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On the Topography of Critique

Hakan Gürses

Translated by Gerrit Jackson

In his novel *Engelszungen*, Dimitré Dinev tells the story of two boys. Iskren, the son of the high Party functionary, observes a contrast between two members of his family:

"His grandmother much preferred to speak of the past, his father, of the future. She who had herself experienced the things of which she told, sometimes admitted that she might be wrong, he, who had not even seen that which was to come, was always certain." [1]

This contrast can also be read as a mockery of real-socialist Bulgaria during the 1970s. The different attitudes of two generations (as told from the perspective of the third) with respect to time are representative as well of two opposing social forces: stubborn relics of the old system vs. progress. Yet did not history and future form a dialectical unity in Marxist social critique? How could they thus clash in the "new society" (not just in Bulgaria)? How could the critique of the present degenerate into a superstitious belief in the magic of the future, only to be caught up with, in the end, by the past? Or, if I set the bitter experiences of

real socialism aside and ask somewhat more generally: how does *critique* become *power*?

I will attempt to sketch a *topography of critique* that takes these questions as its point of departure.

Facets of Critique

In the *Encyclopédie* article on *critique*, Jean-François Marmontel suggests contemplating the notion from two sides: as "the sort of study to which we owe the restitution of ancient literature," and as "an enlightened examination and an equitable judgment of human productions." [2] He thus describes, on the one hand, the humanist-philological activity of reception and examination that brings the "critical edition" of our days to mind. On the other hand, he points to a higher perspective and a meta-discourse comprising logics and aesthetics as well as the scientific scrutiny of truth. This 18th-century definition contains almost all the semantic and functional facets that have inhered to the notion of critique since antiquity and continue to do so to this day—with the exception of one aspect: the notion's *agonistic* component.

In classical Greek usage, the term *critique* appears mostly as an adjective (*kritikos*) and a verb (*krinein*): *critical* activities include distinguishing, separating, deciding, judging, incriminating—and *contending*.[3] The first group of meanings has its contexts in ethics, epistemology, jurisdiction, and, lastly, in philology. The good must be distinguished from the bad, the true must be separated from the false, the innocent and the guilty must be told apart and the latter, charged and adjudged; finally, one must be able to ascertain whether a received narration is really Homeric.

Criticism is the *capacity* to make distinctions, an *activity* that both distinguishes and judges.

The last meaning, to *contend*, in contrast, refers to an *agony*—primarily in the medical sense: there is a *critical* juncture in the course of an illness that can lead into a fatal ending as well as a recovery. The critical understood as a *crisis*: time (past, juncture, and future) is a factor that comes into play here, as well as the potential for change: it is not just about judging a given something as good or bad, and thus separating the good from the bad; but also about acknowledging that the good can *turn* evil, health into moribundity—and that the process of this crisis is, to a certain degree, subject to influence by one's own actions. In a crisis, the critical takes on a voluntaristic momentum: as a contention with higher powers.

This agonistic facet of the term's meaning will return centuries later under a different guise: as insurrection, refusal, and rejection. Interestingly, we encounter it this time within the framework of a philological activity. At its outset stands the simple question: *How ought we to read the sacred books?*

The explosive power of this question becomes clear only before the background of the religious strife of the 16th century: the catholic *principle of tradition*, according to which the church fathers had been appointed to be guiding readers and guardians of the only adequate exegesis, now squarely faces the protestant *scriptural principle*, which holds also "ordinary" minds capable of reading and commenting upon the sacred texts. Paradoxically enough, theologians and humanists on *both* sides gave *one and the same* answer (if to contrary ends) to the question regarding the understanding of the meaning, and its method: the sacred texts must be read *critically*. Thus they all got into trouble with their

respective churches: Leigh, the Presbyterian, and Capellus, the Calvinist, just as much as Simon, the Catholic, and later Bayle.[4]

The method and literary genre, called *critica sacra* or *historical textual criticism*, finds its philosophically most interesting representative in Baruch de Spinoza, who is not only well acquainted with the arguments of both parties of divided Christendom, but has perfect command of the Hebrew language—and thus wields the best philological tool of biblical criticism, the best *critical weapon* of his time.

Of course, the question as to the right way to read did not appear for the first time in the 17th century. Already in the 3rd century, Origen had noted:

"(...) we think that the way that seems to us right for understanding the Scriptures and seeking their meaning is such that we are taught what sort of understanding we should have of it by no less than Scripture itself. (...) Just as a human being is said to be made up of body, soul, and spirit, so also is sacred Scripture, which has been granted by God's gracious dispensation for man's salvation."[5]

Thus arose the well-known "threefold sense" (*historia*, *moralis*, and *allegoria*), to which St. Augustine added a fourth (*anagogia*), and which became the established doctrine of medieval Christian hermeneutics. [6] More than 14 centuries after Origen, around 1670, Spinoza will give an almost identical answer:

"Therefore knowledge of (...) almost all the contents of Scripture (...) must be sought from Scripture alone (...)."[7]

Yet there is a difference in the details: Origen wants to gather from scripture not only its meaning but also the required *method*.

Spinoza equally excludes extra-textual sources of meaning (such as the belief in an unwavering truth); yet he is far from deriving the method from scripture:

"Now to put it briefly, I hold that the method of interpreting Scripture is no different from the method of interpreting nature, and is in fact in complete accord with it. For the method of interpreting Nature consists essentially in composing a detailed study of Nature from which, as being the source of our assured data, we can deduce the definitions of things of Nature. Now in exactly the same way the task of Scriptural interpretation requires us to make a straightforward study of Scripture, and from this, as the source of our fixed data and principles, to deduce by logical inference the meaning of the authors of Scripture."[8]

Features of Critique

The method of *critica sacra* requires that any hermeneutic undertaking meet three conditions. Firstly, the meaning of a text can no longer be disclosed without knowledge of the history of the text, its language, the time of its production, and its author. Commentary had always created a *timeless* text precisely by adapting the bible to the present. Criticism, in contrast, devoted itself to a *temporally determinate* meaning of the sacred texts in order to arrive at a true understanding of them. The hermeneutic circle unfolds in historical time.

Secondly, syllogisms or mere references to the tradition no longer count as arguments—any understanding of meaning must be based on "good documents (exterior proof, actes)"—thus the Catholic Richard Simon. [9] Thirdly, a distinction must be made: the

critical method seeks in the text not primarily *truth* but *meaning*. [10] When a biblical passage is incomprehensible, that does not by itself imply that a higher truth is concealed in it. Criticism means the end of allegory, of the severalfold sense of scripture—of commentary.[11]

I would like to advance the claim that critique has its paradigm in this *critica sacra*. For historical textual criticism unites *all* features that any critical endeavor will henceforth exhibit—in varying dosages and different orders of priority. Which are these features?

1. *Critique creates an outside*: If distinguishing and separating are the central activities of critique, the latter always appeals to a position or criterion that lies outside of that which is criticized and of the critique itself: an outside that serves as critique's Archimedean point. *According to what* must the good be separated from the bad? *Following which criteria* can one distinguish the right reading from a false one? This is, for instance, how Spinoza proceeds: the method is not contained *in* scripture, but *outside of* it: in the interpretation of nature. Truth must be sought not in scripture but in history; the meaning, not in the language that was retained but in the one that has been lost; authority, finally, not in the authors' holiness but in the method, in linguistic knowledge, in reason. *Critique* and *criterion* are not only etymologically related: the former presupposes the latter.

2. *Critique makes history*: by introducing the historical view into the hermeneutic process, critique also divides up time. In order to understand how the object of critique (the present) has become what it is (the past), critique must presuppose a state of affairs that has not yet come to pass (the future). The introduction of history adumbrates a future that seems within the reach of critique: to *separate out* the false readings means to permit an eventual arrival at

an “expurgated” text. By virtue of its intervention, every critique opens up a window out to a blurry future. Critique resembles the *Angelus Novus* Walter Benjamin described as the angel of history; [12] the one difference being that the angel of critique countenances not the past, nor in fact the future. He turns around in the attempt to understand his presence—and in the process *makes* history: with a determinate past and an as yet undetermined future.

3. *Critique furnishes contentions with erudition*: if I have designated the agonistic component of the notion of critique as “insurrection, refusal, and rejection,” that is not to say that such an attitude became possible only from the 17th century onward. Yet historical textual criticism furnished such contentions, which may well always have existed, with an admixture of scholarship, a contentious erudition: demonstrable lines of argument, philological meticulousness, historical knowledge, and a finely attuned hermeneutic sense united with courage, steadfastness, willpower, and impatience. Critique differs both from the progress of science and from revolution, understood as the battle for power. Michael Walzer sums this up:

“The critique of society is less a practical progeny of scientific knowledge than the erudite cousin of the common complaint.”[13]

The philological-hermeneutic method of textual criticism has far-reaching theological and political consequences. It is the apex of the first great battle that European critique led against the authorities. This is what Michel Foucault recognized three centuries later, writing that “critique is, historically speaking, biblical.”[14]

The Critical Topoi

What of this has remained? For today's theology, to read sacred writings critically is a matter of course. What has become of the socially critical endeavors since the 17th century? I have delineated an answer to this question at the outset. Why have theories, discourses, movements, and attitudes that all bore the epithet *critical* sooner or later entered a phase of "rigidity"? Why, after striking beginnings, do they lose their critical sting? Why do they become part of a system that must itself be subjected to critique? Lacking efficiency, too great distances from the "masses," human corruptibility, and insufficient perseverance are frequently advanced as reasons for such a conversion.

Yet I would suggest to examine the *ground* that any critique, at its outset, prepares as its own standpoint, its own "base"—in order, on the one hand, to have a better view of the events it intends to interfere with; on the other hand, to be quite visible itself. It serves as a "contrasting foil"[15] that must be first designed, then justified so that it can be opposed to the present state of affairs (the object of critique). In most cases, a well-elaborated theory forms this base, sometimes a collection of norms, moral standards, and notions of value—or, not infrequently, a canon of names and texts. This brings us to the first and third of the features I have enumerated above: the *outside* and the *erudition* are redeployed as the ground of critique.

This ground, the *topos*, is at the same time the foundation on which the future, initially indeterminate, is erected piece by piece: a future that any critique indicates in its intervention, and that soon becomes the promise of critique and then its *own* future—and thus, sooner or later, its doom. Its, as it were, "topical orientation toward the future" transmutes critique into something that has

passed, into a past. And here the second feature makes itself felt: the *historicalness* of critique. My hypothesis, then, is this: when the ambiguities inscribed into critique (outside and inside; past and future; contention and erudition) are transformed into a topos—can be described as a topos—then a critical theory or a critical movement begins to undergo re-coding into a *source of power*.

A *topography of critique* can be helpful in approaching the theoretical question whether a critique without a topos is possible. To this end, I would like to list three topoi according to historical and structural considerations: the first I will simply call *topos*; the second, *utopos*; and the third, *idiotopos*.[16]

Topical critique: Critique sometimes finds its topos in norms, theories, and conventions that, while well founded, are not universally applied. Human rights, for instance, are a time-tested ground for critique. Thus, a present-day critical discourse incriminates every nation-state with various infractions against human rights, and observes relevant processes of deterioration or improvement. In another field, that of literary and art criticism, the correlative topos is classicism: here, a canon of time-tested norms and corresponding names form the base on which the critic can stand.

Another variety of topical critique is represented by "immanent" critique, which was advocated by Romanticism as well as, recently, by the US-American philosopher of society, Michael Walzer[17]—in this case, the point is to approach the object of critique (the work of art, society) through its own norms and to "remind" it of them. Critique as the interpretation of that which is.

In topical critique, one can identify a "topical topos," a normative foundation that aims at general agreement. It is a reformatory critique, immanent to the system, and formative of identity.

Utopian critique: "By no means does utopian mean (...) impossible; only unreal, that is, not yet or—no longer possible," Klaus J. Heinisch writes.[18] The *utopos* is the "no-place" from which the real place, the present society, can be criticized. The description of this "no-place" already implies a critique—as does Thomas More's *Utopia*, from which the literary genre takes its name.

Yet the utopos need not be a brainchild, derived from moral ideals, religious notions, or rational principles, and projected into a future. The future, the dawn of "being-different," can also be distilled from the contemplation of history. Thus, Marx wrote, in analogy to the natural sciences:

"Human anatomy contains a key to the anatomy of the ape."[19]

The more developed form that is the present thus enables us to understand the rudimentary form that is the past. Yet how can I understand the today?

"The so-called historical presentation of development is founded, as a rule, on the fact that the latest form regards the previous ones as steps leading up to itself, and, since it is only rarely and under quite specific conditions able to criticize itself (...) it always conceives them one-sidedly."[20]

The present is incapable of criticizing itself—as long as it has no insight into or notion of something higher: of the tomorrow. Max Horkheimer notes:

"The concerns of critical thought, too, are those of most men, but they are not recognized to be such. The concepts which emerge under its influence are critical of the present. The Marxist categories of class, exploitation, surplus value, profit, pauperization, and breakdown are elements in a conceptual whole, and the meaning of this whole is to be sought not in the preservation of contemporary society but in its transformation into the right kind of society."[21]

This right must be constructed at a place that has never been realized yet. *Utopian critique* has its topos in a higher form of social development. Without the notion of this higher form, critique would either have to displace its foundational argument onto moral norms, or end up as something that Marx and Engels had mentioned rather unkindly: anarchist arbitrariness.

Idiotopic critique: Another, seemingly solipsistic topos results from the peculiar perspective (*idios: one's own, private, distinct*) especially of groups that are victims of discrimination, suppression, or marginalization. Their own history, in most cases one of suppression, is articulated in *idiotopic* critique as a "contrasting foil"—as is the peculiar "difference" based on which this group was constructed in the first place, and which it has turned around into an identity framed in positive terms.

Such a *perspectivist* critique, which creates its topos in the pronouns "we" and "our," unconcerned for the universality or the theoretical consistency of such foundations, is a component of any kind of identity politics. Michel Foucault offers an example of this phenomenon with the "historico-political discourse" of "the war of races."[22]

This enumeration of the three topoi that serve critique as argumentative supports and standpoints prompts the question—it is at least logically justified—whether a critique might be conceivable that does *not* require a *topos*. This question becomes the more urgent when the hypothesis, advanced above, is convincing: that the topos represents a trap that critique builds for itself.

Within the frame of this short essay, I can only refer to two sources that make such an *atopic critique* appear possible. The first source, historical textual criticism, suggests that a critique is possible that, while constructing an outside, adumbrating a future, and developing a perspectival erudition, does not erect out of these materials, or rather: *on top of them*, a base that later becomes critique's prison (and, as the example of real socialism demonstrated, not only critique's prison!). Any topos forces critique to assume an *identity*. Critique, however, is by its very definition directed against identities[23] by pointing out *differences*.

I would like to conclude with the words of Michel Foucault, my second source:

"In the end, critique exists only in relation to something other than itself: it is an instrument, the means to a future, or a truth that critique will neither know nor be, it is a perspective onto a domain where it would like to act as police and where it is incapable of making the law."[24]

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[1] Dinev (2006): 329 f.

[2] Marmontel (1819-20), 284.

[3] Röttgers (1982): 651 f. Cf. also Bormann (1976) und Koselleck (1988). Since these two dictionary entries and Koselleck's definitive book offer detailed information on the history of the concept of critique, I will mention only a few cornerstones of this history.

[4] Cf. Röttgers (1982): 656 and Koselleck (1988): 105ff.

[5] Origen (1979): 182.

[6] Cf. Szondi (1975) 20 ff. and Brinkmann (1980): 226 ff.

[7] Spinoza (1991): 90.

[8] Ibid., 89.

[9] Simon (1776): 21.

[10] Spinoza (1991): 91.

[11] Cf. Gürses (1996).

[12] Cf. Benjamin (1968): 257f.: "A Klee painting named 'Angelus Novus' shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away

from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress."

[13] Walzer (1993): 78.

[14] Foucault (1990): 39.

[15] Cf. Bonß (2003): 368.

[16] Cf. Gürses (2004), where I had used different names for the three topoi of critique.

[17] Cf. Walzer (1993) und (1997).

[18] Heinisch (1993): 262.

[19] Marx (1973): 105.

[20] Ibid., 106.

[21] Horkheimer (1972): 218.

[22] Foucault (1997): 59-65.

[23] Cf. Holloway (2002): 106ff.

[24] Foucault (1990): 36f.