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**Postcritique:
Past Influences and
Present Conjunctionures**

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Abstract

This paper briefly surveys a history of reckoning with the limits of critique in cultural studies and sociology. It highlights affinities between the turn to postcritique in literary studies and the present generation of Frankfurt School thought, including a heightened attention to everyday life worlds and an interest in developing a more expansive affirmative vocabulary beyond existing theories of utopia. It then raises questions about the political effects of critique in contemporary culture and its potential to trigger counter-productive or unwanted results. In some contexts, it may be strategically wise to rein in the impulse to judge or condemn in the interests of fostering solidarity, empathy, and the building of cross-class coalitions.

Keywords

Postcritique, critique, epistemological break, Frankfurt School, Robin Celikates, Hartmut Rosa

This special issue may trigger a Rashomon effect in readers who find themselves confronted with a bewildering array of perspectives. Some essays lament the marginalization of critique, others point to its endless proliferation. Does critique remain urgent and necessary, or has it been co-opted by capitalism and stripped of all radical force? And what about postcritique? Is it a “postreferential critique” of sheer posturing and strategic mimicry (Cusset) or an alternative imaginary (Diaz et al) or just another part of the critical landscape (Svensson)? As it’s not feasible to do justice to

the arguments of all these essays in a short response, I'll zoom out and then zoom in, linking postcritique to a larger intellectual history before responding to the editors' invitation to comment on the current conjuncture.

As the editors note, “debates and polemics about the condition of critique always risk seeming incoherent because . . . people can be talking about radically different things under the same nominal heading” (Phelan et al.). Let me begin by clarifying that *The Limits of Critique* (2015) was not intended as an intellectual history of critique or an extended engagement with the work of any of its key thinkers: Kant or Marx, Fanon or Foucault. Its ambitions were much more circumscribed: to offer a rhetorical analysis of what had become a virtually obligatory thought style in literary studies, especially in the United States, over the last four decades. The book sought to redescribe this uptake of critique in a specific discipline by attending not only to its political and philosophical claims but also its moods (ethos or disposition) and its methods: reading texts by “digging down” or “standing back” and relying on narratives of criticism-as-detection via the exposure of guilt.

Some of the harsher responses to *The Limits of Critique* mirrored, with uncanny exactitude, the rhetorical moves that were analyzed in the pages of the book. Reducing individual actions to symptoms of social forces, critics portrayed me as an unwitting – or all too witting – pawn of neoliberal capitalism (an argumentative tactic highlighted in chapter 2). The vehemence of these reactions, moreover, appeared to confirm my thesis that “critique does not tolerate rivals” (chapter 4). Why does the idea of critique radiate such charismatic authority? Why does it retain such a tenacious grip on the intellectual imagination? Rather than negating or rebutting critique, I sought to decenter it, presenting it as one option among others rather than the sine qua non of rigorous or radical thought. And here “postcritique” sought to break the hold of a coercive binary by offering an alternative to the pseudo-choice of being critical or uncritical (who would ever want to be the latter?)

Such arguments, as Diaz et al show in their essay, did not come out of nowhere; there is a long history of reckoning with the limits of critique in both the humanities and social sciences. My own questioning of the overreach of certain forms of political and historical interpretation has sometimes been mistaken for a defense of art's autonomy and its distance from the social world. It springs, rather, from a desire to theorize the

social lives of literature, art, and media differently; inspired most recently by the work of Bruno Latour but also by a longstanding interest in both hermeneutics and cultural studies, as well as sociological debates about structure and agency.

Diaz et al point to E.P. Thompson, Jacques Rancière, and Grace Lee Boggs as three figures who have criticized theorists' objectifying or condescending relation to their objects of study. Let me briefly note other touchstones that are especially relevant for my own thought. Trained in the tradition of German critical theory, I sided with Habermas contra Adorno in my first book, which coined the idea of a feminist counter-public sphere, later taken up by Nancy Fraser and others. Habermas's case for the emancipatory potential of everyday language was, to my mind, far more compelling than Adorno's efforts to detect hidden critiques of capitalism in the formal properties of esoteric artworks – or the poststructuralist rhetoric of rupture and transgression that was then in vogue. My graduate training also introduced me to philosophical hermeneutics. Gadamer's work offers a vital counterweight to critique in its emphasis on understanding and receptivity: insisting on the importance of allowing oneself to be challenged and changed by the words of others. Gadamer and Habermas are usually portrayed as being at loggerheads, but even though Habermas remains firmly committed to critique, he kickstarted a process of questioning its elitist and paternalistic dimensions that – as we'll see – has been extended by later German thinkers.

My first academic job was in a school of communication in Western Australia, where I worked alongside key figures in cultural studies such as Ien Ang and John Hartley. Taking issue with a history of aristocratic theorizing about the bovine sameness of the mass audience, cultural studies offered yet another critique of critique, calling for ethnographic studies that would engage substantively and sympathetically with the responses of ordinary readers and viewers. The idea of "articulation" at the heart of cultural studies, moreover, was an explicit rebuttal of the idea of a social totality governed by a single logic as well as the belief that cultural forms are essentially tied to specific groups – that certain genres, for example, can be stamped as bourgeois or patriarchal. Ideas, interests, values, texts, and persons "hook up" in different and sometimes unpredictable ways, as connections are made, unmade, or remade (Slack, 1996). Thanks to this wariness of functionalism, cultural studies often prefers to start

from a concrete case, while remaining acutely conscious of how theorizing can alienate or objectify those who are deemed not in the know (Johnson, 1986-7: 43).

The social sciences offered another resource for reckoning with the limits of critique. While sociologists have been criticized by literary critics for their reductive readings of texts, they are more attuned than the latter to the “many different and often disconnected arrangements that govern social experience” (Levine, 2015: 18). Given its diverse focal points and subfields – from the sociology of the family to the sociology of religion, from the study of social movements to the analysis of bureaucracies – sociologists are all too aware that the shorthand concept “society” encompasses very different institutions, communities, norms, and behaviors (Felski, 2023). And while literary scholars often assume that the language of structure is the only alternative to individualism, sociologists have wrestled with the problems of the structure concept for decades. A telegraphic summary of these problems might include: its radical diminishing of the agency and perspicuity of ordinary persons; its inability, as a synchronic concept, to account for movement and change, and its underplaying of disjuncture, conflict, and unpredictability in social life. Contemporary Frankfurt School thinker Robin Celikates, for example, is weary of hearing about “the cognitive bondage of everyday understanding and its liberation by theory” (2019: 10). How can compelling visions of emancipation be sustained, he wonders, once they are severed from everyday understanding and pitted against the ideas and idioms of the less educated? Celikates offers a lucid overview of the problems of the *epistemological break* – the insistence on a sharp divide between theory and experience, between academic knowing and everyday unknowing – as manifest in the work of Bourdieu and Althusser.

What of the more egalitarian methods in the social sciences? Here Celikates turns to ethnomethodology, with its commitment to describing the practices of everyday life in meticulous detail, as well as the sociology of critique associated with Luc Boltanski. The latter contends, contra Bourdieu, that the “naïve spontaneous sociology” of ordinary people is neither naïve nor spontaneous; rather, individuals routinely reflect, question, and criticize as they move between different milieus and frameworks of value. Critique is not the exclusive property of sociologists training their gaze *upon* the world; it already exists *in* the world. And yet – here we have cause to hesitate – orienting

oneself exclusively to what others do and say would seem to rule out any form of independent judgement. The job description of intellectuals is radically curtailed, consisting of “a mere inventory of the forms of self-understanding that happen to exist” (Celikates, 2019: 108). The scholar as critic has been replaced by the scholar as a ventriloquizer of popular sentiments. (Similar objections surfaced in cultural studies, which was accused of replacing aristocratic pessimism with uncritical populism.)

I discuss Celikates, along with Axel Honneth, Rahel Jaeggi, Nikolas Kompridis, and Hartmut Rosa in my current book manuscript on the contemporary Frankfurt School. While it would be foolhardy to bring these thinkers under the umbrella of postcritique – a word they would no doubt repudiate – there are some striking affinities: an interest in developing a wider range of affirmative vocabularies beyond a familiar language of utopia and the utopian, a heightened attention to everyday lifeworlds, and a reckoning with the limits of critique. Hartmut Rosa, for example, describes the aim of *Resonance: A Sociology of Our Relations to the World* as “an attempt to provide Critical Theory with a *positive* concept that will allow it to move beyond critique and embark on the search for a better form of being” (Rosa, 2019: 444). As well as coming up with a theory of alienation that attends to everyday experience – what she calls a “microanalysis of phenomena of alienation” (2014: xiii) – Jaeggi wants to clarify what it would mean to lead a life that is more or less one’s own. Kompridis remarks that it’s not enough to unmask power relations: “one needs also to initiate alternative ways of being, of going on with our *everyday* practices differently, compellingly” (Kompridis, 2011: 1072). How, then, to account for the regularities of social life – patterns of inequality and domination, foreseeable forms of group behavior – without obliterating the idiosyncrasy, variety, and stubborn opacity of individual persons?

Hartmut Rosa’s writing on resonance, for example, would seem to have much to offer media theory. Taking issue with the philosophy of history embraced by Adorno and Horkheimer, Rosa argues that “modernity cannot be simply understood as a catastrophe of resonance. . . it has also greatly heightened our sensitivities to resonance and in many respects even produced certain capacities for resonance in the first place” (Rosa, 2021: 364). Rosa’s declared aim is to radicalize the idea of relation as primordial rather than secondary, and as a source of aliveness and plenitude as well as alienation or domination. Resonance denotes a reciprocal relation between two bodies – as one

vibrates, another starts to move – that manifests itself in relations to persons, to the material world, and to artworks, belief systems and ideas. Rosa riffs on its acoustic connotations; resounding and vibration, the tuning of forks and the striking of chords. Yet resonance is not to be confused with consonance or harmony: “resonance means not merging in unity, but encountering another as an Other” (447). Nor does it require positive feelings; we may find ourselves deeply affected by a desolate landscape, a hard-hitting documentary, a literary depiction of anomie. Resonance, moreover, has implications for form as well as content. The public impact of Rosa’s book – which was featured on the cover of the news magazine *Stern* – has much to do with his eloquent prose, evocative examples, and stirring appeals to the lifeworlds of his readers, in ways that speak directly to the calls for a more lyrical or public sociology mentioned by Diaz et al (Felski, 2022).

The question of audience offers a segue into the editors’ invitation to think about the current conjuncture. Who is critique *for*? To whom are we speaking? What are its effects? Might those effects include unanticipated or unwanted results, or perhaps no results at all? And if so, is a doubling down on critique the savviest or most strategic response?

Most academics publish in venues that are geared toward a readership of fellow scholars within the same field or subfield. If we take on board Alan Finlayson’s proposal that “the force and meaning of political critique is found only in its effects,” it is hard to see how a critical reading of *Great Expectations* or *Game of Thrones* that is perused by perhaps a dozen colleagues has any claim to being radical or emancipatory, however heartfelt the commitments of its author. A lack of attention to channels of transmission and mediation can lead to a drastic over-estimation of the impact of academic prose. How likely is an essay in *Critical Inquiry* or *Cultural Studies* to send even the slightest tremor through the tumultuous arena of real-world politics? In this context, it’s surprising that contributors to this issue do not elaborate on the value and limits of critique in the classroom – one place where academics, and academic writing, have the potential to reach larger constituencies. (On this question, see, for example, Kai Wortmann (2020) and other essays in a special issue on postcritical pedagogy.)

This potential has recently become the target of reactionary politicians and demagogues, especially in the United States. One thing that has changed since *The*

Limits of Critique's publication, as the editors point out, is the intensifying attacks on universities by the right. Attempts to eliminate the teaching of critical race theory in several states have been widely publicized; in Florida, meanwhile, DeSantis has expressed his interest in banning all forms of critical theory. Moreover, writes Dan Royles, “under a [new rule approved in late March](#) by the Florida Board of Governors, each faculty member’s tenure case must be reviewed every five years. Those found to be out of ‘compliance with state laws,’ such as those restricting what and how we can teach, will stand to lose their jobs” (Royles, 2023). Such attacks on academic autonomy are chilling and the lack of response from university presidents in Florida is equally troubling. It would hardly be a net intellectual or political gain, however, to conclude that the current climate therefore sanctions only two camps: pro- or anti-critique. Postcritique, as the name suggests, presumes a knowledge of critique; it is not a rejection of an intellectual tradition but a working through of its limits.

The reckoning with these limits in literary studies has largely addressed its insufficiencies as a method, whether in interpreting works of art or in clarifying their social uses. The very illuminating article by Alan Finlayson in this issue, however, highlights its potential lack of effectiveness as a political gambit in the public domain, thanks to the confluence of new forms of “anti-political” politics with the affordances of social media. Finlayson considers the US public figure Ann Coulter as a prominent symbol of a “reactionary digital politics” that blends neoliberal and religious ideas. As he shows, this politics relies on styles of performance and provocation that have little to do with reasoned debate and that are promoted by mass-mediated forms of parasocial intimacy. Figures such as Coulter do not need the imprimatur of academia or serious journalism, which they profess to disdain; public authority increasingly accrues to those able to master the rhetoric and style of media platforms, where the divisions between argument and entertainment are blurred and the rapid circulation of memes, soundbites, and TikTok videos severs ideas from larger contexts. Techniques of interrogating and demystifying would seem to offer ineffectual counter-strategies to figures such as Coulter; as Finlayson remarks, “they certainly don’t care about your or my textual critique.”

Nor, it would seem, do most of her followers. “Rational argument and compelling evidence by itself,” Wendy Brown points out in her new book, “does not counter

popular fears and frustrations, attachments and yearnings” (Brown, 2023: 57). Thinking with Weber about the role of charisma in political life, Brown worries that the Right are milking its power to their advantage, even as the Left cling to uber-rationalist tenets and moralistic attitudes. Brown’s book is, among other things, a call to Leftists to convey more effectively their own passionate attachments and to plunge into the affective and non-rational dimensions of public life. To craft, in short, what we might call a politics of resonance. Moreover, assuming that the Left has a monopoly on reason and truth and that anyone on the Right can only be acting out of greed, stupidity, or false consciousness can easily become a counter-productive strategy, reproducing “an intellectual disdain that many drawn to the right chafe against and that right-wing politicians exploit” (Brown, 2023: 54).

Here we must reckon with the status of critical theory as a new form of cultural capital. Nick Holm points out that high levels of education are increasingly correlated not with an aesthetic disposition (an orientation toward art “for its own sake,” as outlined by Bourdieu) but a *critical disposition*: fluency in the language and assumptions of critical theory. Like the aesthetic disposition, this critical disposition relies on norms and interpretative conventions: no longer the formalist analysis of artworks but the interrogation of those same works to demonstrate their complicity with larger structures of power. Even as academics profess their radical commitments, they deploy vocabularies, assumptions, and ways of reading that are unequally distributed; in a knowledge economy, social status is increasingly tied to education and academic credentials. “To apprehend critique as a disposition is to foreground this relationship between modes of knowledge and the educational privilege that allows those modes to be first encountered and then internalized: to consider how knowing, applying and embodying critique as a seemingly natural way of engaging the world can also manifest as a form of educationally-sanctioned power” (Holm, 2021: 156).

Marxist critics are likely to respond by pointing out that educational status is not where the real power lies: that right-wing rants against “cultural elites” are a smokescreen hiding accelerating levels of economic inequality and the growth of a billionaire class. While there’s some truth to this argument, to conclude that the working class must be deluded about its real interests is to rely on an essentialist understanding of interests – long criticized by Laclau and Mouffe among others-- that fails to grapple with how

interests are mediated by frameworks of interpretation and the binding force of moral sentiments and affective ties. As I've noted elsewhere, "the growing divisions, culturally and politically, between the highly credentialed and everyone else can inspire what Michael Sandel calls a politics of humiliation that can be easily exploited by populist movements" (Felski, 2021: 111). In this context, academics are often oblivious to the ways in which their manner of communicating can make others feel small. Meanwhile, even as economic inequality intensifies, the silence about class in contemporary theory is rarely broken, White men are routinely lumped together as a group and chastised for their race, gender, and cis privilege, with little heed given to the countless individuals who are out of work or trapped in low-status and low-paid jobs and who are disproportionately prone to deaths of despair. Critique, in such contexts, seems virtually guaranteed to trigger further defensiveness, resentment, and a flight to the right.

Its proponents may contend that they are not blaming individuals but showing how they are being manipulated by systemic structures of whiteness or toxic masculinity. Celikates, however, queries the assumption that it's acceptable to treat others as dopes as long as you can show that it's someone else's fault. To treat the beliefs, intentions, and motives of one's fellow human beings as nothing more than the effects of structures is to objectify and dehumanize them (2019: 46). Denying their ability to reflect on their circumstances "obscures the complexity of social reality in general and of everyday practice in particular, and will not be able to grasp these in a manner that is anywhere near adequate" (68). Moreover, intellectual claims to greater knowledge can easily veer in an anti-democratic direction, as claims to epistemic superiority are translated into claims to political authority. Perspectives that clash with the critic's own can be disqualified via an assortment of ready-to-hand adjectives (complicit, neoliberal, nostalgic, confused, naive) or explained away ("how predictable that you would say such a thing, given the privileges of your race/gender/ sexuality!") rather than engaged in their own terms as arguments and normative claims. The result is what Celikates calls an immunization strategy that guards the critic from being contaminated by the views of others.

The asymmetry is difficult to overlook; the critic expects to have her arguments taken seriously as arguments rather than symptoms and does not see her social position as

predetermining every aspect of her being in the world. It's hard to see on what grounds this same respect can be withheld from others. While in some contexts criticism remains a vital and important weapon, in others it can become counter-productive, causing people to dig in their heels, or driving away those who one wishes to convert to one's own way of thinking. (Here cultural critics might benefit from reading up on the psychology of persuasion.) In short, it may sometimes be wise to rein in an impulse to judge or condemn in the interests of fostering solidarity, empathy, and the building of cross-class coalitions. Less criticizing and more composing, as Latour might say; less breaking of idols and more building of feasible futures.

As such comments might suggest, I share Paddy Scannell's view (2015) that the messy and varied flux of experience cannot be summarily explained via a single category such as ideology. And yet, while experience cannot help but affect how we see the world, it cannot serve as the full and sufficient ground of knowledge claims. "The self-same events," as Perry Anderson points out in his debate with E.P. Thompson, "can be lived through by agents who draw diametrically opposed conclusions to them" (1980: 28-29). We are faced, once more, with the question raised by Celikates: what are the options beyond the arrogance of the epistemological break and an equally insufficient posture of automatic deference towards the opinions of others?

Here I find helpful Simon Susen's notion of an *epistemic continuum*. In an essay engaging the writings of the German theorist Hans-Herbert Kögler, Susen applauds his blending of critique with a hermeneutic perspective that takes seriously the self-understanding and ethical commitments of ordinary actors. As he points out, "the seemingly distortive aspects of knowledge production – such as bias, doxa, ideology, prejudice, background, milieu, etc. – permeate both "ordinary" and "scientific" modes of epistemic engagement" (Susen, 2022: 40). Pre-existing inequalities help to determine what is known, or knowable; even if everyone has the potential to be critical, some people have far greater access to information and ideas than others. Yet academics need to acknowledge their role as specific rather than universal intellectuals (Foucault, 1980) whose disciplinary expertise does not render them the supreme authorities on the interests, interiorities, motives, and desires of their fellow human beings. "Rather than opposing 'ordinary' and 'scientific' ways of attributing meaning to and acting

upon reality, we should seek to cross-fertilize these – arguably complementary – modes of relating to the world” (Susen, 2022: 40).

My current book manuscript is an attempt to carry out such an act of cross-fertilization, juxtaposing Frankfurt School thought with novels and memoirs – such as Didier Eribon’s *Returning to Reims*, Dionne Brand’s *Theory*, and Magda Szabo’s *The Door* – that center on the relations between intellectuals and others. When and why do such relations misfire? How can the highly educated make others feel small? In what ways can they find themselves trapped in the cul-de-sac of perception (Brand)? What does the culture of intellectuals look like when viewed from the skeptical perspective of an illiterate housekeeper (Szabo) or a factory worker (Eribon)? Literary texts that situate the lives of writers and thinkers in concrete and fleshed-out milieus remind us that intellectual thought does not transcend lifeworlds but constitutes yet another lifeworld: governed by its own habits and hobbyhorses, insights and blindspots, institutional pressures and idiosyncratic personalities.

What would it mean to reckon more fully with the grounding of such thought, to acknowledge the ordinariness of critique? Looking back on a history of intellectuals writing about everyday life, Stefan Collini (2021) remarks that T. S. Eliot and George Orwell dwell nostalgically on such symbols of Englishness as playing darts, boiled cabbage, going to the races, Derby day, Wensleydale cheese, doing the crossword, and having nice cup of tea. And yet one thing that never appears on such lists, he points out, is writing cultural criticism. Acknowledging the ordinariness of such criticism – as part of the everyday practice of intellectual lifeworlds – might help to tone down the messiah complex that Jonjo Brady describes in this issue. Could we remain on a more equal footing with those we criticize? Might we disagree without presuming complicity or duplicity, acting as if our keener vision surpasses the beclouded or benighted understanding of others?

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