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Special Issue Introduction: Critique, Postcritique and the Present Conjuncture

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Abstract

How might we map the different horizons, questions, topics and concerns that come into view when we bring together the signifiers “critique”, “postcritique” and the “present conjuncture”? The canvas suggested by the question might seem impossibly broad and disorderly, but the different contributions to this special issue of *Media Theory* share a common desire to confront the question of what critique means today. This editorial introduction identifies different political and cultural developments which justify discussion of this topic now. None seem more salient than the rise of a culture of reactionary media politics that normalises its own image of critical thinking, sometimes in forms that stage a wholesale authoritarian attack against different critical theoretical traditions. Our introduction reflects on the political and cultural resonances of “postcritique” as a provocative keyword for work in literary studies and other fields that questions critique’s reliance on a “hermeneutics of suspicion”. The postcritique literature has been read by some as symbolising a simple renunciation of critique: an antagonist that the defenders of critique need to polemically combat. We approach it instead as an insightful theoretical perspective for illuminating how critique can potentially take repetitive, predictable and regressive forms, both in scholarly work and in cultural contexts that go well beyond the world of the academy. Inspired by this journal’s expansive conception of media theory, we also explore how the postcritique literature’s attention to the affective disposition(s) of critique speaks to the notion of critique as a medium of communication. Far from wanting to disavow a commitment to critique, we affirm the importance of asserting a democratic vision of critique in a conjunctural context where the political valences of

critique are more ideologically confusing. We conclude with a brief preview of the different contributions to the special issue.

Keywords

critique, postcritique, conjuncture, media, media theory, reactionary politics

Most of the papers published in this special issue¹ offer revised versions of arguments that were originally presented at a pre-conference of the annual conference of the International Communication Association (ICA) at Université Paris Nanterre on May 25, 2022.² The pre-conference was organised as a hybrid event. It allowed speakers to present papers, and audiences to participate, either in-person in Paris or online via Zoom. Holding the pre-conference under an ICA banner was enabled by the formal support of the ICA divisions “Philosophy, Theory and Critique” and “Race and Ethnicity in Communication”, and the pre-conference was also supported by the University of Antwerp’s Department of Communication Studies, and the Université de Versailles Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines’ Centre d’histoire culturelle des sociétés contemporaines. Staging the physical pre-conference in Nanterre would not have been possible without the additional support and enthusiasm of our on-the-ground hosts: the Culture/cultures/CREA 370 research group, led by François Cusset, Véronique Rauline and Thierry Labica.

The *raison d’être* of the original pre-conference appealed to an interdisciplinary academic audience beyond communication studies: thinking about what critique means today is hardly a disciplinary-specific question. Or to put the point more affirmatively from a communication studies perspective, the pre-conference appealed to an image of critical communication (and media) studies as an exemplary post-disciplinary or anti-disciplinary horizon: a field shaped by a porous relationship with other fields and disciplines that would, we hope, invite generative responses to our title of “critique, postcritique and the present conjuncture”.

A commitment to critique – in its diverse theoretical forms and idioms – has long been the defining ethos of scholarship attuned to the power dynamics of academic research and knowledge production more generally. Critique encourages us to interpret the

given world suspiciously, often for very good reasons. However, it can also be a “thought style” (Felski, 2015: 2) with its own intellectual and political limitations. This special issue introduction reflects on the place of critique in a political moment that poses some distinct challenges to how critique is imagined and practised in communication and media studies and elsewhere. It does so from a perspective that is affirmative of critique, yet mindful that “to be faithful to its core principle, critique must involve its self-critique” (Fassin and Harcourt, 2019: 3).

Three rather different, if clearly interrelated, conjunctural developments justify discussion of the question of critique now. First, authors in different fields, and most prominently literary studies, have questioned the condition of critique by invoking the notion of “postcritique” (Anker and Felski, 2017). This label has been read by some as signifying a straightforward renunciation of critique. However, this characterisation negates the intellectual richness of the postcritique literature, and we agree with Rita Felski’s (2015) observation that it is “becoming ever more risible to conclude that any questioning of critique can only be a reactionary gesture or a conservative conspiracy” (8). Similar arguments have been made in work that appeals to motifs like “critique of critique” or “critique of the critical”, to signify how critique can take forms that are formulaic and marketised (Billig, 2013), disenchanted from the political question of emancipation (Rancière, 2011), or over-reliant on a rhetoric of moral denunciation (Phelan, 2022). Work done under the heading of “critical university studies” (Smyth, 2017) emphasises, in turn, the need for meaningful critique in the institutional universe that shapes scholarly identities and practices as an antidote to a critical gaze that directs its attention exclusively outwards.

Second, critique is increasingly being represented in pejorative ways by an ideologically heterogenous cast of political, cultural and media actors, often self-styled academic dissidents. These figures sometimes assume the mantle of the “real” critical thinkers unmasking the politicised scholarship of left-wing academics, as if to dramatise Bruno Latour’s (2004) fears about how the “weapons of social critique” can be reappropriated (see also Tebaldi, 2021). These developments have gained wider public visibility in far-right attacks against “critical race theory” or “gender studies” in the US and elsewhere (Dawes, 2023; Goldberg, 2021; see Diana Mulinari’s contribution to the special issue). They are also expressed in a generalised condemnation of “critical” and “postmodern”

scholarship across the humanities and social sciences. These anti-critique discourses are produced in malleable forms (Jay, 2020) that circulate easily across media cultures and national boundaries. They become part of the ready-to-hand weaponry of “culture war” politics (Phelan, 2023). The critical academy is targeted for its role in the creation of an authoritarian “woke” culture that, we are told, threatens sacred Enlightenment values. The drift of these anti-critical theory discourses is reactionary and right-wing, but they can find odd affinities in ultra-left condemnations of the commodified logics of “the global theory industry”. Some even depict the original critical theorists of the Frankfurt school, Adorno and Horkheimer, as compliant stooges of American cold war anti-communism, who domesticated a brand of “Marxism” that “refashioned critical theory as radical liberal – or even just blatantly liberal – ideology” (Rockhill, 2022).

Third, although we just described how the university is now routinely depicted on the political right as one of a number of elite social institutions (including “the media”) that has been captured by “wokeness” and the forces of “cancel culture” (Davies and MacRae, 2023; Clark, 2020; Labica, 2021; Ng, 2022; Phelan, 2023; Titley, 2020), it is not hard to cite parallel examples of how the culture of scholarly critique is being “cancelled” in a rather different way by forces within and outside “the neoliberal university”. We should be cautious in generalising arguments about the impact of neoliberalism on universities, since university governance structures can differ significantly across countries. But the acceleration of embedded neoliberalising tendencies was exemplified by events at the University of Leicester in 2021, when several critical management studies and political economy academics (Halford, 2021) were made redundant for doing research that was deemed to be at odds with the future strategic vision of the university’s business school. It was also illustrated in a June 2021 motion passed by Danish parliamentarians on the boundaries between science and politics, which was described – in a letter co-signed by over 3,000 academics – as an attack on “critical research and teaching” in areas like “race, gender, migration and post-colonial studies” (Myklebust, 2021). And it takes a distinctly French form in the image of academic departments that have been taken over by the forces of “islamo-gauchisme”, or in the assumption that even talking about race indicates activist commitments at odds with a normative conception of proper science (Dawes, 2023, 2020; Mohammed, 2021). Universities can, and do, respond differently to external

political attacks, sometimes in ways that affirm a principled commitment to scholarly critique and academic freedom. This was illustrated by cross-university support for a September 2021 conference *Dismantling Global Hindutva*, despite the “harassment and intimidation” of speakers and organisers “by various Hindu right-wing groups and individuals staunchly opposing the conference” (Naik, 2021). Nonetheless, the transnational dynamics of such attacks point to a normalisation (Krzyczanowski, 2020) and mainstreaming (Mondon and Winter, 2020) of far-right discourses globally. Like everything else, these dynamics can play out differently in different countries. But it is not difficult to imagine a dystopian future for the university in some contexts where attacks against critical academics become more common, or where the managerial class of universities capitulate to the agenda of reactionary publics. We only have to look at recent developments in Florida under Governor Ron DeSantis to show how the pursuit of an extreme anti-woke politics has the potential to radically redefine the conditions in which the public university, and public education, functions.

Critique can clearly mean different things to different people. It is entangled in the problem of disciplinarity, whereby the critical disposition becomes a disciplinarian (or sub-disciplinarian) disposition and accepted way of doing things, with one theoretical or methodological approach deemed to be more legitimate than another in a particular scholarly milieu or context. Encouraging more self-reflexive appreciation of the limits of any disciplinary perspective underlines the importance of an openness to interdisciplinarity, in the pluralistic spirit of the contributions to this special issue. It also compels us to be alert to our position of writing from within the academy to critique an oppressive reality outside of it, at a time when neoliberalising forces and the accelerated precarisation of academic employment, as well as journalistic and political attacks against critical research and researchers, illustrate some of the specific institutional limits of academic critique. While it is understandable, inevitable and necessary that we defend ourselves against reactionary forces that would banish us, we should take the opportunity (which comes with publishing this special issue in a non-corporate, open-access journal) to consider our habitual implication as academics in the capitalist processes we seek to critique, publishing articles in commercially published journals that are hidden from the public behind paywalls and which provide free labour to multinational corporations that make easy profits from our pursuit of critiques, and performatively pursuing our own entrepreneurial projects and

foregrounding the unique selling points of our own authorial identities (Bacevic, 2019; Billig, 2013, Hall, 2019). At the same time, an inherent obstacle to pursuing a more self-reflexive and autoethnographic posture, often without the benefit of a constitutionally-recognised and -protected independence and autonomy, is the very real threat (however exceptional it might seem) of legal repercussions and disciplinary proceedings from our employers if our critique is deemed to bring our institution into disrepute, thus muzzling us from articulating more explicit, concrete and effective forms of self-reflexive critique. The task, therefore, is to continue to critique, and to defend the idea of critique, while simultaneously acknowledging the limits of how we currently do critique and considering how we might do critique differently.

At a time when attacks on the integrity of academic freedom are increasingly widespread (Babraj, 2021; Yildirim, 2016), where the term “academic freedom” is used to guarantee platforms for hate speech and give impunity to academics and non-academics alike on university campuses, and when the free speech of Marxists and poststructuralists are susceptible to the ire of reactionary forces and lumped together under dubious banners such as “cultural Marxism” or “Islamо-gauchisme” (Davies and MacRae, 2023; Dawes, 2023), now is it not the time for academics to (once again) exaggerate our differences in the form of a dubious stand-off between critical and postcritical researchers. The contributions to this special issue hardly speak with a univocal voice. But, whatever the argument, we might (to put it romantically) say “we’re all in this together” in wanting to collectively defend an idea of the university that makes possible a culture of autonomous scholarship that does not deny the political valences of our work and objects of study. As well as supporting colleagues under attack in the present conjuncture, we should also defend ourselves from future attacks, anticipate criticisms and take the opportunity to rethink critique, to reinvigorate critique and affirm its emancipatory intentions. “The point, in the end, is not to redescribe or reinterpret critique but to change it” (Felski, 2015: 192–3). And to add our own postscript: to change it in ways that enrich our conversations about what we consider critique to be.

The contributors to this special issue speak from diverse perspectives. Some engage with theoretical debates about postcritique and critique. Others focus on the rise of reactionary politics and the theme of critique and critical scholarship under attack. We

preview the different contributions in the final section of this introduction. But let us first take something of a theoretical detour by reflecting on the limits of critique from a conceptual perspective that – appropriately for this journal – stresses the mediated character of critique and criticism.

The medium (and media) of critique

To describe critique as a *medium* offers a suggestive metaphor for at least two reasons. First, it chimes with the journal's editorial remit "to stretch the definition of 'media'", so that "media studies" and "media theory" suggest a horizon of theoretical inquiry that is no longer delimited to a common-sense understanding of those terms. These expansive ambitions were articulated in different contributions to the journal's inaugural "manifesto" issue (Dawes, 2017) that recalled Marshall McLuhan's (1994) idea of a medium as that which "shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action" (9). Sean Cubitt (2017) suggests we should think of media theory as a transdisciplinary universe that is concerned with:

Anything that mediates. Weapons. Sex. Cash. Mosquitoes. Chlorophyll. Seismographs. Neurons. Mediation is not exclusively human, but it is what humans do when they are being human. The ecological principle concerns the connectivity of everything with everything else (188).

Second, describing critique as a medium invites us to think of a mode of philosophical and sociological reflection that would focus on the rhetorical, affective, stylistic and performative dynamics that mediate the relationship between the "thing" being critiqued and the person or persons making the critique. Put another way, it might help us name things that could escape our "attention" when we limit our focus to the substantive "content" of critique (McLuhan, 1994: 9). From one perspective, the meaning-making dynamics of critique seem impossibly complex, given the heterogenous factors that could mediate the subject-object dualisms of critique and critical discourse. From another, we might describe them as entirely straightforward, even primal. Behind self-serving impressions of intellectual or theoretical complexity, it is sometimes not hard to discern images of performative superiority animating the practice of critique where the person or object being critiqued is represented

disdainfully or made the purposeful target of a “takedown”. These dynamics take a lurid form on platforms like Twitter but, in a more careful passive-aggressive guise, they are hardly an unfamiliar aspect of academic rituals and practices either.

The alertness to the affective dynamics of critique in the postcritique literature offers one useful reference point for sketching an argument about critique as medium and media. However, we can also point to important antecedents within a conventional communication and media studies universe, such as Paddy Scannell’s reflections on the status of ideology critique within media studies (Phelan, 2016). Writing in 1998, Scannell questioned media scholars’ tendency to treat the media re-presentation of reality as a form of systemic *misrepresentation*. Like Felski’s critique of literary studies, he invokes Paul Ricœur’s notion of a “hermeneutics of suspicion” to suggest that the cultivation of an inherently distrustful view of media can obscure our ability to understand other aspects of mediated communication (Scannell, 1998). He describes ideology critique as “an instance of Depth Theory, a way of thinking that regards the appearance of things as potentially unreliable and deceptive. To get beneath the superficial ‘naturalism’ of phenomena is the task of Theory” (255). Scannell develops his argument with reference to Heidegger, contrasting ideology critique’s ontology of “being-in-doubt” and “being-in-the-head” with a Heideggerian ontology of “being-in-the-world” (261). He ultimately tries to navigate a phenomenological way of thinking about media that privileges neither ontology. We should be able to critique the limitations of a “hermeneutics of suspicion” without confining our interpretative horizon to an unthinking “hermeneutics of trust” (254). To simply invert the dichotomy “would be to replace one absurdity (the denial of world) by another (the denial of self-reflecting reason)” (267). Reasoned suspicion of the truth and truth effects of media and language has its place and justifications. But a generalised hermeneutics of suspicion can calcify into a form of non-thought where prefabricated theoretical propositions and answers start to explain everything.

Citing an argument made in 1998 about the hegemonic status of ideology critique in media studies might seem odd in 2023, since it could be suggested that not much has changed since John Downey, Gavan Titley and Jason Toynbee found cause to argue the opposite in 2014: that a “major lack in the field of media studies” is that “there’s no ideology critique” (Downey et al., 2014: 879). From a different angle, media and

communication researchers who do ideology analysis might legitimately object to how Scannell appeals to a reductive view of ideology as “false consciousness” that they do not subscribe to. However, his argument is worth revisiting here because it articulates an unease about a culture of suspicious critique that anticipates many of the concerns of the postcritique literature. Moreover, he made the argument in a disciplinary universe where it could be suggested the scholarly justification for privileging a hermeneutics of suspicion holds even more authority than it does in literary studies, given the spectacle-driven cultures of the thing called “the media” and its everydayness as a target of critique (see Nick Holm’s contribution to this special issue).

In a 2006 interview with Tarik Sabry (2006), Scannell elaborated on what he saw as the inadequacy of ideology critique as a theoretical perspective and vocabulary for understanding the dynamics of media and communication, a disciplinary legacy that he primarily attributed to the influence of Stuart Hall. He explained how his historical research into the “care structures” of British broadcasting illuminated a world that couldn’t simply be “dismiss[ed… as ideology]”, though he also acknowledged that he “found it extremely difficult throughout the 70s and 80s to say with any degree of clarity why I objected to ideology critique” (12-13). Sabry’s follow-up question begins with the friendly prefatory remark that nowhere in his work does Scannell “deny the fact that the media have ideological functions”, though he still feels sufficiently uncertain to clarify the point directly by asking: “you don’t deny that the media do have an ideological function, do you?” (13). Scannell’s answer is categorical, but interesting because of how it frames ideology critique as obscuring our ability to grasp and perceive the communicative specificity of the media:

No, I don’t, of course I don’t. David [Cardiff] and I have written about the ideological functions of the BBC. It’s perfectly obvious that it produces an ideology of the nation, say, of the meaning of Britishness of the British way of life, etc. … But you can’t claim that nationalism is something unique to broadcasting, anymore than you can claim racism or sexism as particular to the media. Of course if you look for any of these in the media you will find it. But you could look anywhere in a country like Britain or in the USA and find these things – in the family, in education, religion, politics. *Ideology critique doesn’t actually tell you anything*

particular about the media. In fact it deflects attention from what is specific to the media, which I take to be to do with communication [italics added]. It is not a good place to start in terms of thinking about the communicative character and the communicative power of the media and these are the things I find absorbingly interesting (13).

Scannell's juxtaposition of a generative image of communication in opposition to a sterile image of critique reinforces the impression that *being suspicious* can become its own form of "aspect-blindness" (Wittgenstein, 1973). However, its significance to the line of thought that we want to explore here can be clarified by considering its resonances with John Guillory's (Guillory, 2010) discussion of the communicative character of media and mediation. Guillory describes "the concept of a medium of communication" as the "history of an absent concept" (326). He locates this conceptual absence in opposition to the philosophical primacy of a "dominant paradigm of representation" (360) that conceptualises representations as mimetic reflections of reality. Guillory links his critique of representation to a critique of the dominant paradigm of ideological analysis, suggesting while it "is always possible to collapse the mediations performed by the media back into representations" for the purposes of ideology critique, he thinks this has become exhausted and "the perennial strategy of cultural criticism" (356). Not unlike Scannell, he suggests that "grasping the nature" and specificity of mediation necessitates an

affirming [of] the communicative function in social relations, that is, the possibility of communication....The proper theoretical context for conceptualizing mediation is therefore the process of communication (357).

What might we make of these brief suggestive remarks as part of a discussion of the proposition that critique is a kind of medium? It seems that what is common to Scannell and Guillory is their shared affirmation of the possibilities of communication, media and mediation in opposition to a notion of critique that can become rote and predictable. Both could be read as simply renouncing a commitment to critique (along with articulating a reductive view of the concept of representation). Yet we think both are better approached as bringing attention to a "condition of being in the middle" (Peters, 2022: 1) that can escape our conscious attention when thinking about the

subject-object dualisms of critique and criticism. John Durham Peters describes this condition as the very definition of a medium, a condition that can be hard to pin down and identify because “being a medium is not a permanent state” (1). It might be best named as an affective condition, since “affect involves fluctuating intensities of encounter that” are constitutive of communication, yet “neither amenable to articulation nor necessarily conscious” (Ashcraft, 2021: 4).

Karen Ashcraft’s discussion of the “affective ontology” (15) of communication is helpful because it allows us to highlight how the notion of critique as medium, and the notion of mediation as a process of communication, resonates with the postcritique literature’s emphasis on the affective dynamics of critique and knowledge production. In *The Limits of Critique*, Felski (Felski, 2015: 3) suggests that “critique is as much a matter of affect and rhetoric as of philosophy or politics”. To foreground “the affective tone of scholarship” is not to “spurn” the intellectual substance of critique, but rather to acknowledge how “modes of thought are also orientations toward the world that are infused with a certain attitude or disposition” (4). The place of affect is given similar emphasis in Anker and Felski’s (2017) introduction to the edited collection, *Critique and Posteritique*. It acknowledges how the theoretical “turn to affect” (10) in different fields and disciplines has been an important touchstone for reassessments of critique, not least through the influence of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s pioneering work on the affective valences of paranoid and suspicious modes of reading (see Irina Kalinka’s contribution to this special issue). Toril Moi’s (2017) contribution to the same volume is also relevant, because of how it deflates the affective appeal of depth-theory metaphors, as well as critique’s preoccupation with exposing “the hidden”, in a fashion that would appeal to Scannell. Against the notion that language is “always hiding something”, and that “words, sentences, utterances themselves always wear masks”, she locates the manipulative dimension of language use in social practices “we do” rather than in deep, mystifying processes that are beyond our everyday reach and knowledge (34).

Christopher Castiglia’s (2017) contribution to the same edited book is especially suggestive here, because of how it helps give clearer conceptual shape to the notion of critique as medium. Castiglia (2017) recognises how even talking about something called “postcritique” invites caricatured and dismissive responses, but he suggests

“very little is gained...by understanding ‘post’ in an oppositional sense” (211). Instead, we should read the prefix as signifying that “*something* is wrong” with critique that has made it “seem sour”, in the sense of both “unpleasantly dour and past its prime”. Castiglia suggests that the “‘something’ that is wrong” is not the critic’s desire to focus on social injustice or structural inequalities, but rather the “disposition” of critique and “the *attitude* with which critique is approached” (212). He thinks the tendency to equate critique with a one-dimensional oppositional mode of ideological analysis has inhibited a more affirmative vision of critique, which, in the words of Roberto Unger (Unger, 2004), would cultivate forms of theoretical praxis that “connect criticism... with a reconstructive purpose” (235). Revitalising critique through “an adjustment of critical dispositions” (212) is no trivial matter, Castiglia suggests, but rather focuses our attention on examining “deeply habituated” ways of scholarly being, talking and perceiving that are “the hallmark of any naturalized ideological system” (213). Nick Holm (2020) is similarly alert to the dispositional orientation of critique, particularly when theoretical dispositions and discourses cultivated and prized in the academy become the basis of a popular form of “critical capital” on social media platforms and elsewhere. Think, for example (as Éric Fassin notes in his contribution to the special issue) about how concepts that were until recently largely confined to the academy (“whiteness”, “critical race theory”, “intersectionality”, “identity politics”, “neoliberalism”) have become familiar objects of public critique and commentary, both for those who affirm their conceptual usefulness and for those who represent them as hate objects (Phelan, 2023).

To conceptualise critique as a medium, therefore, partly means talking about the dispositional tendencies of critique and criticism, and being attuned to affective and rhetorical dispositions that transcend a narrowly cognitivist, intellectualist, scholastic and theoreticist conception of critique. Consider, for example, the specific case of neoliberalism, which has been a key object of antagonism (Phelan, 2022) for critical scholars in the humanities and social sciences over the past 30 years. Whatever the field or discipline, we now have an abundance of diverse theoretical vocabularies and frameworks for critiquing neoliberalism. We might critique it from, *inter alia*, a Marxist perspective, a Foucauldian perspective, a Deleuzian perspective, a Lacanian perspective, a feminist perspective, or an ecological perspective; the possibilities are many. As either a subject or object of knowledge (Bacevic, 2019), the subsumptive

“thing” called “neoliberalism” (Gilbert, 2013) may look rather different when conceptualised through different theoretical and (inter)disciplinary imaginaries. But for someone coming to the vast interdisciplinary literature for the first time, the theoretical differences may seem less salient than a common representation of neoliberalism as a thing to be opposed and denounced. In other words, the communication of affective and moralised opposition to neoliberalism, and the rhetorical privileging of it as a keyword, might seem just as important as the precise choice of theoretical vocabulary or framework. We are describing a critical doxa that is equally observable in our own work, because if we were giving a talk about neoliberalism we would like our audience to clearly know that we oppose it, too. However, the cumulative effect can be critical scholarly rituals that are often underwhelming in illuminating the possibility of forms of political, economic, cultural and social life that might be named as something other than neoliberal. As John Clarke (2010) suggested a decade ago, “much critical work on neoliberalism” can become “overly fascinated by tracing the dominant and as a result confirms its dominance” (340).

Our argument about the mediality of critique can only be signposted. But let us punctuate it for now by speaking of the pluralised *media of critique*, especially if we want to grasp the ideologically confusing (Corcuff, 2021) nature of critique in a conjuncture where even factions of the “alt-right” and nationalist conservatism like to denounce neoliberalism. Debates and polemics about the condition of critique always risk seeming incoherent because of the multiple ways the signifier might be articulated and imagined; people can be talking about radically different things under the same nominal heading. These arguments find one dead end in moralised antagonisms between the true proponents and defenders of critique and those who are accused of bastardising or betraying a critical tradition. They can take another equally dismal form when any talk of critique is met with knowing dismissals: think of how the very use of a term like “neoliberalism” can be immediately disparaged by some reactionaries and liberal centrists, who see and hear nothing but a paranoid, left-wing conspiracy theory (Phelan, 2022).

We might respond to these interminable dramas by insisting there is no such thing as “critique” in the sense of a singular discourse, imaginary or disposition. In other words, we could pluralise the concept of critique: treat it as a medium that is open to radically

different political articulations or, to be more precise, speak of different media of critique that are given common affective charge in the impression of opposition or antagonism. We might think of these media as essential ingredients of a vibrant democratic life and existence. We cannot have meaningful forms of political conflict and disagreement without potentially communicating the impression of some hint of antagonism, even when we adhere to the most careful codes of democratic deliberation or constructive criticism. Indeed, we could make a similar point about the very notion of postcritique itself. In the fashion and fads of “Theory” discourse (Hayot, 2017), the appeal to postcritique can seem like it is staging its own “critique of critique”, even when that explicit formulation is disavowed (Felski, 2015: 118). There is a violent dimension to the act of critique that is perhaps inescapable because of how it stages a confrontation between one identity or argument and another.

The antagonistic valences of critique point, therefore, to the antagonistic dynamics of the social (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001; Marchart, 2018), an ontological condition that invites all of us (scholars, activists, citizens, social media posters or whoever) to reflect on the ethico-political dispositions we bring to negotiating the question of political-intellectual difference (Connolly, 1997) and the communicative failures that inevitably mediate the relationships between different human beings. To affirm critique means affirming the democratic necessity of such conflicts. Yet to suggest that “something is wrong” with critique is to simultaneously recognise how the media of critique can become ideological weapons in the staging of a “politics of enmity” (Mbembe, 2019) and a politics of ressentiment – or simply a politics of numb, lifeless communication. The affective and hermeneutic dispositions of critique are abundant and manifold. The practice of critique can be mediated by paranoia, suspicion, violence or hatred, but it can also be mediated by love, care, and the most redemptive image of communication and human understanding (Peters, 1999). How we might articulate a critical disposition is partly a matter of choices which can also *choose us* because of the naturalisation of particular ways of doing critique in different social and media universes that, in a digital age, can have us all functioning like automated cogs in a transversal attention economy (Citton, 2021). The possibility of affirming the best democratic image of critique is ultimately a slow collective labour which faces many political, economic, social and cultural challenges in a conjunctural context where reactionary forms of critique have been normalised.

Let us end our discussion of the mediality of critique by citing one of the first media theorists. As Plato suggested in the Phaedrus – that infamous critique of writing through the very medium of writing – the pharmacological benefits of writing may help us remember things we might have otherwise forgotten had we not recorded them, but it may also detract from “our capacity to remember” (Wark and Soncul, 2022: 5). Perhaps we can say something similar about critique: that the production of critique may well hinder our capacity to critique, depending on how such critique is conducted. For Plato, “true knowledge” was not something acquired from outside, but something recovered through dialogue that elicits remembrance of knowledge that is already within us. Therefore, if we can momentarily contradict ourselves by talking of such a thing, maybe “true critique” is likewise best grasped as a dialectical process: one sensitive to the possibility that our inherited critical dispositions may numb our critical sensibilities if not permanently reimagined or turned upon themselves and performed (without scholastic excess!) as a critique *of* critique *through* critique.

Contributions to the special issue

In “This is Not a Critique: Reactionary Digital Politics in the Age of Ideological Entrepreneurship”, Alan Finlayson discusses the rise of what he calls “ideological entrepreneurs”: figures who disseminate reactionary political ideologies as a kind of business enterprise. He argues that it is a strategic mistake to mount a normative “critique” of the gap between their claims and some notional consensus on standards of propriety, evidence and authority, not only because this is symptomatic of the liberal tendency to reduce politics to the exchange of opinions, but also because waging polemical warfare on socially liberal ideals of communicative deliberation is what this reactionary digital politics is all about. Finlayson insists that rather than simply diagnosing the irrationality of the performative critiques of reactionaries, we should recognise instead that “online far-right, right-wing and reactionary populist politics did not come from nowhere but have developed out of, and in the wake of, tactics of rhetorical and ideological communication with a much longer history”. Only once we recognise what we’re dealing with, and what is at stake, can we develop a truly critical strategy to counter the anti-egalitarian idioms of reactionary politics.

In “Critical Inversion: From Social to Techno – and Left to Right?”, François Cusset sees the contemporary landscape as characterised by both an inflation of critical discourse and an amplified powerlessness of critique itself, and that it is within this context that ultraconservatives and neofascists have confiscated critical symbols and gestures and disconnected them from progressive politics. In a wide-ranging analysis of the current moment, Cusset argues that we’ve arrived at this conjuncture because of: the demise of the social-democratic left and their betrayal of the working classes and the progressive causes they had been elected to pursue; the right’s strategic move into the vacuum this has created so that they can claim to represent anti-conformism; and technological developments whereby the “age-old critical grammar” is put to the service of “both market forces and reactionary politics, through individualistic posturing and social demobilization”, manufacturing culture war polemics that set vaguely left-and right-wing groups against one another.

In “Critique is Dead – Long Live Critique!”, Natalie Fenton responds to both Finlayson and Cusset by warning against the techno-centric temptation to overstate the importance of social media without also continuing to take account of the prevailing influence of legacy media, as well as against a privileging of front-stage party politics over an account of back-stage power and the growing influence of elites. In both cases, she argues for the need to remember the longer history of media and political debates on such issues, such as the right’s manufacturing of moral panics about “political correctness gone mad” in the 1980s and 1990s, and to interrogate contemporary versions of such phenomena as variants of such a process rather than as unique artefacts of the media-political conjuncture in which we find ourselves. Ultimately, she argues for the need to focus on the exposure of inequality and to emphasise the emancipatory potential of critique.

Robert Porter and Iain MacKenzie’s essay, “Who? How and How Much? When and Where? On Why We Need to Be Pragmatic about Critique”, argues that in a world of “gamified” communication (Nguyen, 2021), generic criticism has “run out of steam” and the task now should be to restyle the tone of critique and to dramatise it in terms of context-specific moral calculations and practice, asking “how and how much?” and “when and where?” instead of (universalising) “what?” questions. They explore the merits of what they playfully describe as a “part-time utilitarianism”, offering a rich,

contemplative illustration of the calculative dimensions of everyday life by juxtaposing the tragic-comic Twitter misadventures of “Dr left-Nietzsche” with the arcane register of analytical philosophy. They insist on “the rough and tumble of the everyday life in which we do this thing called ‘critique’” in pragmatic terms that reject the philosophical attempt to give critique some kind of “absolute” or “universal” grounding.

Jonjo Brady’s essay “What if the Problem is That There is Too Much Critique?” contemplates the purpose of critique in the contemporary conjuncture and theoretical landscape, considering the possibility that in an era of increased and intense circulation of critical arguments and opinions, all one can do is make more noise and add yet another addition to the “anarchic debris of [already] circulated knowledge” (Badiou, 2001: 50). Writing in a reflexive idiom that enjoys flipping the terms of his own argument, Brady discerns the possibility of some kind of hope in the notion of a silent critique, one that refuses to partake in a poisoned communicability and that “leaves space for the breathing in of elsewhere(s) and otherwise(s)”.

In “Everyone’s a Critic (So What Comes Next?)”, Nick Holm demonstrates the pervasiveness of critique today, suggesting that this is particularly so when it comes to media, a topic with which everyone is familiar and on which everyone has an opinion. He argues, however, that critique should ideally tell us something we don’t already know and, furthermore, that it should be self-reflexive and aware of its own limits: “a form of investigation characterised by an awareness of the limitations of knowledge”, emphasising doubt rather than suspicion. Turning to Kant via Foucault, Adorno and Felski, he rejects any dichotomisation of critique and postcritique arguments, reframing the latter as a part of the struggle to critically understand our mediated world.

In “Reading in Dark Times: Toward a Queer Politics of Repair”, Irina Kalinka’s essay takes as its starting-point the significance of Sedgwick’s text on paranoid reading for the postcritical literature, especially in literary and queer theory, before contending that this political project has a longer history in Sedgwick’s oeuvre than normally presumed, tracing it back to her 1991 article “Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl”. Kalinka argues for the reinterpretation of Sedgwick’s project of reparative reading as one that is consciously political, as well as for a re-emphasis on her commitment to “making oppositional strategy”. Paranoid reading can thus be conducted as an exercise in

“radical reassembly”, whereby texts can provide opportunities for the discovery of radical moments of reimaging both past and future.

Phoebe Braithwaite’s essay, “Contradictory Subjects: Stuart Hall and the Politics of Mutual Vulnerability”, considers contemporary debates on affect and postcritique in terms of early work in British Cultural Studies, in particular Raymond Williams’ notion of “structure of feeling” and Stuart Hall’s seeming dismissal of it as a “lost concept”. She focuses on the concept’s blend of “systematisation and the refusal thereof”, its merging of both “structure” (systemisation) and “feeling” (its denial), and connects these to affect theorists’ interest in the hard and soft infrastructures of sociality and the blurring of the boundary between public and private. She then applies this to a consideration of mutual vulnerability as affect in the context of a reconceptualisation of safe spaces and the limits of dialogue and debate, drawing on Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy and Rosemary Bechler as sources for affirming the possibility of forms of redemptive critique that militate against a contemporary cultural mood that hardens political differences.

In “A Postcritical Imaginary for the Study of the COVID-19 Pandemic”, Kelly Diaz, Adetobi Moses, Jing Wang and Guobin Yang present illustrative vignettes of three case studies of mobile-phone photography, audio diaries and podcasts produced during the pandemic that demonstrate the importance of a postcritical sensibility which focuses on questions of vulnerability, affect and care as critical sensibilities. Focusing on people’s everyday struggles and emotional experiences rather than their opinions about COVID-19, as well as on telling their stories with an affective stance rather than analysing them through a normative frame that communicates analytical mastery, the authors reject an epistemology of suspicion in favour of an ethos of openness, and the call for emotional attachment to be seen as an ethos of critical inquiry.

In “Proposing a Postcritical AI Literacy: Why We Should Worry Less about Algorithmic Transparency and More about Citizen Empowerment”, Eugenia Stamboliiev takes as her starting point the problems posed by the opacity and pervasiveness of AI, particularly for vulnerable or disadvantaged groups, and the turn towards XAI (explainable AI) and its attempt to make AI transparent via models and simplification. She argues, however, that what this constitutes is rather a

“depoliticization of transparency”, and denial of the ideological underpinnings of AI as well as a pretension towards transparency as an adequate remedy for opacity, whereas the technology remains technically opaque and its opacity as a system, with its own power relations, remains hidden. As a supplement to XAI-informed debates on media literacy, she argues for the need for a postcritical framework that focuses on access to AI and that privileges citizen empowerment as much as algorithmic transparency, thereby extending the terms and scope of a critique of AI.

In “The Turn Towards New Criticalities in the Study of Media, Communication and Journalism”, Göran Svensson suggests we are seeing the emergence of a new era of critique in what he calls a turn towards criticality, whereby a focus on singular critiques is displaced by a focus on a variety of critiques and their “different aims, traits, compositions, expressions and uses”. Offering a deliberately “panoramic” perspective on diverse theoretical traditions, disciplinary perspectives and literatures, he identifies four main types of critique: open (traditional forms of explicitly emancipatory critique), reforming (those discontented with the former but which are still emancipatory), resonant (those with an unacknowledged overlap with either of the first two categories) and emerging (new ways of doing critique that do not necessarily build upon previous traditions). In an ecumenical spirit, he argues for a communicative criticality focused on bringing different forms of critique into dialogue so as to enable the discovery of new emancipatory possibilities.

In “Where’s the Critique? On the Dearth of Critical Theory in German Communication Research” Mandy Tröger and Marlen van den Ecker tell a story that might seem counter-intuitive to an international readership: that “critical theory”, both in the particular form of the Frankfurt School and in a broader sense of the term, has been historically marginalised in how “communication” has been taught and researched in Germany. They describe how the discipline of “communication” has been conceptualised primarily in Germany from a rigid social scientific perspective (partly made possible by the institutionalisation of a sharp division with the humanistic concerns of “media studies”), and their first-hand account of these disciplinary constraints will resonate with critical researchers based in other countries still dominated by (post)positivist research imaginaries. Tröger and van den Ecker discuss how this disciplinary history has inspired them and other German-based researchers

to establish a national Network for Critical Communications Research: a project committed to a pluralistic conception of critique that insists on the politicality of all knowledge production, whatever the research paradigm.

In “Contesting the Vocabularies of the Marketised University”, Natalie Fenton, Des Freedman, Gholam Khiabany and Milly Williamson consider the contemporary attack on critical scholarship in the context of the marketisation and financialisation of the academy in the UK and the prioritisation of career-focused courses at the expense of arts and humanities courses. They see one symptom of these changes in shifting vocabularies whereby terms like “academic freedom” and “free speech” are rendered devoid of meaning, while others like “critical thinking”, “social justice” and “decolonisation” become branded content material. To counter the effects of such processes (particularly the precarity and reduced autonomy of academic staff), they argue for continuing to do critique even within the increasingly narrow confines of the “neoliberal university”, to make the case for a public and critical conception of the university, and to resist through collective industrial action.

In “Critical Academy Under Attack: A Panel Discussion”, Gavan Titley, Sahana Udupa, Éric Fassin and Diana Mulinari reflect (in an edited transcript of the final plenary panel of the original pre-conference) on a reactionary political atmosphere where critical researchers across the social sciences and humanities, particularly those researching race and gender, are subject to aggressive, and sometimes violent, attacks. Introducing the discussion as panel chair, Titley notes one of the novel features of anti-academic attacks today: the “transnational synchronicity” of how a moral panic about “woke” academics (“critical race theory”, “Islam-gauchisme” and all the other objects of disparagement) is restaged and recontextualised across national boundaries. Udupa examines some of the challenges of researching the extreme speech of the online far-right, particularly when critical scholars are trolled and disparaged in terms that resonate with the depoliticising impulses of unreconstructed positivist discourses within the university. Reflecting on his own standing as a hate figure for the French far-right (or what he prefers to call “real neofascists”), Fassin finds something redemptive in the systematic attack against critique and critical thinking, quipping that “if some people hate us, it means that we’re doing something right”. Mulinari discusses some of the methodological and ethical challenges of researching anti-gender social

movements and organisations in a Nordic context that exposes researchers to the threat of violence and is energised, once again, by a mainstream academy that sees critical scholarship as an affront to proper science. The discussion then moves to different audience questions and comments before ending with some hopeful observations from the panellists on “realistic utopias” (Mulinari), the inseparability of “critique and courage” (Udupa), and “the politics of making things desirable” (Fassin).

In her afterword to the special issue, “Postcritique: Past Influences and Present Conjunctures”, Rita Felski reminds us that she proposed the concept of postcritique not as a critique of or alternative to critique, but as signifying a decentring of critique and an alternative to the false choice of pro-critique or anti-critique. Even in the current climate where critical scholarship is under attack, she argues it would be a mistake to think that only two possible stances are available to us. Reminding us that critique is not something that only academics can do but is rather something that exists in the world already, she argues that critics would do well to remember that their arguments are as symptomatic of their social position as those of the people they critique. Addressing the limits of critique as a strategy of persuasion and its tendency to inadvertently increase defensiveness or even drive away those one is hoping to convince or convert, she argues instead for an alternative strategy of composing rather than critiquing: of “fostering solidarity, empathy, and the building of cross-class coalitions” whilst recognising the role of inequalities in access to information and ideas that determine what is known and who gets to know.

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