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To Embody Critique

Some Theses. Some Examples

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"Not only does it matter which principles we chose but also which forces, which people will apply them"
Merleau-Ponty

1. The problem of critique has traditionally been a problem of conscience. Today it is a problem of the body. How do we incarnate critique? How do critical thought acquire a body? If critique was used traditionally to combat darkness, today it must combat impotence. The global world is completely illuminated. Our minds are enlightened. There is nothing which we don't see: misery, lies, exploitation, torture, exclusion, etc., all are completely exposed and brought to light. Nonetheless we are capable of doing so little. About ourselves. For our world. We can say it all and nonetheless we have nothing relevant to add. To embody critique is not to find the correct wording, nor to become complacent in the gardens of good conscience, nor to sell the cheapest solutions to existing institutions. To embody critique means to ask how to

subvert one's life nowadays in such a way that the world can no longer remain the same.

2. The critique that historically fought ignorance had a hero: the artist-intellectual. Their words and their actions were bearers of light: analysis, metanarratives, denunciation, provocation... These were the tools of an intervention made before and about the world. Artist-intellectuals worked from their desk, from their studio. That was their balcony. From there, their word could remain pure or sell itself to the powers that be, sacrifice itself for the cause of the struggle or return the stability to the current order. This word could be right or wrong, faithful or treacherous. The artist-intellectual could even abandon her/his balcony and join the multitude. A critique that battles impotence does not have a hero, or it has many. Its expression is anonymous, without a face. Its place of enunciation is wandering, intermittent, visible and invisible at the same time. Today, who is the subject of enunciation of critical thought? Where will we find it? If we cannot name it, that is because it is an anonymous and ambivalent subject. Composed of theory and practice, of word and action, this subject is brilliant and miserable, isolated and collective, strong and weak. Its truth does not illuminate the world, rather its truth contradicts it. If the world claims: "This is all there is," there exists a *we* that responds: "That cannot be all".

3. Impotence is not the consequence of a historical weakness of social movements or of any other kind of political subject that we can think of. Their weakness is the result of a big change in social relations, where a logic of pertinence has been replaced by a logic of connection. This means that the inclusion/exclusion of each one of us is decided not through our relationships of pertinence to some wider collective (a people, community, class) but rather in our capacity of connecting. Connections that must be fed and

renovated permanently, maintained by each person throughout all activities in which s/he is completely invested in. In the network-society, everyone is on their own in their connection to the world. Everyone fights their specific battle in order to avoid losing that connectivity to the world, to avoid remaining outside, to avoid making a story of exclusion out of their own biography. To spend one's life looking for work, to risk one's life crossing borders: those are the two paradigmatic movements, the biographies of the *precarious* one and the immigrant one that we all are. The logic of pertinence had it own forms of domination. The logic of connection is simple and binary: either you are connected or you are dead. With this reformulation of social links, -which could be understood as a result of the historic defeat of the workers' movement-, every life is put into motion toward the world. No one is sure of where they are: connections, personal and non-transferable, are inseparable from the threat of dis-connection. For this reason, this new social contract converts us into producers and reproducers of reality, in knots that strengthen the network: established unilaterally through each person. This network obligates through self-obligation, controls through self-control, represses through self repression.

4. Impotence is not the result of a historical weakness of social movements, nor is it the result of an incapacity of the "I". "I don't do/cannot do anything": not for society, not for the preservation of the planet, not to stop war... Nothing. This is the declaration of self-contemplation by a subject that can only move between culpability and cynicism. It is the voice of that "I" that is isolated in its connection to the network. Alone in a lonely world. Alone with all the rest. From its precarious and depoliticized connection, that "I" is prey for moralism, opinion, and psychology. This "I" moves between the spheres of some values that orbit around the

world, with which s/he judges and is judged; the marketplace of opinions that offer this "I" a position in society and the restrictive environment of discomfort/comfort.

5. Fighting impotence and embodying critique must pass firstly through attacking that "I". Attacking the values with which we fly around the world, attacking the opinions with which we protect ourselves from the world, attacking our own particular and precarious comfort. If critique can define itself as a theoretical-practical discourse that has emancipatory effects, the principal objective of critique today must be to free ourselves from the "I". The "I" is not our singularity. The "I" is the device that simultaneously isolates and connects us to the network-society. Each person with their values, opinions, and states of mind can remain calm before the world, can remain impotent before the world. Cynical and guilty, the "I" always knows where it must remain.

6. Against the grain of the modern tradition, developing critical thought does not mean bringing the subject to its highest degree of maturity and independence but rather, uprooting the "I" from that place that maintains it continuously in "its place" before the world. The modern ideal of emancipation was linked to the idea that to free oneself really meant to "takeoff" from the world of necessity, to undo the link until achieving a god-like self-sufficiency, individually or collectively. This would be the path from the kingdom of necessity toward the kingdom of liberty in its diverse forms. In our network-society, the question of a critical or emancipatory thought should perhaps be different: to ask what is our capacity to conquer liberty in the act of networking itself. Nowadays, liberation has to do with our capacity to explore the networked link and fortify it: the links with a planet-world, reduced to an object of consumption, a surface of displacements

and a depository of wastes; as well as the links with those "Others" who, while always condemned to being "other", have been evicted from the possibility to say "we". To combat impotence and embody critique then means to experience the "we", and the "world" that is amongst us. This is why the problem of critique is no longer a problem of conscience but of embodiment: it does not concern a conscience facing the world but rather a body that is in and with the world. This not only terminates the role of intellectuals and their balconies, of which we have already spoken, but also disposes of the mechanisms of legitimation of the intellectuals' word and their mode of expression.

7. The principal challenge for critique today is to challenge the privatization of our existence. In the globalized world, not only have goods and land been privatized but our very existence as well. The experience that we have of the world refers us to a private field of references: individual or collective, it is always self-referential. This privatization of existence has two consequences: first, the depoliticizing of the social question. This means that we have enemies but we don't know where our friends or allies are. We can perceive the foci of aggression against our lives, but not the line of demarcation between friend/enemy. We can speak of financial speculation, precarity, mobbing[1], borders, etc. But how do we name the "we" that suffers and struggles with these realities? By the same mechanism, the "enemy" also becomes privatized. Every person has their own enemy, in their own particular problem. The multiple fronts of struggle are difficult to share. They infiltrate into every cell of our everyday misery, which is miserable precisely because in this everyday everyone is on their own, as an individual or in their small ghetto. But the privatization of existence also has a second consequence: the radicalization of the social question, which sinks its roots directly in our own experience of the world

and not someone else's. To ask for this "we" requires starting form the only thing we possess: our own experience. The fragmentation of meaning contains this paradoxical virtue: we are obliged to start with ourselves. Here we discover the importance of abandoning the third person, which dominated the traditional critical thinker, and exploring our own fields of possible experiences. The quest for the common today requires the courage to drown oneself in their actual experience of the world, even if it is naked and empty of promises. This is what it means to embody critique.

8. In Barcelona 2002, a project emerged from the necessity to begin a practical and collective form of critical thought. Collective, not because this thought does not have any proper names but because in each one of those names, a "we" echoes. Practical, not because it excludes the theoretical dimension but because the world is not the object of study or contemplation for this project of critical thought. Rather the world is the area of operations of this project's collective body. We call this project *Espai en Blanc*, Blank Space in Catalan (www.espaienblanc.net). Linked to the antagonistic practices occurring in the city over the past few years, this project opened a breach where critical thought could circulate outside of the spaces of specialists and in/through the hands of the protagonists of real movements, in their fragility, their intermittence, and their anonymity. Out of the works and projects in which *Espai en Blanc* has participated, three examples will be mentioned to indicate what to embody critique might mean today: the report *"Barcelona 2004: el fascismo postmoderno"* ("Barcelona 2004: postmodern fascism", 2004); the movie *"El taxista ful"* (2005), and the series of encounters *"La tierra de nadie en la red de los nombres"* ("No man's land in the network of names", 2006).

9. The first example, the "Barcelona 2004: postmodern fascism" report demonstrates how a theoretical intervention can be

embodied in the city. This intervention took place in the framework of the campaign against the *Forum Universal de las Culturas* (Universal Forum of Cultures), a large international event organized by city institutions in Barcelona 2004. *Espai en Blanc* contributed an analysis that uncovered the mechanism by which the project for a multicultural city being proposed by the municipality was in reality the implementation of a new device of de-politization and neutralization of conflicts. What we call "postmodern fascism" is based in mobilizing all the existing differences in the city towards a single project for that city, towards a single reality. However, what could be done so that this analysis didn't just float above and out of Barcelona but could actually intervene and interfere in the city's movements? The idea, together with the *Bellaterra* publishing house and other critical collectives in the city, was to edit and compile this analysis, together with other materials in a free book (this book can be downloaded at *http://www.ed-bellaterra.com/uploads/pdfs/FOTUT%202004X.pdf*). The book was released at a large public gathering, and two distribution points were selected. Those persons interested in the book, would have to go get it and could only obtain one copy. In two weeks, 3,000 copies were distributed. Even more interesting though is the fact that the appearance of the book provoked a mobilization. One had to decide for oneself how far to let their interest take them, travel to another part of the city, and personally relate with the editor and with the collectives that were promoting the book. All type of people arrived: teachers, activists, politicians (!), and most of all, many anonymous folks whose intuition led them to identify with the words in the title or the description of the book. Many bodies were mobilized in order to share their rejection, rage and critiques against a model of the city that was getting more hypocritically aggressive everyday.

10. The second example, the movie *"El taxista ful"* (2005), is an example of how all critique is done with and on our very body, with and on our own life, especially when our life is understood as a common problem. This project was born out of a long collective initiative dealing with the critical consequences of precarity. For years, this assembly called *Dinero Gratis* (Free Money) was wondering about: how could one refuse to work when the factory and stable jobs no longer exist? From that perspective a series of campaigns, actions and writings were carried out that called to attention the problems that our relations with money, both individual and collective, present nowadays. The film director Jordi Solé (Jo Sol) proposed a film project about these issues. The interesting thing was that it wasn't about producing a documentary about a political movement or a social problem, but rather using film to interrogate our own practices, and call to the film spectator at the same level. We worked without actors and without a written script. We were both subject and object of the process of creating this film. Together with Jo Sol and the non-actor Pepe Rovira, a very real fiction entered our lives: the story of a man that robbed taxis in order to work. This was a guy who wanted to have a normal life, that continued to aspire to this normal life, and that in the process of pursuing this dream, had become a thief and a lunatic in the eyes of the law and society. What would this guy think of us? How would he relate to us? Two lines of flight, two forms of resistance to the violence of work and money are found in a story of friendship, our true story of friendship. We don't have a solution to the problem of money nor do we have an ideology that explains and resolves our relationship to precarity. We have the capacity to present ourselves, to learn and struggle from our own field of possible experiences. The movie speaks form *there*. The movie calls to the audience from *there*.

11. Finally, the third example is about the gatherings called *"La tierra de nadie en la red de los nombres"* ("No man's land in the network of names") taking place in 2006. This initiative is an example of how critical thought is produced *amongst us*. That is to say, that the production of critical thought happens when we break the hierarchy "thinker-audience" in order to constitute a thinking "we", in order to build a collective word capable of advancing through the problems that are truly problems. For five months, Espai en Blanc called for an encounter every last Thursday of each month in a local coffee-bar. Each gathering dealt with a specific problematic (social disquiet, border spaces, the experience of "we", and speaking up) and began with a series of questions and materials for consultation that were distributed through a blog site *(http://blog.sindominio.net/blog/espai_en_blanc)*. The attendance was made of those that wanted to be there: no announced conferences, no coordinating committee, no turns to speak or rebuttal. Throughout the 5 months, more than a hundred people, most of whom did not know each other, gathered together in order to think collectively. This anonymous self-called assembly opened a space for politicizing our language and our lives. Against the privatization of our existence, a world amongst "us" appeared. In today's metropolises there are many collective happenings, we could even say that the majority of happenings are collective. Nonetheless, the city had completely lost the ability of calling itself to assemble. Its happenings are empty of a "we". "We" only move if someone calls us, if there is a programmed activity, and if we're told what to do. At these gatherings, we didn't know what would happen, who would come, what direction the discussions would go in, or when silence would devour us. We came with knots in our stomachs. And every time, one after another, the encounter worked. With more or less tensions during the course of the discussion, each time a "we" emerged that gave the happening

meaning. Thanks to this we could think in another way. During these processes lives are shaken up. We no longer walk the same way when we return home. Maybe we don't even know exactly what we think. Perhaps, an empty space was opened, a blank space where other ways of living could be explored together with other people. Another consciousness? No, a body better prepared to battle fear, a body more exposed and less isolated. A body that knows that its life does not belong solely to itself, and everything depends in that which goes beyond itself.

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[1] Note of the translators: "Mobbing" refers to many types of harassment and psychological pressures used to coerce, stress or defeat someone with serious emotional and physical results. The term is used most often in reference to the workplace and when there is some involvement (or tolerance) of management. It is not the same as sexual or racial harassment though the lines may be difficult to draw. Mobbing has also been referred to "bullying", "psychological terror", and "emotional violence".