

# Critique in Context – Criticizing Critique

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**Abstract:** *In the following synoptic text I discuss some of the most crucial pitfalls that arise when we talk about critique. Confronted with the proclaimed death of history, metaphysics and the subject, the project of emancipatory critique seems to have been in trouble for quite some time. Deprived of a single metanarrative which could provide a solid foundation for transformatory critique, recent debates on this subject have re-opened an interesting field of discussion. By first discussing two different but strongly interconnected aspects of critique (the more theoretical and the more social dimension), I reflect on the necessity to treat critique as an epistemological problem within the paradigm of “Situated Knowledges.” Against this backdrop I then discuss certain selected aspects of the aforementioned contemporary debates, which nail down a few important dilemmas like the immunization effect, or the local-versus-global problem. In my conclusion I argue for the urgent need of transdisciplinary communication between the Humanities and the Social Sciences when dealing with critique. In my opinion a meta-critical perspective on critique has to be combined with a sociological analysis of the social conditions (of both scientists and agents) which allow, encourage or frustrate transformatory critique.*

## Introduction

Recent German and Austrian publications about the concept of emancipatory critique suggest indirectly or sometimes more openly that it is possible to talk about critique on a “metacritical” level.[1] The sheer fact that these anthologies are called “What is critique?” or “The art of critique” or “Social philosophy and critique” could at first glance indicate that a special, quasi-detached perspective is possible which would allow us to discuss different concepts of critique.[2] On the one hand, it seems productive to collect various approaches and answers to the question of how we might conceptualize the relationship between critique and its object(s). What problems and dilemmas, but also hopes, opportunities, and tasks do we confront when we face this question? On the other hand, a general mode of questioning bears the risk of doing something that many of the aforementioned approaches would strongly criticize: to essentialize critique itself.

Critique is always something that exists only in relation to its particular object, in a particular time and under particular circumstances and can never be detached from it. Or, as the editors of “The art of critique” put it in their preface: “In this sense one of the book’s key interventions consists not in offering total coverage of the field of critique, but rather in keeping it open.”[3]

Nevertheless (and I am well aware of this problem) it seems interesting and important to me to diagnose and elaborate some of the most crucial pitfalls when talking about critique. They are important insofar as emancipatory and transformatory critique needs to learn from its past and its mistakes to find new solutions and strategies. Additionally, it is also my belief as a sociologist that we need to approach critique from an epistemological standpoint because our theoretical notion of critique has much to do with the (social) consequences of our thought. If we follow Habermas, who points out that sociology should not be limited to empirical-analytical research which produces only technically exploitable knowledge, then the challenge is to discover on what grounds a critical perspective could stand.[4]

This synoptic essay therefore tries less to solve problems than to show problems. It is not so much a compendium of hypotheses or results; it is rather an attempt to sketch specific open problems one encounters when talking about critique, or—as Foucault puts it—about the “art of critique.”[5]

## The “art of critique”: two readings

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The term “art of critique” is a good point of entry to the problem, insofar as it contains two different (but strongly connected) moments that are central to the issue. Firstly, “art” can be interpreted in the historic tradition of *ars critica* or *critica sacra*, referring to the discursive or textual and methodological aspects of critique. Secondly, “art” can be interpreted as something we do or perform in a social context, in a social field; to put it briefly: it can be read as a social practice.[6]

This first “textual dimension” of critique as *ars critica* has had its present connotations since the end of the 16th century and refers back to the classical meaning of art as a *techne*. In this sense, it was a technique manifest as the art of Bible criticism—an art of historical text-critique with a philological or hermeneutical methodology that dominated the task of critique.[7] This has to be understood against the historical background of religious wars in the 16th century, which challenged the clerical monopoly to read and interpret the holy texts.[8] Among the questions important for the old critics were, for example: What is the true or intrinsic meaning of the text (here: the Bible) and how can we find methods or criteria of separating the wrong interpretation from the right? But these early scientific, methodological questions were already strongly connected with a specific political agenda; this form of alliance found its peak in the program of the *Aufklärung*. Thus this *art critica* or *critica sacra* were the initial developments of the modern method of critique under consideration.

This first indication that critique could be a textual or discursive method leads me further to the important question of today's methodology and epistemology: On what grounds do we articulate and perform our critique? Do we not find the status of our critique problematic since postmodernity (taken in its strong version) brought us the death of history, metaphysics and of the subject? Do we not have a problem since the linguistic and cultural turn took away the option for a single metanarrative, which would provide us with a foundation from which we could articulate our critique? In fact, we see this problem as early as the 1940s Frankfurt School. Adorno and Horkheimer were quite pessimistic as regards the potential for "Aufklärung" after World War II. They argued that this special kind of (scientific) rationality that accompanied the humanist tradition of Enlightenment perverted itself. If we are to believe Adorno and Horkheimer, what was once, as Kant so optimistically proposed, supposed to guide us out of self-imposed immaturity has failed – namely the modern sciences with their new rationalities.[9]

Moreover, after the collapse of the socialist regimes in 1989, the great left Marxist utopias were also compromised through their involvement in totalitarian oppression.[10] So the 20 th century could also be read as the recognition that homogeneous narratives that guided and grounded our critique were a disappointment, in both political and epistemological terms. What are we then to do with the former emancipatory critique that turned itself into the very monster it was fighting against in the first place?

The second dimension of the term "art of critique" that I want to discuss is the notion of "art" as a practice, as something we do or perform in a social context. For example, the form of scientific critique in which we engage (conferences, talks, oral or written debate, etc.) has certain distinct consequences for the social relationships between those participating in the academic context; the competitive nature of scholarly critique creates a social field in which such combative techniques are encouraged in the name of bettering our knowledge and method (e.g. Popper). But who can play this "game of critique" and perform the "art of critique" and who is excluded? And what does this mean for potential new critical input in the form of research topics within the scientific world? Bourdieu, for example, pointed out that the scientific field – like all the other social fields – is structured by power struggles in order to gain, keep and reproduce cultural capital.[11] Thus since the second half of the 20 th century the approaches of the anti-positivist theory of science, Critical Theory, the Feminist critique of science, the History of Science and especially the Sociology of Scientific Knowledge proved that knowledge is always socially, culturally and historically situated. One consequence of this was that the ideal of a neutral, value-free and aperspectival objectivity was refused. Sandra Harding, a standpoint theorist, asserts that "nature as-the-object-of-human-knowledge never comes to us "naked"; it comes only as already constituted in social thought." [12] Thus there is no visitor from another planet that could objectively observe or – in this case – objectively criticize a society. As Donna Haraway puts it, there is no "god's trick" anymore, meaning that the idea of theory as an abstract, detached place from which to see the world objectively is obsolete.[13] Another consequence was that new social movements, for example feminist or postcolonial ones, began to claim access to the scientific field, because their advocates wanted to bring their (situated and previously excluded) knowledge and critique to the fore.

To conclude my introductory background considerations: there are two strongly interdependent epistemological aspects to consider when talking about critique: first, the more theoretical dimension, where the central question is on what grounds it is still possible to articulate our critique, when we have to say goodbye to the metanarratives that used to legitimize our objections? As Demirovic puts it, this is the dimension of a “metacritical critique”, in other words, the level where we criticize critique.[14]

And second, the more sociological dimension, where the paradigm of situated knowledge brought the epistemological highly relevant insight that knowledge must always be contextualized socially, culturally and historically. This means social locations have distinct consequences for our thought and thus critique. And where critique is understood as social practice, as something that is performed in a social context (no matter if in the scientific field, or in everyday and/or political practices of agents) and therefore can never be detached from a sociological analysis of the social conditions that allow, encourage or frustrate contra-hegemonic statements or actions.

To some extent these different dimensions of critique are also controversially discussed in terms of opposition between “Critical Sociology” and “Sociology of Critique” and pertain to the epistemological standpoint of the sociologist.[15] In short: whereas in the case of Critical Sociology the critical or reflective abilities are mainly in the hands of the sociologist and articulate through his/her analysis (e.g. Bourdieu’s sociology of domination), in the case of Sociology of Critique the focus shifts to the critical practices and reflective abilities of the agents themselves (e.g. Boltanski’s pragmatic sociology).

However, what is always at stake in all these considerations, notwithstanding their specific subjects, is critique itself, as an epistemological concept, because our notion of critique shapes our understanding of the tasks, possibilities and limits of the critical social sciences.

## **Pitfalls of critique**

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With this in mind I shall now discuss certain selected aspects of the contemporary debates referred to above which seem to nail down a few crucial dilemmas.

According to Alex Demirovic, a younger scholar of Critical Theory, the verbalization of critique can happen from different locations.[16] It can happen from the “outside”, which also means the assumption of the possibility of general and universal principles. Or it can happen from the “inside”, which consequently means arguing locally and immanently. In the first case, these universal principles are mostly normative or moral (as he explains with recourse to Michael Walzer), and run the risk of becoming usurpatory and authoritarian. In the second case, the critic’s closeness to the object of critique and the absence of a more global strategy together run also the risk of corrupting any intended critique.[17] Therefore Demirovic’s central claim refers to the flexibility of critique: [...] “critique has to be moveable in itself, it has to be at the same time local and global, it has to be immanent and transcendent.”[18] He also points out with recourse to Laclau and Mouffe’s “radical democracy concept” that when immanent critique – which incidentally is the classical instrument for ideology critique – demands that freedom and equality be

realized in our societies, it is under the condition that these principles could never be completely fulfilled.[19] Every hegemonic success of one group achieved by installing freedom and equality will necessarily produce exclusion, inequality and bondage. So the role of critique is to dismantle all the tendencies to naturalization and reification and to keep alive the game of antagonistic differences.

The claimed flexibility of critique is also important, insofar as it can be seen throughout history that critique tends to be absorbed by the capitalistic bourgeois societies and tends to help reproduce capitalistic formations on a consistently higher or more functional level.

This next crucial aspect of critique was analyzed by Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, in *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. They argue that critique functions as a motor for change within the capitalist system. The capitalist system, which itself has no normative goal or content, needs its enemies in order to establish the capitalist spirit.[20] Critique challenges the capitalist process in this respect as it forces its advocates to legitimize its practices by including or absorbing values and arguments that advert to the common weal. If the critique is strong enough, the system changes insofar as it takes in some of the values called for by its critics. In their analysis, Boltanski and Chiapello point out the role played by the new social movements with their claims for autonomy in the sixties (namely the social critique and the artists critique) in the change of the capitalist system. The change from a fordistic to a postfordistic system of production can be also understood against this backdrop.

I would like to call that dilemma of critique the “immunization effect”, because a formerly “poisonous” critique is neutralized and absorbed through incorporation, or, as Gramsci puts it, “hegemony through neutralization.”[21]

But the immunization effect is not only visible in capitalist organization but also within the scientific field. Philosopher Hakan Gürses points out that if critical theories (and their authors) together with certain normative and moral standards start to build up a canon, a *topos* – and by doing so lose their ambiguity – they are in danger of becoming “recoded as a source of power” themselves. So the task of critique is also to question and to challenge “the orthodox perspectives of the critical tradition”, as Loic Wacquant phrases it.[22]

In his famous essay “What is critique?” that was already cited at the beginning, Foucault posits that critique is something that merely exists in relation to something else: critique is a tool for a future or a truth that it yet does not know or become.[23] The starting point for critique is a moral or political attitude: “the art not to be governed in such a way.”[24] The nexus between knowledge, power and the subject becomes paramount here: not to want to be governed in such a way means refusing to accept the truth proclaimed by an authority. It means to question authorities and their truths about “their power-effects, and to question the power with respect to its discourses of truth.”[25] In other words, it is to question the legitimacy of power created through knowledge and the authorization of knowledge created through power. Here critique is understood as a virtue with *praxis*. Judith Butler interprets Foucault’s notion of critique as such a practiced-based virtue as follows: the formation of the subject (subjectivation) goes hand in hand with subjection: only the internalization of norms of the diverse regimes of truths leads to the emergence

of the subject. If the subject now in its permanent “self-forming” process manages to establish a virtue that is characterized by an actively disobedient and scrutinizing attitude towards the principles that it formed, then this is exactly the practice of critique.[26] Foucault calls this practice “desubjugation.”[27]

## Conclusion

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In this essay, I have tried to demonstrate the difficulty in locating a disciplinary starting point or perspective that could contain various and complex aspects and objects (!) of critique. I have tried to show the difficulties and pitfalls which critique confronts since the end of the big metanarratives. It has become clear that the “art of critique” has to be a transdisciplinary communication, where the Humanities and the Social Sciences have to meet each other. Furthermore, critique must remain flexible and should never verge on becoming itself a *topos*, because the risk of dogmatism or usurpation is grave. Critique must also remain aware of the potential immunization effect that could neutralize the critical impetus or help to reproduce inequality or exploitation on an intensified scale, when dealing with fluid or normatively underdefined systems (like the capitalist one). Moreover, critique has to manage the difficult balancing between its simultaneous local and global impulses (e.g. sometimes one needs to stress universalistic argumentations like in the case of human rights, and sometimes one needs to insist on local standpoints like in the case of exclusive rights for particularly discriminated groups). And, last but not least, it is important that critique is always something we do, we perform; it is a social practice of desubjugation, to use Foucault’s term. In that sense it is absolutely necessary to provide a sociological analysis of the social conditions (applicable to *both* agents *and* social scientists) which allow, encourage or frustrate counterhegemonic statements or actions.

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Notes:

Translations of titles and citations by the author.

<sup>1</sup> Alex Demirovic, “Kritik und Wahrheit. Für einen neuen Modus der Kritik,” *Transversal* 8 (2008), accessed Dec 11, 2010, <http://eipcp.net/transversal/o8o8/demirovic/de>.

<sup>2</sup> Rahel Jaeggi and Tilo Wesche, eds., *Was ist Kritik?* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2009); Birgit Menzel, Stefan Nowotny, and Gerald Raunig, eds., *Die Kunst der Kritik* (Vienna: Turia+Kant, 2010); Rainer Forst, Martin Hartmann, Rahel Jaeggi, and Martin Saar, eds., *Sozialphilosophie und Kritik* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Menzel et al., *Kunst der Kritik*, 10.

4. Jürgen Habermas, "Gegen einen positivistisch halbierten Rationalismus," in *Der Positivismusstreit in der deutschen Soziologie*, ed. Theodor W. Adorno (Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1979), 262ff.
5. Michel Foucault, *Was ist Kritik?* (Berlin: Merve, 1992).
6. Raunig talks about the necessary complementarity of critical discursiveness and social fights, and about the complimentary of textual and social machines in "Was ist Kritik? Aussetzung und Neuzusammensetzung in textuellen und sozialen Maschinen," in Mennel et al., *Kunst der Kritik*, 17.
7. Ibid., 19.
8. Hakan Gürses, "Kein Kommentar. Was ist 'atopische' Kritik?" in Mennel et al., *Kunst der Kritik*, 180.
9. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Die Dialektik der Aufklärung. Philosophisch Fragmente* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 1988).
10. Demirovic, "Kritik und Wahrheit."
11. Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo academicus* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp), 1988.
12. Sandra Harding, *WhoseScience? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women's Lives* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 147.
13. Donna Haraway, "The Persistence of Vision," in *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, ed. Katie Conboy et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 285.
14. Demirovic, "Kritik und Wahrheit," 8.
15. Cf. Robin Celikates, *Kritik als soziale Praxis. Gesellschaftliche Selbstverständigung und kritische Theorie* (Frankfurt/Main: Campus, 2009); Luc Boltanski and Axel Honneth, "Soziologie der Kritik oder Kritische Theorie? Ein Gespräch mit Robin Celikates," in Jaeggi et al., *Was ist Kritik?* 81-114; Ulf Wuggenig, "Paradoxe Kritik," in Mennel et al., *Kunst der Kritik*, 105-124.
16. Demirovic sometimes speaks in the way of critique and sometimes of criticism of society.
17. See Michael Walzer, *Kritik und Gemeinsinn* (Hamburg: Rotbuch, 1990).
18. Demirovic, "Kritik und Wahrheit," 3.
19. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemonie und radikale Demokratie* (Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 1991).
20. Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *Der neue Geist des Kapitalismus* (Konstanz: UVK, 2006), 68.
21. Cf. Isabell Lorrey, "Identitäre Immunität und strategische Immunisierung. Lépra und Lepra von der Bibel bis ins Mittelalter," *Transversal* 11 (2007), accessed Dec 11, 2010, <http://eipcp.net/transversal/1107/lorej/de>; Gramsci cited in Chantal Mouffe, "Kritik als gegenhegemoniale Intervention," in Mennel et al., *Kunst der Kritik*, 40.
22. Loic Wacquant, "Kritisches Denken: die Doxa auflösen. Interview mit Loic Wacquant" [2001], *Transversal* 8 (2006), accessed Dec 11, 2010, <http://transform.eipcp.net/transversal/0806/wacquant/de>.
23. Foucault, *Was ist Kritik?* 9.
24. Ibid., 12.
25. Ibid., 15.

26. Judith Butler, “What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault’s Virtue” [2001], *Transversal* 8 (2006), accessed Dec 11, 2010, <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0806/butler/en>.

27. Foucault, *Was ist Kritik*, 15.

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