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Critical Inversion: From Social to Techno - and Left to Right?'

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Abstract

Today's intellectual and ideological conjuncture is marked not so much by a demise of critical labor, but by a confiscation of critical grammars and gestures by the very enemies of the progressive forces historically associated with the modern rise of critique: ultraconservatives and neofascists who are taking advantage of the crisis of intellectual institutions, the failure of social-democratic politics, and the affordances of fast-rising digital media, to disconnect social critique from its traditional progressive politics and thus appear like the new bearers of cognitive freedom and critical audacity. This paper maps the various factors and contexts making such a critical inversion a clear and present danger today.

Keywords

Social critique, cultural criticism, identity politics, neoliberal capitalism, far-right

In this time of critical uncertainty and political isolation on the part of emancipatory forces, it seems more crucial than ever to connect our critical threads across borders and disciplines in the longer term – if at least critical labor is still possible today within our institutions of higher education, and still of any use in our devastated social world, or still actual: *actual* in the sense of having real-life consequences *and* being carried forth by some sort of agency. Agency here is of the essence, if academic and scholarly politics (activist politics, that is) is to be done still by collective human agency, before ChatGPT

and other robots make such a thing as human agency terminally outdated in our institutions.

While covering elements of context, or just metacritical ingredients in today's conjuncture, it can be worth mentioning two of them – one which is not just an anecdote, and another which is not just a news item – before trying to make sense of the somewhat obscure object or promise of this paper.

The first element is not a smokescreen to evade the issue, but a significant side aspect of any academic event. In trying to prepare for the original ICA pre-conference both recorded to be archived and live-streamed to be followed (and given) remotely, its organizers, themselves busy academics, have had to exchange dozens of emails and have run into Kafkaian obstacles, each university's technical services recommending we read endless tutorials to be able to manage it ourselves. Technical formats seemed at first to be incompatible, and so forth – a form of irrational rationalization which is not just a bug, but the way Information Technology is always framed by management: as an implicit yet brutal power relation and as a directly ideological take on what operationality *is*, raising questions of technical format potentially impacting (or not) critical content, and the famous postmodern paradox of autonomy turned into self-conscious alienation. In short, we are entering an era in which academic technolistics, rather than just offering instrumental support of research and scholarly exchange, become both an obstacle to our age-old activities and an inescapable revelation of our political defeat, or loss of agency. To paraphrase Bill Clinton's answer to a journalist asking him what was the key issue of the 1992 presidential election in the US: "it's the technology, stupid!" (he said "the economy" back then, but thirty years later both have merged, and can no longer be separated).

The second element of context is more newsworthy. The new French government appointed in June 2022 (after Emmanuel Macron's re-election and just before new Congress elections) came with only one big surprise: the replacement as Minister of Education of Jean-Michel Blanquer, a rigid technocrat but also aggressive ideologue at war against communities and identity politics, by a renowned historian and pioneer of French Black studies, impeccable scholar Pap Ndiaye. The news became an ideal target for French supremacists who went out of control in their denunciations of him the days after: to put it bluntly, a Black man devoted to a scholarly struggle against racial

and colonial discriminations (to the point of defending a US campus-style identity politics for the African-French community, with the same hyphen as African-Americans) replaces a “Caucasian-French” conservative obsessed with the war against what he calls “wokeism”; a man who mounted a so-called republican “laboratory” to track down identity politics within French education, and was hysterical enough about it to introduce a colloquium in 2021 with the following statement: “we in France have circulated a virus called French Theory, now we need to provide a vaccine” (a metaphor all the more arguable in the context of the Covid pandemics).

A strategic inversion, indeed, which brings into view the highly volatile notion of “critique” in today’s politics and above all the subtext behind the political decision: a civil servant exhibiting his supposedly “brave” *critical* attitude against identity politics (*communautarisme*, in French) is replaced by another civil servant famous for his critical attitude against the French prohibition of identity politics (*anti-communautarisme...*). This amounts to a two-layered *tour de force* from president Macron: first, he is committing to a reversed critique in order to attract the French cultural Left three weeks before a Congress election deemed very risky for his current majority; and, second, (quite likely yet much less visible) he’s displaying this rhetorical circus of reversible critical discourses in order to better dissimulate the reality of a very French continuity at the highest governmental level in terms of cutting educational budgets and gradually neoliberalizing the entire educational system. To make this long story short: focusing on what looks like a hot debate between two opposing *critical* postures serves to better disarm, or prevent, a true *critical* take on new public management in France and decades of a policy consisting of reducing the autonomy of French education to benefit the job market and a brutal economic system. Identity politics as a smokescreen to make anti-capitalist politics simply unthinkable? Critique as posturing to disable a possible critique, in words *and* acts, of the larger ideological and economic system? It may not be that simple, but there is something to that.

This logic of a critical debate on “woke” issues working to disarm critique on social/labor issues, or divert attention away from it, is exactly the logic at work behind the 2021 controversy at the University of Leicester in England. That June, the university’s introduction of a “decolonized curriculum” to replace more traditional classes of English literature triggered the fury of classical academics and the

conservative press, but it was in fact part of a larger plan to make the university more competitive globally, a plan consisting mainly of more than 100 lay-offs – which in the end was much less commented upon than these new classes on race, ethnicity and gender. Indeed, neoliberalism in recent years has been able to capitalize on cultural diversity and what one might call ‘woke-washing’ to advance a socially aggressive and culturally regressive agenda – or just the final victory of a pure logic of profit. It is this very strategy which scholars such as Gargi Bhattacharyya (2018) and Anamik Saha (2017) have in mind in their (inherently critical) work on what they label “racial capitalism”. At this point it is key to specify that these two layers of critique, ‘cultural’ and ‘social’, should never be used to cancel one another, nor even prioritized: a university offering such classes on the politics of race and colonialism *and* keeping (if not increasing) its faculty staff would be the best option, and making sure both aspects are safeguarded and made compatible should be the preoccupation of progressive politics. Alas, it is not.

Finally, equally relevant here might be the relation with another line of research, one more indebted to intellectual history and (in this case) interested in this American commodity named French Theory: the global legacy and pioneering North-American uses of a French philosophical generation devoted to subverting the intellectual & political status quo – to be seen in retrospect more as an alternative form of critical theory. An indispensable complement to, rather than a fashionable substitute for, Marxist theory and analysis. A bold gesture it was, and indeed contentious, to be associating, as was done in US campuses three to four decades ago, names such as Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, or Jean-François Lyotard with the label “critical theory”, since these were philosophers at odds with the dominant Marxist camp of their time, and intellectual history had always applied the label to the Frankfurt School and to the larger variety of 20th-century heterodox Marxisms. But we were mainly (and still are) stressing the crucial necessity of attempting to bridge the gap between Marxism and left-wing Nietzscheism: between the history and future of class struggle and the philosophy of difference, between political insurgency and existential intensity, between social critique and the critique of origins and norms (macro- and micro-politics, in the 1970s Deleuzian lingo), rather than calling the former traditional critique and the latter *post*-critique, in yet another act of (intellectual) authority.

But we are beyond that story now and there is more urgent work today: Capital as War, academia mutilated by the logic of management, the global rise of a populist (if not fascist) Right forcing people to vote against their direct interest in order to avoid “worse”, and our health (or our biopolitical doctrine) as a pretext to control bodies, digitalize life, reduce civil liberties – not even to mention the environmental apocalypse looming in the background.

Connecting Deleuze with Georg Lukacs, Foucault with Walter Benjamin, and why not Derrida with Ernst Bloch, might sound like a luxury in such a nightmarish context. Critique as both the counter-intuitive interpretation of texts *and* a consistent refusal of the existing order, as both social *critique* and epistemic *criticism*, has always been a discursive concept, anchored in logics and rhetoric. All of French Theory might have deconstructed for good the old dualisms of language and action, words and real-life struggles, but still, who can afford today a true critical labor from a battle site in Ukraine, during a Covid quarantine, or just the feeling of powerlessness in front of neoliberal “reforms” putting us on the dole or in front of the clear and present danger of racist police brutality. To put it in a nutshell: if critical labor requires stable institutions devoted to it, how can it be pursued today when the triple acceleration of war, biopolitics, and the privatization of knowledge makes such institutions the most vulnerable of all? It all remains precisely dialectical, however, as each modern conflict, each victory of progress (as much as each regression into the abyss of injustice) has always rearmed, renewed and reaffirmed the historical necessity of critique. Critique as a historical phoenix turned from discursive luxury (or academic commodity) into vital necessity by the very process which seemed to make it useless – or obsolete.

And yet, here comes the old guilt, the old self-hatred (or *mauvaise conscience*, as Sartre would have it) of scholars and academics, whom Nietzsche called the men (and women) of resentment: the fear we all share is that it is too late today to still be speaking about critique/critical. Or the simpler fear that we will never have the time and energy to remain critical *anyway*, to renew and reinforce the resources of critique, because of our piles of papers, dissertations, grades, timetables, and urgent mobilizations to save this teaching position, that administrative staff, or fight each new status of precarious, disposable faculty.

This old sense of guilt comes with many unresolved contradictions, and a good deal of political melancholy and critical nostalgia; melancholy and nostalgia typical of the defeated ones, maybe of what's left of the Left (as suggested by Italian historian Enzo Traverso, 2021) when its utopian horizon fades away. All of this is of course made worse by today's ideological and communication landscape, oversaturated as it is with random opinions, daily social media buzz, artificial debates, polarized hysteria fueled by algorithms, and what Freud used to call "the narcissism of small differences". At the risk of being way too general, fuzzy even, I would say the said landscape is characterized by *both* an unprecedented inflation of critical discourse of all sorts, hyperbolized by digital media (compared with a time when critical discourse was limited to special circumstances and specific social groups), *and* by an amplified powerlessness, or political deactivation, of critique itself (of which the prefix *post-*, so *en vogue* among academics, might be the most obvious sign, or another academic sign, to stick to our turf). And, indeed, the gap is widening every day between a more and more specialized criticism and an emancipatory social critique, between the ethics of the singular and the (late?) politics of the common, or the united.

This inflation of critical gimmicks and polarized rhetoric is produced to a large extent by three pillars (or intertwined structures) of our contemporary authoritarian capitalist regime: first, by a technological apparatus of interactive social media precisely fueled by intersubjective antagonisms; second, by a wider cultural and media industry competing for our attention (the number one bankable resource today) and generating added value through invented polarities and artificial "issues"; and, third, by an ideological superstructure dissimulating the violence of predation behind the illusion of individual free will and corporate greediness behind naturalized fatalism and the old but reinforced assumption that any alternative would be worse than the existing system.

This triple setting of today's power structure needs to be taken into account to understand the paradox we started with of an inflation of critical discourse *and* an unprecedented powerlessness of critique – beyond the old argument, however relevant it remains today, about the ability of the socioeconomic system known as capitalism to appropriate to its own benefit the critical powers challenging it, a familiar argument

running throughout the 20th century, from Gramsci to Lukacs, Althusser to Marcuse, Adorno to Debord, or Bourdieu to Jameson.

Grasping these three ingredients of our ideological atmosphere is required to account for today's inner split in the very concept of critique: a gradual and dramatic dissociation between rationality and choice, or between the work of reason and the power of refusal, which were both correlated in Immanuel Kant's ideal of intellectual autonomy (and his three famous "Critiques") and were still, however differently, tightly connected in dialectical materialism and the various combinations of critical theory and practice of social change inherited from a century and a half of Marxisms. Such a dissociation of rationality and refusal was taken to another level over the last few decades, ever since what we call the "neoliberal" turn, as rationality was delegated to a techno-scientific apparatus framing contemporary lives (the Web and its dream of cybernetics as optimized social control, taking Adorno's nightmare of "Reason without a subject" to a historical climax), while refusal and opposition were relegated to the irrational tautology of identity politics and the childish stubbornness of network narcissism. In other words, the rational dimension of critique has been severed from collective agency and assigned to a technostucture of control fantasized by post-war scientists and implemented by our digital oligarchs, whereas the antagonistic (or conflictual) dimension of critique has been relocated in the realm of narcissistic projections and identitarian affiliations. Critique thus has been cut in two, stretched to the point of disappearance, or at least of terminal confusion.

The result is not so much post-critique as post-referential critique: critique without a perennial referent, without a shared and global object – critique separated from its modernist tradition of challenging the existing social order in the name of equality and justice, and instead evolving towards sheer posturing and strategic mimicry, which is what makes the critical attitude available for hyperconservative if not fascist reappropriations nowadays, as well as moving towards a subjectless algorithmic effect of a certain positioning of opinions within a larger communication network.

But such an inner split, and self-dissociation of critique, didn't happen like a weather change or a tidal wave. It has a causality and is based on a plan. Or rather: it is as much human-caused and evitable, owing to deliberate strategies and serving specific interests as climate change and environmental catastrophes are. So, what we have to consider

now, as an open-ended series of questions, as a metacritical reflection, is indeed this causality: the socioeconomic and political genesis behind this unprecedented crisis of critical labor, behind this collapse of critical power, behind this dangerous aporia of rational critique incompatible with an *acritical* techno-Reason.

To stick to brief, programmatic questions, I would just phrase here three such causes: two directly political ones (one on the left, one on the right) and one of a larger techno-ideological nature. A triple (techno-political) causality that we as scholars and teachers have to come to terms with (to the extent that you can part them), instead of fatalizing, as we're tempted to do, the advent of 'culture wars' and the digital confiscation of social energies.

These three reasons for our crisis of rational critique may sound too self-evident here, but refreshing our memories about the obvious is always a useful premise; a way of underlining the contour of the larger frame in which our questions of critique and the critical can be raised today.

1) First reason for the demise of critique, or its inner divorce between gimmicks and social referentiality: the sad legacy of the Social-Democratic Left in power, of the experience of power by a political Left who had been associated for all of modern history with the critique of socioeconomic injustice, of political arbitrariness, of cultural elitism and of essentialized inequalities. Names such as Clinton, Blair, Schröder, Gonzales, Mitterrand, and Delors or Juncker for the EU, are the code names of a much larger betrayal, a sacrifice of working classes, a prohibition of any radical social agenda, and a devastation of social struggles – classes, agenda, and struggles they were supposed to stand for and had been democratically elected to serve. The advancement of a cool and hip marketplace, the transformation of emancipation from a collective grassroots endeavor to an individual workaholic enterprise, the replacement of a tradition of utopianism by a blackmail in favor of "realism", the depoliticization of progress, mentioned mostly to put cultural creation and minority politics to the service of market forces... all of that is both what liberal politics at the turn of the millennium can be blamed for, and what has triggered this collective disabling of critique.

The split that liberal politicians eager to remain in power can be blamed for is the very split between emancipatory culture and the critique of capitalism. Of course – we know this part of the story too well – it had all started much better during the post-war historical sequence, a three-decade long period of global emancipation, with decolonization, and a liberal turn of the State structure in countries more favorable to working classes, along with an unprecedented youth protest movement conquering new rights and liberties. But, meanwhile, the technocratic elite was secretly reacting to this, fashioning new instruments of control and paving the way for the more recent backlash – in order to strictly limit such conquests and make sure workplaces and social forces would never again be “ungovernable” (as factories, offices, social movements and minority groups had become at the end of that sequence, around the turn of the 1970s).

One crucial strategy here has been to duly separate the cultural or symbolic ingredient and the sociopolitical dimension of such movements, stimulating and reappropriating the former to better prohibit the latter. In short, the power of critique has been reassigned to the media (and more and more to their corporate owners), to an expanded cultural industry, and to elements of lifestyle and specific rights, while it has been disactivated in its more radical challenges to the sociopolitical order: thus the 1980s could be seen both as a decade of showy, active (or talkative) critical forces from media to advertising and counterculture *and* as the time of the worst ideological regressions at the socioeconomic level, from financial deregulation to the strict containment of social counterweights. The tight connection between these two tendencies is the key to our present and future. In brief, this emancipatory sequence has been paid for at a very high cost: critique itself allowed to become a rhetoric, a gimmick, a style, provided it didn’t impact the foundations of a rapidly neoliberalized world anymore.

2) Meanwhile – as a second political reason for this conversion of critique from a collective resistance to a floating signifier – the conservative right and beyond, let’s say the expanded bastion of those who *hate* emancipation, have filled the political vacuum, occupied the rhetorical space left empty by a governing Left more focused on financial markets than labor rights, and staged a very successful magic trick, a daring and profitable one: making people believe that *they* embody anticonformism, brave,

freethinking and intellectually emancipated, and the epitome of today's critical mind – making people believe that they would take the risk of standing alone, a courageous minority isolated from the liberal mainstream, even when in fact most electoral results and most headlines seen in a newsstand prove the exact opposite.

What we are faced with is the infection of democratic politics and public debate by an aggressive strand of the reactionary Right, whose electoral success and cultural audience are on the rise, now that bankers and preachers, or the conservative right and the neoliberal right, have struck a long-term agreement (signed around the end of the 20th century). With a trendy cultural Left eager to repress (and forget) its historical anticapitalist/social origins, and with the widening gap of socioeconomic inequalities giving a new life to age-old scapegoat politics, the most daring fraction of this rising Right has strategically reappropriated the critical tone, the critical gesture, the critical vocabulary and syntax left unused by the Left – no wonder why so many neocons started their career on the left. To the point that today, both revolutionary rhetoric and the unexpected insurgency, seem to happen more often on the far right than anywhere on the Left: see how “radical” politics in 2022 France bear the face of racist polemicist Eric Zemmour, and why both in the US (in January 2021) and in Brazil (one year later) the assault on the nations' Capitols and the critique of unfair democratic politics has been the work of racists and white supremacists. All in all, they did a tragically good job at confiscating the revolutionary pattern, not like in the interwar period when both political extremes were competing for such a monopoly, but this time because the Left has ducked out, discretely leaving the Titanic to go chill on some tropical island, preferably a sunny tax haven. Of course, a finer, more minute analysis would need to be done here – some are working on it – of lexical appropriations, syntactic mimicry, performative enunciative postures, and how the iterability of the same speech acts can give them a reversed meaning once they're staged at the other end of the political spectrum.

In any case this rhetorical inversion whereby the claim for social change and critical audacity has gone from Left to Right is based on (and justified by) pure mystification and false (or crazy) premises, as they are voiced today by reactionaries and neoconservatives everywhere on Earth. Indeed the latter all claim, more or less:

- that emancipation has gone too far (to the point of oppressing old males and the White majority) when in fact only half the emancipatory job had been done and is often about to be erased, which is exactly what #metoo activists, for example, have in mind: to finish the job before it gets entirely reversed;
- that *they* on the far right would be the sole enemies of economic globalization and financial capitalism... when in fact they're just a late ramification of it, in the same way that Hitler had been made possible by interwar German industrialists;
- that immigration, demographics, and cultural globalization would threaten civilization and national identity to death... when in fact you don't need a PhD in history to understand that nations are the result of exchanges and migrations, and national identity a historical process rather than a timeless given;
- that climate change is a lie or at best a pretext imposed to further mistreat hardworking recipients of the old promise of Progress... when in reality today's environmental crisis is much worse than what the most pessimistic and reliable studies tend to show;
- or, that democracy today is a scam handing all powers to urban bobos and “cultural Marxism” when so many names in power speak to the exact opposite: Bolsonaro, Marcos Jr., Trump, Orban, Meloni, Modi, etc., the new mavericks of opinion-making on the far right, and even (to go back to where I started) our apparently more liberal former French Minister of Education...

Such a multi-faceted mystification is not only a political trick but is made directly possible, or plausible, by the regime of post-Truth, of fake news, of polarized hysterias in which algorithms and the Web 3.0 have placed all of us: it is even desired by a media structure inflaming if not inventing one culture war after another like cash cows boosting ratings and the number of views. Which takes us to the third and final point: what is the role of Information Technology and social media in such an ordeal?

3) Indifferent to this old polarity (of a progressive Left vs. a reactionary Right), or rather, bound to directly benefit from such a re-polarization, is a techno-structure of digital life and social control usually dated back to the Internet turn of the 1990s, but in fact made possible, and desirable even, by a few World-War-Two scientists' fantasies

of soft yet total control of bodies and minds through cybernetics and permanent surveillance. Eighty years later, the result is a world where AI and digital networks are on neither side of the critical watershed but in the hands of their (and our) masters, and currently putting an age-old critical grammar to the service of both market forces and reactionary politics, through individualistic posturing and social demobilization.

Too much needs to be explained here, but as an open-ended conclusion let's at least sketch a few lines and tracks for further critical discussion:

– how the algorithmic and viral workings of digital networks require and favor this volatility and schizophrenia of critical discourse (the work of Deleuze & Guattari would help here, with their concept of “desiring machine”, their take on technological subjectification, and their analysis of capitalism as an “apparatus of capture” and our schizophrenic energies);

– how artificial polarization is a direct effect of the way algorithms and search engines are programmed, which explains why an innocent Google search on Islam or Black Lives Matter will lead to inflammatory posts by Islamophobes or white supremacists, not because the Web has been hacked by Trump supporters but because the interactive structure of social media makes them focus on the most vivid exchanges, on where the action is, however unrepresentative it might be;

– how network narcissism and techno-cynicism propose a culture of *irony* as a substitute for late critique, and as the best line of escape away from both essentialized identities and a violent, compulsory economic regime, and in that same logic, how simulation and the erasure of truth lie at the heart of Information Technology and digital devices, allowing to endlessly pretend, dissimulate, divert and falsify (the forgotten works of Jean Baudrillard in the 1970s could be useful here);

– and how the overall imperative of acceleration, which in a nutshell is the main benefit of Information Technology for capitalism, leads to instability, exaggeration, and a highly precarious mindset utterly incompatible with a consistent and perennially critical force (one might remember here the useful works of German sociologist Hartmut Rosa, but also the notion derived from Paul Virilio's “dromology”: that a given

phenomenon takes extreme dimensions, not due to a deliberate plan but to a global circulation, a technical acceleration beyond control).

In light of such vast stakes and massive questions, we should keep in mind our collective and institutional responsibility as academics in these processes (or in our inability to contain them) of commodification, normalization, re-appropriation, and depoliticization of critical discourse. But at the same time, if critique and reason have been split, along the various lines of causality suggested above, then the very bearers of critical reason do have a role to play: *au travail, les amis!*

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Notes

- ¹ This is a revised version of a keynote address delivered on May 25th 2022 at the 'pre-conference' Critique, post-Critique and the Present Conjuncture at University Paris Nanterre, part of the 2022 International Communication Association conference. Hence it has the register of a paper that was written to be orally presented.

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