

In Critical Condition or Fully Out of Steam? Critical Thinking 'Today'

Kathrin Thiele

1. It is hard to tell what exactly the current condition of critical thinking is. To 'google' critical thinking or critical theory, brings an amount of 'hits' that is nearly innumerable. The announced critical condition of critical thinking might, therefore, not be all too critical. There are thousands of books on the topic, hundreds of critical thinking/theory programs all over the world, and many most significant events of contemporary intellectual life – on a daily level – headed under 'critique' or 'critical...something'. And yet, the timeliness of the question respectively critique cannot be overstressed. It may be that the field of the humanities itself (in all its plurality) is at stake when we ask about the current state of 'critique'. In what follows I would like to re-engage critique and critical thinking anew as the most precise and specific 'methodological tool' of and in the humanities. With my position I manoeuvre in-between two current trends respectively the question of 'critique, criticism, or critical thinking': on the one hand a recurring critique of 'critical theory/thinking' for its apparent 'weakness', with the wish to 'strengthen' the critic's position by again dividing things so that choosing sides is the solution; and on the other hand the opposite tendency, where 'critical engagement' is (mis-)understood as mere negation, leading only to oppositional scenarios, and thus making critical engagement look like something to be best left behind.

Instead of letting go of terms and tools (in this case critique, critical, criticality), what I want to propose here is to opt for a revitalization of critique. What I want to argue is that a central moment in and of criticality is in no way outdated, but actually still needs to be put in practice as that which could animate our activities within the humanities. This central moment of critique and critical thinking is what Michel Foucault already in 1978 has called 'not to be governed like that' (cf. Foucault 2007), and the question we face 'today' is *how* we produce ways of thinking and acting that are in this sense 'critical'. In this short paper I claim that we need to re-conceptualize critique/criticality from being pictured as a dialectical process whose major task is 'to set apart' and 'divide', and transform it into a practice of *com-passionate affirmation*.¹ Only by starting with such an affirmative ethos will critical engagement become again capable of negotiating appropriately the complex ecologico-socio-ethico-political conditions this world is made of today.

2. In 2004 Bruno Latour wrote 'Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Facts to Matters of Concern' (Latour 2004); tellingly published in the journal

¹ In this position paper, there is no room for explaining 'com-passionate affirmation' in detail. However, in order to give conceptual direction: the emphasis on affirmation instead of separation as theoretical force takes its inspiration from the Nietzschean/Deleuzian feminist philosophical legacy (e.g. Braidotti, Grosz, Marrati); the specification of 'com-passionate' affirmation comes from Ettinger's usage of it as 'an effect within the transsubjective sphere' (cf. Ettinger 2009) – thus stressing another logic of collectivity and togetherness, not based on the division individual/collective, thus also beyond the mere psychological concept of compassion as an individual emotion.

Critical Inquiry. In this text Latour asks ‘What has become of critique?’ (226) in an era that on a geopolitical level becomes often described as ‘after the end of history’ or even ‘after the end of ideologies’. In this article he diagnoses that the ‘progressive’ critical thinking/critique is in fact not so much helping to resist and find alternatives to the worrisome state our world finds itself in today, but actually might be more jointly responsible for it than ‘we’ – progressive critical thinkers – might want to acknowledge.

What has become of critique when my neighbor in the little Bourbonnais village where I live looks down on me as someone hopelessly naïve because I believe that the United States had been attacked by terrorists [in 2001]?...Things have changed a lot, at least in my village. I am now the one who naïvely believes in some facts because I am educated, while the other guys are too *unsophisticated* to be gullible. (228)

While the tone of Latour’s diagnosis certainly exaggerates, his concern for what has become of critique is very relevant. For if, and I cannot not say that this does not also sound familiar to me, if critique and critical thinking are today somewhat inherently connected to the buzzwords of (social) constructivism and deconstruction, and if these are all too often misunderstood and misused so that they mean nothing else but that ‘truth doesn’t exist’, that ‘everything is possible’, and that ‘nothing holds’, then ‘we’ (and here I include myself as happily and self-critically as also Latour includes himself in this ‘we’ in his article), ‘we’ as critical theorists, critics, or critical thinkers need to step back and take time to reflect again what it actually is that we are aiming at with our concepts, theories, and thinking.

In difference to Latour, however, I see such moment of pausing in no way as aiming at overcoming critical thinking, critique, or criticism. Rather, I see this slowing down process as a most productive time in-between, in which a renewal of criticality and critical thinking can – must – emerge. I would therefore like to challenge a Latourian inspired negative judgment on a ‘certain form of critical spirit’ (231), and instead of simply leaving behind ‘the unfortunate solution inherited from the philosophy of Immanuel Kant’ (231/232), in which a dismissal of ‘deconstruction’ seems to inherently belong, I argue that it is precisely today that we have to once more learn (in a quite Derridian sense) to ‘inherit well’ (cf. Haraway 2008), ‘work through’ and ‘think with’ in a strong sense (cf. Stengers 2011)), so that nothing is left behind or gets silenced, but ‘more’ gets produced, something that – to return to Foucault – might help us in the exercise of not being ‘governed like that or at that cost’.

3. The return to Foucault suggests an engagement with his lecture ‘What is Critique?’. That I will not engage myself with this text has first of all to do with Judith Butler’s excellent reading in ‘What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault’s Virtue’ (Butler 2000/2002) that has brought out the significance of Foucault’s genealogy of critique as the art/virtue of ‘voluntary insubordination’ (Foucault 2007: 47) so well that I do not have anything to add here. However, I also do not engage with this text, because when it comes to Foucault’s plea for critical thinking, with Butler I think that ‘What Is Critique?’ is only ‘prepar[ing] the way’. The full force of Foucault’s argument, its connection to the question of ‘today’ that I want to stress here, we find in the article that followed ‘What is Critique?’, ‘What is

Enlightenment?’ (Foucault 1984/1997). Here, Foucault famously takes up the question of ‘What is Enlightenment?’ 200 years after Kant, and in a unique (critical) engagement with the Kantian legacy turns (or better ‘queers’) Kant from being the mere critical philosopher who approaches reality from a mechanistic world view according to which *a priori* laws govern this reality (a critique that Latour throws against Kant) into a ‘first thinker of today’, instigating thus what Foucault considers central to critical thinking in his/our times:

No doubt, it is not the first time that a philosopher has given his reasons for undertaking his work at a particular moment. But it seems to me that it is the first time that a philosopher has connected in this way, closely and from the inside, the significance of his work with respect to knowledge [*connaissance*], a reflection on history and a particular analysis of the specific moment at which he is writing and because of which he is writing. It is in the *reflection on ‘today’ as difference in history and as motive for a particular philosophical task* that the novelty of this text appears to me to lie. (Foucault 1997: 309, my emphasis)

For Foucault, Kant’s critical significance lies precisely in approaching his times in a concerned manner. His claim for enlightenment and modernity is not to be understood in epochal terms but as an ‘attitude’ or ‘ethos’; and, as Foucault shows in his reading, it is an ethos that does not work in a prescriptive way, but follows the continually transformative and demanding maxim of ‘[w]hat difference does today introduce in respect to yesterday?’ (Foucault 1997: 305), producing thus ‘a mode of relating to contemporary reality’ (309).

Foucault’s engagement with the continental philosophical tradition of ‘critique’ and ‘criticality’ represented by and through Kant does not fall into either repeating or rejecting ‘critical philosophy’ – the common argumentative move in philosophical engagements –, but instead dares to *think with* Kant about the questions at stake. Only by continuing Kant’s imperative to ‘to have the courage to use your own understanding’ can the dimension of resistance emerge on which Foucault himself puts so much emphasis. When taking up Kant, Foucault, therefore, does something that instead of ‘subtracting’ from his predecessor’s argument, ‘adds’ to it and ‘multiplies’ it. Not turning his back on ‘critique’, he thereby forces us to see another side to Kant’s critical project, a more defiant and resisting ‘potentiality’ of critique, one that can only be grasped in its verb-form: *aude sapere* – not the enlightenment’s progress fantasy of omnipotence, but the strenuous exercise of theoretico-practical engagements. It is from here that Foucault develops what is needed in respect to critique for his own ‘today’: a thorough reformulation of critique as ‘limit-attitude’ (315), a form of critique that no longer looks for ‘formal structures with universal value’ (ibid.), i.e. transcendental critique, but one that becomes a fully immanent – worldly – endeavor, ‘genealogical in its design and archeological in its method’ (ibid.), and one that dares to claim that the potential ‘to give new impetus, as far and wide as possible, to the undefined work of freedom’ (ibid.) lies precisely in the seemingly ‘weak’ criteria of ‘experimentation’ and ‘partiality’ (cf. 316).

4. The development of criticality/critique as such an ontological force and practiced as ‘limit-attitude’, not resorting to dialectics (negativity) but expressing an affirmative attitude/ethos towards this world, continues to make Foucault’s engagement with the question of Kant’s enlightenment a manifesto for critical

thinking today. I see precisely these issues in need to be further thought through, now in 'our' today, when we aim at a rethinking of critique and/or critical thinking. Continuing Foucault today, I want to point out that critical thinking has to re-learn, or maybe it has to learn for the very first time, that 'being committed to making a difference' – a Harawayan feminist reformulation of both Kant's and Foucault's critical credos for our today (cf. Haraway 1997: 273) – is in no way the same as the supposed critical acts of 'judging', 'abstracting', or 'sublating'. On the contrary, in order to effectively transform the structures of our understanding of-with-in this world, the seemingly natural tendency to 'separate', 'distinguish', and 'distance' ourselves from what we do not like, disagree with, or find unacceptable needs to be transformed into a practice that *attaches* us anew to the matters at stake, such as also Foucault's engagement with the critical heritage of the enlightenment has shown.

Claiming such an affirmative practice as critical engagement, however, makes it necessary to also stress that practicing such 'com-passion' isn't less strenuous than what we are used to see as critical engagement. Critique as com-passionate engagement envisions a practice that acknowledges its structural inconclusiveness and entangledness. Rather than imagining a cathartic reversal, an elevation *out of this* situation, criticality today has to both conceptually come to terms with primary implicatedness (i.e. it has to change its vocabulary into one of an *entangled* critical ontology) and learn to manoeuvre in – *negotiate* – this situation in which 'relation' rather than 'opposition' is the criterion. Donna Haraway calls for such different critical practice, one based on relational ontologies (cf. Haraway 2008), and for the necessity to learn 'to stay with the trouble' when engaging with them (Haraway Utrecht 2011/Durham 2011/London 2012). Instead of simply 'knowing better', or 'starting anew', she argues for a critical process of inheriting 'the past thickly in the present so as to age the future' (ibid.). Even more than simply taking into account the situation of our here and now, such critical credo strives for the undoing of sedimented (power) structures, i.e. the un-learning and not the celebration of a new beginning. This critical practice asks for a necessarily 'daring' experimental mode in which we aim to achieve a continuous process of responding to our situatedness, of being accountable for it and – if we do it well – maneuver and negotiate it into a different future. I don't think that it is so coincidental that such non-innocent, patient, but experimentally driven process fits again surprisingly well to the way Foucault has ended his discussion of the question 'What is Enlightenment?' in 1984: 'I do not know whether it must be said today that the critical task still entails faith in Enlightenment; I continue to think that this task requires work on our limits, that is, a patient labor giving form to our impatience for liberty.'(Foucault 1997: 319)

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Kathrin Thiele teaches in the Graduate Gender Programme
at Utrecht University.