

## **Speculative and/as Critical Thinking**

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Addressing the state and stakes of critical thinking today two questions come to the fore for me: (A) why is a re-visioning of critical thinking needed today? And (B) what would a renewed critical thinking look like, that is: what are examples of different modes of critical thinking?

(A) Why a re-visioning of critical thinking today?

My reflections start out from an ambivalence towards critique as a mode of thought inherited from the European Enlightenment. The 'great division' that Kantian philosophy has entrenched into modern modes of thought – between theoretical and practical reason, between fact and value – seems inseparable from critique as a practice of thinking. Drawing on the thought of Alfred North Whitehead I would like to argue that, as a discursive practice, critique is embedded in a historical and discursive situation that he described as a 'bifurcation of nature'. By 'bifurcation of nature' Whitehead referred to a systematic as well as historical constellation that marks modern modes of thought. Despite, maybe even because of, the critique of metaphysics that is inherent to modern thinking, the bifurcation of nature can be called the metaphysics of modernity, because it shapes its basic concepts that other concepts presuppose. This modern metaphysics, however, is marked by a fundamental incoherence. Nature bifurcates because within modern thought one can find two conceptions of nature that are incompatible with one another. There is on the one hand nature as it is the object of scientific query – molecules, atoms, neurons etc. – but this nature is never perceived as such. It is bare nature, or more precisely, a nature of 'bare facts'. On the other hand there is nature as it is perceived, with its qualities and values. As a consequence, within this frame it is the human subject that endows 'bare nature' with qualities (such as warmth, colour) and value. For Whitehead, 'the bifurcation of nature' was an outcome of scientific materialism as it derived from Newtonian physics. Nevertheless, Whitehead is not criticising Newtonian physics or the sciences per se. Rather, he is concerned with the philosophical interpretation of the materialist doctrine, be it implicitly or explicitly performed. Nature bifurcates, because the Newtonian conception of matter has been generalized beyond its experiential scope (that is: inanimate nature). It thereby came to be understood as designating nature generally, referring to the most concrete aspect of nature – that is: to 'matters of fact'. Everything that doesn't fit into nature thus understood – values, qualities – therefore has to be explained by different means, in the modern frame of thought they are relegated to the human subject. This Whiteheadian diagnosis is inherently related to the question of critique insofar as the bifurcation of nature supplies

a powerful strategy of critique and has historically informed practices of critique. 'You might experience and even enjoy the beauty of the glowing sunset (and therefore believe in its reality), but *actually* it is only the outcome of a particular play of atoms that cause certain neurological reactions in the brain' – the perception of beauty in this example becomes a mere byplay of the mind, a subjective illusion due to the addition of values and qualities to 'bare facts'. One could thus say that 'explaining away' of what is in fact part of experience is a particularly modern and particularly powerful strategy of critique. Critique thus presupposes a notion of matter of fact, even if what counts as matter of fact is interchangeable according to different regimes of explanation and knowledge production. For Newtonian materialism everything that doesn't fit into the materialist scheme is in turn explained away, in the case of the different forms of ideology critique for example it is social facts that are taken as the real facts about the world and thus as basis for critique. That is: the contents or variables of critique can be and have been various, but its logic stays the same. If critique is a practice of 'krinein', disentangling and separating, it is a very modern one, as it sets out to disentangle fact and value, nature and culture, legitimate from illegitimate knowledge claims, and also humans and nonhumans.

Rather than aiming at a critique of critique though, I would like to take up Bruno Latour's claim in his essay *Why has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern* that critique, quite to the contrary, "has not been critical enough".<sup>1</sup> Even if Latour's essay has been widely read as a critique of critique, I would like to read it as a plea for a *renewal* of critical thinking. This reading can be underscored by the fact that Latour's concern is what seems to be at the core of any form of critical thinking – the relation of theory to experience. It is this relation of theory, and more specifically critical thinking, towards experience that points towards three aspects that I think are important to take into account in view of a renewal of critical thinking.

1) The first one concerns the notion of experience itself. From Kant onwards the movement that critical thinking deploys is one that *moves away* from 'what is given in experience' towards its *conditions*. This movement however assumes – a little uncritically assumes – a certain notion of experience and of what a matter of fact is. A renewal of critical thinking thus would also have to imply a renewed empiricism. Such a new empiricism would have to trace back the lines from Kant to Hume and Locke and would take the form of a *radical empiricism* in the sense of William James.<sup>2</sup> For it was against the background of his physiological work that James was able to formulate a renewed empiricism

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<sup>1</sup> Bruno Latour, 'Why has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern', *Critical Inquiry*, 30/2 (2004), 103..

<sup>2</sup> William James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, hrsg. v. Fredson Bowers Frederick H. Burkhardt, Ignas K. Skrupskelis (The Works of William James, 3; Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1976).

without letting nature bifurcate, thereby putting the necessity itself of the Kantian critical turn into question.

2) The second point concerns the relation of theory to experience in the sense of its present and past. The interesting point about Latour's essay to me is the fact that it is bound to a diagnosis of contemporary discourse and experience. In other words, Latour is not talking about critique in general, but – in a pragmatic vein – looking at the consequences of a particular way of thinking in a particular situation. He starts out from the fact that critique as a mode of thought was born in a particular moment, in response to a particular situation – modernity – and his question is whether it is still valid in the same way today, facing a very different world. The problem thus for him lies in the fact that critique has become a *habit*, that thinking today seems to a large part to operate *per default* in a critical mode, and therefore has become a little blind to its subjects and its consequences in the world. It is precisely in relation to the devastating consequences of a bifurcation of nature that the powerlessness of critique as a methodological instrument becomes apparent. The separation of facts and values that has guided politics, economy and research has led to the point in which survival in dignity is threatened for many inhabitants, not exclusively but also human, of this world.

3) Thirdly, if as supposed, at the core of critical thinking there is the desire to relate to the world we live in, to be relevant to it, then attention must be drawn as to *how* theory positions itself towards experience, its present and its past. Thus, the issue at stake rethinking critical thought today is not what one would in German call a 'Weltanschauung', but rather it is a methodological one, it is about the practice of theory itself. How do we do theory? What does it *practically* mean to think critically? How is the mode of functioning, the efficacy and performativity of theory towards its outside thought and taken into account?

(B) How could renewed practices of critical thinking look like, what are examples of different modes of critical thinking than the ones inherited from modernity?

Despite this problematization of critique, it is clear that a world that cries for critical intervention and thought cannot afford to throw out critical thinking with the bathwater of critique (this is why, throughout this short intervention, I have tried to distinguish terminologically between 'critique' as a mode of thought that follows Kantian lines and 'critical thinking' as a denominator for a renewal of critique beyond Kantian parameters). Critical thinking rather, in Latour's words, faces „(t)he practical problem [...] to associate the word criticism with a whole set of new positive metaphors, gestures, attitudes, knee-jerk reactions, habits of thoughts“.<sup>3</sup> Where then can we look for different ways of critical thinking than those inherited from modern thought and inscribed into the bifurcation of nature? I would like to sketch out four

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<sup>3</sup> Latour, 'Why has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern', 247

instances of critical thinking that don't follow the lines of critique and that can be characterized as forms of speculative thinking.<sup>4</sup>

1. The questions I have posed so far are pragmatic questions and classical pragmatism is indeed a first stance from which I think an attempt to renew critical thinking can be undertaken – despite the long standing prejudice against pragmatism of precisely being an uncritical, if not to say opportunistic philosophy.<sup>5</sup> Pragmatism precisely *is* a form of critical thinking because it is first and foremost a method that proposes to evaluate a concept or a theory not in terms of what it *is* or represents but what it *does*, where it leads to in William James' words. Assessing theories or concepts not in relation to given truths but to ensuing consequences – be those within thought, language or experience – pragmatism inscribes an ethical dimension into the very construction of knowledge itself.

2. Alfred North Whitehead's speculative philosophy is a second example for a different form of critical thinking. The specific form of criticality of Whitehead's metaphysics comes into view when taking into account his pragmatism and his revision of the notion of theory. Theory for Whitehead has been too narrowly understood within modern philosophy: it has been reduced to judgement. Whitehead's concept of 'propositions', introduced within his metaphysics, is of core importance here. Propositions are 'theories', but Whitehead introduces them in a metaphysical, not an epistemological context (that is: they refer to

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4 The term speculation doesn't seem to come to mind accidentally as the fate of speculative thought and critique have from the outset been intertwined. Speculative thought has been for long – actually since the birth of critique – subject to critique. One could say that metaphysical speculation was the first object of critique, if one understands critique in the sense inaugurated by Immanuel Kant as his attempt was to reframe metaphysical speculation by a reversion to the conditions of possibility of knowledge. This reframing of speculation by critique marks the beginning of modern thought, one could even say it marks its modernity. Note however that in reviving the notion of speculation as here proposed the meaning of the term has changed: speculation no longer refers to the *object* of thought – the absolute etc. – but rather to its *practice* and *method*. In this perspective the Kantian project and speculative thinking as here sketched out are less antagonistic than they might seem at first glance. At the same time it becomes evident that the current vogue of 'speculative realism' is speculative in an old, prekantian sense – the price to pay for which seems to be that it therefore can not be critical in any (even modified) sense.

5 Horkheimer's critique of pragmatism has entrenched this prejudice into the theoretical landscape up until today (cf. for example Horkheimer: "Zum Rationalismusstreit in der gegenwärtigen Philosophie"(1934) in Max Horkheimer, Gesammelte Schriften. Band 3: Schriften 1931–1936, hrsg. v. Alfred Schmidt; Gunzelin Schmid Noerr (Frankfurt/Main: S. Fischer 1988), 192 ff.). This prejudice largely rests on a misconstruction of the fundamental pragmatic stake – the reconsideration of the relation between theory and practice. For pragmatism it is not practice – understood as a distinct field from theory – that is primary and according to which theories are to be assessed, but the distinction between theory and practice itself is radically questioned.

actual entities in the Whiteheadian terminology). Their function is not only to judge but to be 'entertained', to act as a 'lure for feeling'.<sup>6</sup> Propositions at the same time mark the speculative aspect of thought – they introduce novelty and transcend the given – as well as its empiricist aspect: the relevance and meaning of a proposition depends pragmatically on the consequences that it entails in experience, that is: the way it is taken up. If for Whitehead philosophy's role is 'to take care of the abstractions',<sup>7</sup> as they circulate in a historical time, his metaphysics itself embodies a proposition: as a metaphysics in which nature doesn't bifurcate it is 'a lure for feeling' animated by the hope for an alteration of modern habits of thought. Read pragmatically then, Whitehead's metaphysics is not a reversion to uncritical, premodern modes of thought, but rather attempts a renewal of critical thinking – a renewal that takes the (certainly strange) form of a speculative metaphysics.

3. It doesn't seem to be by chance that Latour belongs to the field of Science and Technology Studies (STS) as the notion of matter of fact – so central to critique – has here been thoroughly called into question. From Ludwik Fleck<sup>8</sup>, as one of the founding figures of the discipline, to contemporary authors such as Simon Shaffer and Steven Shapin<sup>9</sup>, the field of STS has exhibited the manifold ways and efforts it takes to bring about a matter of fact, not only epistemologically but ontologically. Rather than simply and naturally given (and then to be discovered) matters of facts are the outcome of delicate processes of construction that involve a whole set of actors and concerns.

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6 A proposition [...] is at datum for feeling, awaiting a subject feeling it. Its relevance to the actual world by means of its logical subjects makes it a lure for feeling" (Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality. An Essay in Cosmology (Corrected Edition)*, hrsg. v. Donald W. Sherburne David Ray Griffin (New York: The Free Press, 1985) 259).

7 „You cannot think without abstractions; accordingly it is of the utmost importance to be vigilant in critically revising your modes of abstraction. It is here that philosophy finds its niche as essential to the healthy progress of society. It is the critic of abstractions. [...] An active school of philosophy is quite as important for the locomotion of ideas, as is an active school of railways engineers for the locomotion of fuel" (Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: The Free Press, 1967), 59). I think this quote shows that the particular role or task Whitehead ascribes to philosophy in and for a society is a critical practice. However, it is not critique (in a modern sense), I think it is important that Whitehead says 'critic', which refers to a practice, comparable to the literary or the art critic, rather than a philosophical concept of critique following a Kantian lineage. The philosopher is less a judge that judges on right or wrong uses of concepts, she is rather comparable to a railway engineer, who takes care of the infrastructure of a society.

8 Ludwik Fleck, *Entstehung und Entwicklung einer wissenschaftlichen Tatsache: Einführung in die Lehre vom Denkstil und Denkkollektiv* (6. Aufl. edn., Suhrkamp-Taschenbuch Wissenschaft Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2006)

9<sup>1</sup> Simon Schaffer; Steven Shapin, *Leviathan and the Air-Pump. Hobbes, Boyle, and the Experimental Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

Therefore Latour proposed 'matters of concern' as a more appropriate term to capture the politics necessarily inherent to the coming to be of matters of fact.<sup>10</sup>

4. Feminist Epistemologies have a long tradition of questioning the givenness of knowledge claims and bringing to the fore what has been excluded and devalued in the construction of 'matters of fact'. Continuing the Latourian line of thought and drawing on feminist concerns for the situatedness of all knowledge claims Maria Puig della Bellacasa has proposed the notion 'matter of care' as a way of incorporating at once the emphasis of STS on 'Dingpolitik' – the inclusion of manifold actors, human and nonhuman – as well as 'thinkpolitics' – the ethics inherent in any form of knowledge production – and the feminist insistence on critical standpoints.<sup>11</sup> Inserting 'care' – understood as "everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair 'our world' so that we can live in it as well as possible"<sup>12</sup> – for 'concern' implies a heightened attention to the ethically, politically and also affectively charged practice of knowledge construction and takes into account persistent forms of exclusion, power and domination in a world shaped by technoscience. Precisely because such a world undermines thinking in terms of all too simple oppositions, practices of critical thinking beyond a corrosive critique are a vital necessity, not only for feminist thinking.

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10<sup>1</sup> Latour, 'Why has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern', . Bruno Latour, 'Do Scientific Objects Have a History? Pasteur and Whitehead in a Bath of Lactic Acid', *Common Knowledge*, 5/1 (1996), 76–91

11<sup>1</sup> Maria Puig Della Bellacasa, 'Matters of care in technoscience: Assembling neglected things', *Social Studies of Science*, 41/1 (2011), 85 – 106.

12<sup>1</sup> Joan C. Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 103. Cf. Bellacasa, 'Matters of care in technoscience: Assembling neglected things', 93

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