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What if the Problem Is that There Is too much Critique?

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Abstract

How to tell “good” critique from “bad” critique, meaningful encounter from opinionated tokenism, or a genuine investment in political emancipation from the cartoonish contrivances of a recuperated emancipatory gesture refolded as empty pastiche? This paper begins with the assumption that we can no longer make any such distinctions. What if all critique nowadays is a spectacle, or perhaps better described, not as critique at all, but merely the proliferation of opinion and criticism? Merely the “unreflective to-and-fro of claim and counter-claim” (MacKenzie, 2004: 6), the “anarchic debris of [already] circulated knowledge” (Badiou, 2001: 50), mere “propositions ... defined by their reference” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994: 22), by the relationships with what has been said before and what will be inevitably said after. What if the pertinent question is not whether we can tell “good” critique from “bad” critique, but in the wake of all contemporary communication becoming repetitive and impotent, why do we insist on talking at all? And what if, in light of all this, the only potentially radical response is to remain silent? To find “little gaps of solitude and silence in which they might eventually find something to say” (Deleuze, 1997: 129). A conjuring of the gentleness, the quiet solemnity and the right to have nothing to say is perhaps the condition that has a “chance of framing the rare, or even rarer, thing that might be worth saying” (Deleuze, 1997: 129).

Keywords

Critique, Criticism, Opinion, Silence, Encounter, Deleuze

A few thousand words to say something meaningful. A few thousand. A few thousand is not a lot of words to say anything. And I hesitate to write anything at all. What is there to say? What is there to say that hasn't already been said? What is there to say that isn't always already implicated in the perpetuation of the present, of the status

quo, of capitalistic affirmation and the love of noisy opinionated narcissistic self-indulgence? I wonder whether giving voice to any response to the question of critique only serves to add more fuel to the proverbial fire. I wonder if, in giving form to thinking, giving expression to some musings about the types of gestures we are capable of making within contemporary capitalism, I am inevitably only ever using and perpetuating the thoughts and expressions already readily available – already programmable and installable onto the hard drives of western cultural and political zeitgeists.

How do we tell “good” critique from “bad” critique, meaningful encounter from opinionated tokenism, or a genuine investment in political emancipation from the cartoonish contrivances of a recuperated emancipatory gesture refolded as empty pastiche? The fact that we cannot make any such distinction seems to me such an obvious and banal suggestion to begin with. Critique nowadays is a spectacle, a stylised event. Or perhaps better described, not as critique at all, but the mere proliferation of opinion and criticism. Gestures glamorously disguised as historical dynamics, principles of reason or moral indignation, but which are actually the mere “unreflective to-and-fro of claim and counter-claim” (MacKenzie, 2004: 6), merely the “anarchic debris of [already] circulated knowledge” (Badiou, 2001: 50), mere “propositions ... defined by their reference” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994: 22), by the relationships with what has been said before and what will be inevitably said after. Those discursive gestures which are always caught up in the dynamic interplay of already existing sociological, cultural and political structures and processes. Whatever ironic distancing technique we use to rationalise ourselves into thinking that we are the odd ones out, that we the critics, the critical scholars, are the higher pedestaled arbiters of truth, knowledge and critical judgement, those able to cut through the bullshit and get to the real meat of the matter, we are all also so profoundly aware of our inability to abstract ourselves from this muck and molecular of everyday contradiction. How are those still holding onto the belief that critique somehow automatically offers emancipatory potential not crumpling under the weight of their own messiah complexes? How do we maintain such conviction in critique even as we all are confronted by technologies redirecting our desires at their “point of emergence from the virtual” (Massumi, 1992: 134), by the unravelling of grand teleology and the modernist tenants of progress and self-actualisation into an endless circulation of signs, significations and trite “post-

truth” rhetoric and by a capitalism accelerating at a pace wildly outstripping human responsive capacities and understanding?

“Good” critique or “bad” critique then? This seems not to be the pertinent question. If we think alongside Slavoj Žižek’s concern about the ineffectiveness of critical theory (Douzinas and Žižek, 2010), Bruno Latour’s claim that critique has run out of steam (Latour, 2004) or even Quentin Meillassoux’s suggestion of the rise in fideism – the “belief that belief is all there is” (Meillassoux, 2009: 49) – and many other similar sentiments, it might seem understandable for those on the frontlines of political and philosophical commentary to begin to feel dejected, worn out and resigned to the inevitability of critique’s critical edge wearing thin. And yet, anyone plugged into the colourful trajectories of post-68 inspired French radical theory will probably also follow the argument that the intensity and frequency of opinion and criticism has only increased, rather than been censored and stifled, under the encouragement of our contemporary neoliberal *dispositif* (Badiou and Žižek, 2009). The question then, if we can’t see the wood for the trees, and if we suspect that, even if we could, we’d have to confront our impotency in the wake of all contemporary speech and communication having been corrupted by their very design (Deleuze, 1997: 175), then why do we persist? Why do we insist on talking? On adding to the noise we experience in the present that only reaffirms the necessity of more noise in the present? Does communication just beget more communication?

Gilles Deleuze was always fond of suggesting that we suffer from an excess of communication, that “repressive forces don’t stop people from expressing themselves, but rather, force them to express themselves” and so we are “riddled with pointless talk, insane quantities of words and images” (Deleuze, 1997: 129). We talk incessantly. Prattling on endlessly with fevered passion about whatever ideological entrenchment we find ourselves eliciting from our various positionalities even as any opinion or criticism begins to seem as valid as any other, even in the knowledge that whatever we are peddling has “already been said a thousand times” (Deleuze, 1997: 130) in a thousand supposedly different, but actually very similar, conversations. This is not to say that the noisy, high-speed communication conjured within contemporary capitalism has rendered itself entirely meaningless and nonsensical. Franco Berardi, quite understandably, asserts that the acceleration of capitalist experience – the endless

swirling miasma of sign and signification – diminishes “critique” or, indeed, any form of communication, to something “banal and ridiculous” (Berardi, 2011: 109). We might avoid stumbling too far into this dreary postmodern aporia by remarking upon the kinds of meanings that contemporary opinion and criticism do generate. Our constant chit-chat must conjure meaning after all. Enough meaning to form attachments to what is being said, who is saying it and why. Enough to collectively invest in conferences, committees and conversations discussing the importance of this or that position. All the noisy exchanges in classrooms and lecture halls, the gritted teeth and furious keyboard strokes of animated twittersphere(s), the beer-soaked diatribes emitting from beer-soaked public houses, the news, the psychotherapy sessions, the political debates and advertising campaigns, the casual familial conversations and the small talk and everything else that enters into this overly connected communication society.¹ To dismiss all this as empty noise would surely imply a kind of mass disengagement on our parts. Why bother talking, adding more chatter into cultural and political circulation, if it only becomes submerged in the incoherent shrieks and screeches of more chatter sped up to unintelligible degrees, if it only contributes to more empty noise?

It seems more like contemporary communication remains drenched in meaning, in clusters of desires, attachments and promises that nowadays induce us to always return to the scene(s) in which speech, discourse and dialogue continue to unfold. It invokes a fundamentally optimistic responsiveness. A firm uncritical belief in the verbal capacity for exposing injustice, for ironing out disagreements, for giving minorities the ability to speak up for themselves, for building and sustaining communities, for stimulating comfort and catharsis, and for generally guaranteeing the “endurance of something, the survival of something, the flourishing of something, and above all the protection of the desire that made this [communicative process] powerful enough to have magnetized an attachment to it” in the first place (Berlant, 2011: 48). Perhaps the reason why so many of us still favour opinion and criticism is the same reason why they have become so facile and impotent. We stick to our guns, our ideological safe spaces, secure in the rationale that we are the privileged truth seekers, the only bona fide central characters in a political theatre full of phonies, because opinion and criticism organises the world into ways that are already familiar to us. The continuity of their forms in turn promises a kind of continuity for our sense of what it means to

carry on living in the way in which we have become accustomed. It's a seductive facsimile of critique. A way for us to denounce some contrived other while grounding ourselves in the here and now, in cliché, in simple, relatable ready-made propositions and experiences.

It is so easy to return again and again to the scene(s) in which speech, discourse and dialogue play themselves out. Speech and discourse demand a call and response. An opinion is uttered in response to another and that opinion in turn demands an opinionated reply. Imagine being caught up in the tediously familiar conversational throes of a debate surrounding the exact quality of a political superstructure. Someone might begin by invoking some reference to class, that underneath all other tensions and exploitations in society lies the class war. This haughty remark would inevitably spur a challenge as to the effect of "well, you say class is the driving factor, but how can we understand class without bringing race into the mix?". Someone else cries "no, gender is a better articulator of class!". It becomes a game of one-upmanship, a competition for the *really real*.² The format might then be flipped by a little corner side commune of evangelical Marxists resolutely dismissing this discussion. They might argue that whatever the factors are which seem visible and relevant in society now, they will all be coalesced by the world historical spirit into a future communist utopia eventually anyway. So, what does it matter? This would lead some other kind of evangelical thinker to call this a cop-out, a way of avoiding responsibility for those communities caught up in the trauma and exploitation of existing in the here and now, and anyway, how do they know that the future utopia will be a communist one? Maybe the world historical spirit is post-gender in nature, or post-race? Perhaps another clever somebody, who has remained smugly silent up until now, will pipe up to comment on the circularity of this whole affair. Maybe no singular criterium is essential. The pragmatists in the room will argue tersely that they need some criteria with which to base their political analysis. And on and on it goes. Each criticism of the last criticism invokes its own ground for criticism. Everyone has this backwards. It is not that the really real exists in some transcendent fixture just waiting for us to identify it correctly. The really real does not exist until it has been materialized by the conversation itself. The conversation materializes the parameters for debate – the epistemological meanings, the stakes at play – from the clichés and ready-made propositions of the already actualized and already uttered. They then are locked into this continuity,

weaved into a circularity that repeats over and over. Even the smugly silent critic eventually succumbed to the lure of the conversation. Even telling everyone they are wrong conjures its own critical subject. By verbally negating the discussion entirely, they contribute a kind of legitimacy to the problems and solutions contained within it. How can we criticize a really real without grounding ourselves in our own really real? How do we speak of anything, even to dismiss it entirely, without recapitulating into another counterclaim?

This quality of contemporary communication certainly has its uses. Alain Badiou, despite his general dismissal of opinion over that of the Event, even suggests that opinions are the “cement of sociality”, the “primary material of all communication” (Badiou, 2001: 50-51) and as such wholly necessary for making our institutions functional and for sustaining our collective sanities. I’d wager that this is all the more valid and relevant in the wake of a capitalism unburdened by any singular stratification or teleology, a capitalism racing outwards in all directions and at velocities far exceeding the metabolic limitations of the body. I’d wager that communication acts as a kind of autonomic response within our human bodily finitudes. It is a defence mechanism. It is all we can do to shield ourselves from the otherwise intolerable chaotic randomness we experience in our day-to-day lives. The randomness felt from the centerground of politics breaking apart into endless clickbait populisms, from the touchstones of cultural zeitgeists disappearing into the next before having even had a chance to coagulate into our collective consciousnesses, from causes and effects becoming seemingly interchangeable, from the Earth itself acquiescing to the climatic instability of the Anthropocene. The sheer speed and magnitude of opinion and criticism function as a dam, a blockade, a protective barrier against a capitalism that would otherwise continually tear apart the ego and stitch it back together in countless monstrous refashioning(s) beyond our capability to imagine. To always espouse opinion and criticism is to reduce the complexities of the contemporary capitalist everyday into something more manageable, something articulable and recognisable, something like stories of revolution and triumph, stories of recuperation and despair, stories of comfort and distraction, grisly stories, titillating stories, stories that have heroes, villains and absolute moral antagonisms, stories with binary yes or no outcomes. Stories that simplify the world around us, that facilitate a kind of tailoring of reality to the comprehensible, that graft a world otherwise teeming with an

unfathomable dynamism into static and organised structure and allow us to compartmentalise this world into discrete and quantifiable categories. All this to explain away the dynamism of our existences, to stubbornly carve out our subjective “signature[s] upon every one of the particles in the universe” (Ballard, 2010: 601), to constantly search for images of ourselves “free of the hazards of time and space” (Ballard, 2010: 603). Manic and panic stricken, stressed and *fatigued*, we abstract ourselves by way of opinion and criticism from the muck, from the middle, from the “world of quantal flux” (Ballard, 2010: 603), to protect our subjective integrities and our organic equilibriums.

Ah but wait! Let’s backtrack. What happened there just above? I made a wager, a ridiculous unsubstantiated sweeping remark about what is *really* happening in the contemporary. The *real and essential* cause for the overreliance on opinion and criticism. And, in doing so, I made the very same gesture that I have been so vehemently railing against. I suddenly find myself the nauseant know-it-all, the odd one out, the smug one unable to keep quiet, the one who supposedly holds the keys to valid objective truth-dom. All this gesture amounts to is the creation of another placeholder for the critical subject, another contrived space around which an expansive medley of opinions and criticisms can be positioned. In fact, this whole piece has been peppered with these ideological slippages. These jumping off points for dissenters. Capitalism now operates at speeds beyond our subjective capacities. Discuss. Communication is a defense mechanism. Discuss. Critique is a pointless farce ... Dare to disagree? This is why I hesitated to write anything! It is so easy to fall into this trap as we navigate the rhythmic back and forth of the conversational tide. It is so easy to recapitulate into an opinion or criticism and, thus, provide the impetus to incite more and more opinions and criticisms ad infinitum.

How then might we make a point about criticism and opinion, about the practice of critique itself, without being critics? Perhaps a way to reject both the problem and the solution is to maintain that silence out of which we are so easily seduced. Nowhere does there seem to be a collective effort to cease all this nattering. There are no brilliant spellbinding criticisms which spur some ability to shush, no conversations exchanged or possibilities uttered which suggest an unclenching of the tension experienced within the contemporary capitalist *dispositif*, no new opinions expressing a final solution and a

desire to bring an end to all the noisy melodrama. If anything, as intensity and frequency of communication has built momentum over the last fifty years, the less there seems to be of any friction or resistance to more of it. So, I'm not going to suggest that we all just stop talking. I'm macabrely aware that most of us are not capable. I have certainly demonstrated a failure to stay silent myself. But what if there is something interesting about a capacity to be silent? Deleuze, after all, advocates for "little gaps of solitude and silence in which they might eventually find something to say" (Deleuze, 1997: 129). A conjuring of the gentleness, the quiet solemnity and the right to have nothing to say is perhaps the condition that has a "chance of framing the rare, or even rarer, thing that might be worth saying" (Deleuze, 1997: 129).

There must, no doubt, be many kinds of silences.³ There is silence as lack or negation – a failure to communicate (Dendrinis and Pedro, 1997), an absence of speech. There is silence as something constitutive of speech – a delay before responding (Rochester, 1985), a pause between words (Crown and Feldstein, 1985). There are also, of course, the politicized silences. Either a defiant silence, a silence employed to unnerve those who regulate normative structure through speech, or an imposed silence, a "forced absence and suppression" (Ferguson, 2003: 53) of people subjugated by those in power (Olsen, 2003). Or else another kind of silence imposed upon those who do speak but are not heard because they remain unrecognised by normative structures of speech. These silences are perhaps less interesting only in as much as they are a direct reaction to a specific impetus in speech already pregnant with meaning. They are themselves a criticism, however implicit, to the claim uttered prior to that silent response. The kind of silence that might interest us needs to have a more indeterminate quality. What if silence could be generative of a kind of becoming quite unfamiliar to us chatterboxes? What if silence can be a reticence? Simply a withdrawal from participating entirely? A silence in which the agency to speak is entirely refused, in which we refuse to commit to any kind of meaning, any kind of stake in the game of contemporary communication. A moment – a small vacuole – of silence that is an intensity which radically depersonalises the self, uproots the integrity of our supposedly stable subjectivities, deserts the ego and its fabled commitments to a kind of determined totality and instead operates with a totally different conjugation with the flows of the world. An uncoupling from power, discourse and representation that, at other times, Deleuze might call "vacuoles of noncommunication" (Deleuze, 1997: 175). A moment

of noncommunicativeness that is itself a kind of communication. Not a silence then that simply lapses into an absence, but one that has a virtual dimensionality of its own. A silence “populated not with dreams, phantasms or plans, [not with claims and counterclaims,] but with encounters!” (Deleuze, 1987: 6), with the speaking to people, movements, ideas and entities without words or utterances, with moments of mad discombobulations which acknowledges these speaking(s) conjuring the event before the subject, the intensity before the structure. Maybe, ultimately, the efficacies of these silences are entirely indebted to this strange Deleuzian theory of the encounter. A theory which ruminates on how revelations might precede the fixing of their terms, on how thinking is not the result of some prior disposition, not some already established object of recognition, but is actually a sensation that acts upon thought from the outside.⁴ A sensation that is also a violence, one that forces us to think differently, wounding, straining and stretching out existing classifications of sense perception, sending us a psychological shock because it short-circuits our ready-made understandings (Zourabichvili, 2012: 71). Encounters are drivers of mutations in thought⁵ and we are bodies perennially primed to collide with them. Colliding with unspeakable multiplicities, with unnameable and unknowable resonances and dissonances capable of altering and recontextualising the world around us. To have an encounter with silence then or to find our own silences are full of encounters. Silences that disconnect from us from the busy noisy populous of the present and leave space for the breathing in of elsewhere(s) and otherwise(s). Silences that affect and infect us, and hopefully envelop, hijack and shake up speech as well when it eventually comes back around. This is the gambit – that from the depths of these silences, we might not only reveal a refusal of a poisoned communicability, but also a calling for a new kind of originality.

Oh nuts! Have I done it again? Does this gesture towards silence sound too much like an opinion? A criticism of speech? An unfounded claim about what we should be *really* doing in this hyper-mediated, over-communicated society? Am I still the smug one unable to keep quiet about how we should all be quiet? If so, so be it. Perhaps to *speak about an appeal to silence* offers the perfect literalization of criticism, opinion, and their performative contradiction. Maybe the belabored circularity of criticizing the impotence of critique is always doomed to failure and counterclaim as long as it is invoked within the medium of discourse itself. I’ll defend my predisposition to silence

only on the basis that the act itself requires none of this foray into claim and counterclaim. The kinds of silences I long for cannot even be compelled by us, cannot be instigated by us. They are not the weapon of the critic, not a part of our arsenal ready to be fired at other unsuspecting smug people. The silences I long for *happen to us*. They are as surprising as they are fickle, unreliable as much as they are full of potential. They might find easier footholds amongst the most involuntary of responses – the exhausted, the addled and stupefied, those who find the present intolerable. Those just resigned enough, just tired enough, and therefore just quiet for long enough to maybe find themselves breaking out of the monotonous cycle of discursive repetition. The mad and frazzled who eventually speak back to us in what must seem like nonsensical riddles and religious tongue.⁶ Those taken up by silences that betray the present and open into the new.

And, if we are to end on an ideological predisposition with a slightly messianic tone, is there not one more appropriate than a vague gesticulation towards the new? Is this not what critique was always meant to do? Wasn't critique always supposed to be a creative endeavour? To follow the tradition set out by Marx in his eleventh thesis, to *stop interpreting the world and start changing it* (Marx, 1998: 569)? In a world where it is difficult to say anything that has not already been said a thousand times already, are we not under an obligation to jump upon the new wherever they can be accessed? Maybe silence can be our entry point. Maybe we owe ourselves a little peace and quiet. Or maybe I should just take my own advice – to stop prattling on and invite you, dear reader, to do the same.

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Notes

- ¹ Some notion of our voracious appetite for excessively communicating has been identified and discussed at length by various thinkers over the decades. From Berardi's concept of 'Semio-capitalism' (Berardi, 2009) and Jodi Dean's 'Communicative Capitalism' (Dean, 2005) to Jean Baudrillard's book 'The Ecstasy of Communication' (Baudrillard, 1988) and Richard Seymour's 'The Twittering Machine' (Seymour, 2020). It is perhaps a dull irony that this already well-trodden conceptual ground is yet again being invoked in a self-reflexive commentary about the performative contradiction of criticism and opinion. It is almost as if we cannot stop talking about our inability to stop talking.
- ² This is a scene rather similar to the one playing out in Latour's crushing appraisal of the critical landscape. In his essay *Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?*, Latour outlines the inane circularity of critics in action and shows how, whether you are revealing "naive believers'" faith in objects to be only fetishes or "explaining" fetishes as behaviour entirely determined by "powerful causalities coming from objective reality" (i.e. economic status, social denomination, fields of discourse, etc.), you are doing so while also unknowingly relying on your own faith in a different set of objects. The "fun" thing is that, within this circularity, everyone gets a turn at being "right" (Latour, 2004: 237-242).
- ³ Indeed, as Kennan Ferguson suggests, "silence can operate in multiplicitous, fragmentary, even paradoxical ways. The politics of silence, in other words, are not reducible to any particular political functionality; [...] silence resists absolutism" (Ferguson, 2003: 59).
- ⁴ To say that the encounter comes from outside is a slight misnomer. It isn't that there is an actual space outside, an exteriority looking in on thought. It is more that encounters "place thought into a state of exteriority, throwing it into a formless field where the heterogeneous points of view, corresponding to the heterogeneity of the forces at play, enter into a relation with one another" (Pelbart, 2015: 200).
- ⁵ Deleuze in fact considers the encounter the very conditionality of thought. In an explicit nod to Heidegger, Deleuze suggests that the act of thinking itself is always generative and has a constitutive relation to its limits, to the not-yet thought, to what nips and scratches at the edges of the discernible, to what gets hauled, however reluctantly, into thought. We might say, then, that all the incessant chatting does not involve a process of thinking at all. Perhaps it is the inverse – a realm of non-thought, a dull recycling of the same (Deleuze, 1994: 144-145).
- ⁶ This is only to emphasise the involuntary nature of encounters and not to suggest that there is some cult of rarefied minorities – the exhausted, the mad, the stupefied – more capable than the rest of us of tapping into these silences. For Deleuze, breaking out of the constrictive apparatuses of subjectivity, of discourse or power, etc., is less about finding specific sites of exteriority and more a matter of liberating the exteriorities immanent within us all. In keeping with the theory of the encounter, we might say that exteriority is the "groundless ground" from within which criticism and opinion actually emerge, that, as we sweep ourselves up in the cycles of claim and counterclaim, we (as subjects) retain an "absolute memory of the outside" (Pelbart, 2015: 204). Perhaps, if anything, exhaustion or madness are only those immanent minor inflections which oscillate at the edges of the most extreme points of thought – those limit-thresholds of thought breaking open.

Jonjo Brady is a PhD candidate at Ulster University and University of Kent currently working on a thesis exploring the concept(s) and experience(s) of tiredness within contemporary capitalism. His main research interests lie in political theory, process philosophy, Continental philosophy, Queer/Crip theory, as well as the philosophy and politics of post-68 Italian and French thinkers.

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