Foucault ('What is Critique?'), and Butler ('An Essay on Foucault's Virtue'), and recently to Latour ('Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?'). There is reason for this. Even in its most general-sense of fault-finding, one could claim that negative critique aimed to make the world better, despite cynics might object rightly with Adorno that it just made the fault-finders feel better. But whether constructive or destructive, negative critique could surely claim to be about change. Well, until recently.

2 Neutralising Negation

In the current climate, the power of negation that once fueled resistance finds itself more and more often without effect. Exemplary for this strategy

1 Well captured by Alexandre Kojève, 'The Dialectic of the Real and the Phenomenological Method in Hegel', in: Introduction to the Reading of Hegel, Basic Books, 1969 (1947), p. 169-260

2¹ Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, Science of Logic, London, Routledge, 2002 (1969), p. 55

of power is the following: in July 2011, illegal phone hacking of several UK newspapers came to light, a scandal that shook up the journalistic public far beyond Britain. Several publishing houses, all owned by the businessman Rupert Murdoch, had failed. Stating that this was 'the most humble day' of his life, he acknowledged that there were failures. However, he handed them down further and further, until they were out of his reach to rest with the regular guy on high street: 'I hold responsible the people who I trusted to run it and the people they trusted.'³ Instead of firing his management, he closed one of his newspapers and 200 journalists not responsible of actual phone hacking were made redundant. A year later, when UK's Prime Minister met campaigners against phone hacking, the humbleness was gone, and Murdoch called them publicly 'scumbag celebrities pushing for even more privacy laws' on Twitter.

There are a more examples that indicate this strategy of affirmative illusion has become mainstream, but I'll leave it here. For now, I think we can notice the rise of a new discursive style – duck and cover critique with the illusion of affirmation: the opponent simply agrees to the critique while as few as possible is to be changed, of course. Instead of setting norms like in the disciplinary society, power plays hide and seek: we are not the ones responsible, indeed we also don't like this problem and agree with you. In such a discursive environment, concepts that allow us to escape the politics of negation become more than they ever a political necessity.

3 On the potential of diffraction and irritation

Fortunately, negation isn't the only drive for making progress. Negative critique surely has been one of the most used rhetoric techniques, but argumentation can follow many ways in order to push at the borders, as there is also aporia, chiasm, disruption, or subtly deductive and inductive reasoning – thinking has many arms. As a matter of fact, the term critique itself has even been used in ways that didn't indicate negation. Among others Kant's 'Critique of pure reason' as well as later Walter Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence' referred to the term simply in order to signify the examination of a subject. Still, there is a problem: What becomes of resistance? If we let go the concept of negation, we lose the important tool of opposition. How can we hold power in check?

Debating critical thinking today on a conference in Berlin, philosopher and feminist Kathrin Thiele⁴ made an interesting suggestion: to read critique not as a process of detecting, uncovering and fighting contradictions, but as an immanent practice, i.e. to engage. Quoting Donna Haraway's approach of 'staying with the trouble'⁵ this concept of critique as a radical affirmative gesture proposes to get attached to the matters at stake, manoeuvre them, and negotiate them into a 'different' future, instead of the tendency to

³ The Telegraph, 'Rupert Murdoch: I do not accept responsibility for wrongdoing at News of the World', *The Telegraph*, 19 July 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/phone-hacking/8647802/Rupert-Murdoch-I-do-not-accept-responsibility-for-wrongdoing-at-News-of-the-World.html>.

⁴ Kathrin Thiele, 'In Critical Condition or Fully Out of Steam? Critical Thinking Today', International Conference 'Gegen/Stand der Kritik' of the DFG-Graduiertenkolleg 'Lebensformen und Lebenswissen', Berlin, June 28–30, 2012

⁵ Donna Haraway, 'When Species Meet: Staying With the Trouble', in: *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 28 (1), 2010, p. 53

'separate', 'distinguish', and 'distance' ourselves from what we don't like. In a Kantian way, this gesture stands critique on its feet. Like the process of enlightenment it enacts critique as a 'strenuous exercise', and not as a 'fantasy of omnipotence'⁶ as Thiele points out. In order to not again live in a self-incurred tutelage, we need to have the courage to use our own understanding: in today's world, things are complicated and complex. However, this is more than annoying. It is also an interesting challenge – there is new reason to pick up the fight. A useful tool when eager to conceptually arm ourselves, might be the methodology of diffraction in the reading of Iris van der Tuin. Following Donna Haraway and quoting Karen Barad, she points out that a 'diffractive strategy' entails to rework (and not negate) concepts, and uses their interferences with the aim to disrupt fixed casualties (van der Tuin 2011). Instead of negating, it irritates.

Again, it becomes obvious that in (what I call for now) the 'era of affirmation', there are not simply anymore two sides given. Still, we need to make a stand, and we can. In the absence of a preconfigured dialectical world neatly tidied up in two opposing sides, the struggle must continue: now we need to organize us newly 'against alignment with the way of the world, against withdrawal from engagement with the world', as Peter Hallward once put it when he conceptualized a 'prescriptive practice of politics'⁷. Under the governance of an affirmative discourse, this approach could prove itself quite useful. Encircled by the monsters of this decade, the 'frenemies', we might lack the convenient clarity of a 'natural given' opposition we have conventionally turned to. That doesn't mean, however, we come unarmed. The world is rich in material useful to re-think the position and process of a resistance that now operates in the mode of assistance. That isn't judging but holding on to a certain perspective (Kaiser). That doesn't act for a moment of rebellion but is practicing *Gelassenheit* (Lawlor) as an effective subliminal force. That is guided by the semi-agency of an immanent criticism. That carefully uses time, this complicated concept, as one of its forces. That is sensitive towards knowledge that is not there (Buikema). That has just begun to be a concept, one that clearly can be to our advantage as our resistance doesn't depend from our opponent anymore.

This new approach to politics can be described as an 'agential cut' (Karen Barad)⁸ that turns out to be a useful weaponry under the governance of an affirmative discourse, whose outlines aren't rough anymore but very real. Thus, instead of fighting against we now fight for, and instead of negating critique, the diffractive discourse holds on, in order to stubbornly guide this world into a different becoming. In the 'era of affirmation' we'll say 'yes', too: we will stay with the trouble.

⁶ Kathrin Thiele, 'In Critical Condition or Fully Out of Steam? Critical Thinking Today', International Conference 'Gegen/Stand der Kritik' of the DFG-Graduiertenkolleg 'Lebensformen und Lebenswissen', Berlin, June 28–30, 2012, p. 8

⁷ Peter Hallward, 'Politics of Prescription', in: *South Atlantic Quarterly*, Fall 2005 104 (4), p. 769–789

⁸ Karen Barad, *Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter*, in: *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 28.3, p. 815

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