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Critical Thought as Solvent of Doxa

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What is critical thought for you?

One can give two senses to the notion of critique: a sense one could call Kantian, in the lineage of the philosopher of Königsberg, which refers to the evaluative examination of categories and forms of knowledge in order to determine their cognitive validity and value; and a Marxian sense, which trains the weapons of reason at socio-historical reality and sets itself the task of bringing to light the hidden forms of domination and exploitation which shape it so as to reveal by contrast the alternatives they thwart and exclude (recall Horkheimer's definition of "critical theory" as theory that is at the same time explanatory, normative, practical, and reflexive). It seems to me that the most fruitful critical thought is that which situates itself at the confluence of these two traditions and thus weds epistemological and social critique by questioning, in a continuous, active, and radical manner, both established forms of thought and established forms of collective life – "common sense" or doxa (including the doxa of the critical tradition) along with the social and political relations that obtain at a particular moment in a particular society.

Better yet, there can and must exist a synergy between these two forms of critique, such that the questioning of intellectual critique – the history of concepts, the logical dissection of terms, theses, and problematics, the social genealogy of discourses, the archeology of their cultural underpinnings (everything the early Foucault put under the notion of épistémè) – nourishes and enhances the force of institutional critique. Knowledge of the social determinants of thought is indispensable to liberating thought, if only slightly, from the determinisms that weigh on it (as on all social practice) and thus to putting us in a position to project ourselves mentally outside of the world as it is given to us in order to invent, concretely, futures other than the one inscribed in the order of things. In short, critical thought is that which gives us the means to think the world as it is and as it could be.

What is the influence of critical thought at the moment?

I would say, at the risk of seeming to contradict myself, that it is at one and the same time extremely strong and terribly weak. Strong in the sense, first of all, that never have our theoretical and empirical capacities to understand the social world been so great, as witnessed by the extraordinary accumulation of knowledge and techniques of observation in the most varied domains, from geography to history by way of anthropology and the cognitive sciences, not to mention the blooming of the so-called humanities, philosophy, literature, law, etc. In all these domains, with the deeply regrettable exceptions of economics and political science, which remain for the most part consigned to the sad role of techniques for the legitimation of the powers that be, one observes that the will to critical questioning is everywhere present and fertile. It is no accident that Foucault and Bourdieu are the world's two most cited and utilized authors in the social sciences today:

both are critical thinkers and thinkers of power. And that feminism, an intellectual movement and critical politics by its very principle, has renewed research in the most varied realms, from aesthetics to archeology to criminology, by connecting them to a concrete project of social and cultural transformation.

Read the analyses of the murderous drift of rationality produced by Zygmunt Bauman in *Modernity and the Holocaust*; the literary experimentations (I use this oxymoron by design) with which José Saramago deconstructs the social order in *Blindness*; the theories of equity and economic development, fusing scientific rigor and moral commitment, of the recent Nobel Prize laureate Amartya Sen in *Development as Freedom*; Nancy Scheper-Hughes's account of the contradictions of maternal love in the shantytowns of Brazil in *Death Without Weeping* or the gripping portrait of the twentieth century drawn by Eric Hobsbawm in *The Age of Extremes*; the epic journey of the notion of freedom springing from the shadow of slavery as recounted by Orlando Patterson in *Slavery and Social Death* and *Freedom in the Making of Western Culture*; or, again, Pierre Bourdieu's anatomy of the mechanisms of legitimation of technocratic rule and class power in *The State Nobility* – and you will be quickly convinced that critical thought is very much alive, productive, in full swing, and moving forward. And, moreover, that it is not limited only to those intellectuals who march self-consciously under its banner: many researchers, artists, and writers help to sustain it independently of and sometimes even despite their personal political engagements (or lack thereof) inasmuch as they reveal oblique social possibilities that have been pushed aside, shoved back, or repressed but are still present, in outline or in gestation, in our present.

Add to this the fact that there have never been so many social scientists and intellectuals in the broad sense as today, that the

general level of education in the population is continually increasing, that sociologists (to take only them) have never been so influential in the public sphere (judged by the number of books they sell, their presence in media, their direct or indirect participation in political debate), and you are tempted to conclude that reason has never had a better chance to triumph over historical arbitrariness in human affairs. The growing success in France of the "Raisons d'agir" [Reasons to act] imprint, created by Pierre Bourdieu in the wake of the 1995 social upheavals in France, which produces rigorous but short books, written by leading researchers in accessible language on subjects of vital civic interest, from television journalism to educational reform to the new ideologies serving to naturalize the deregulation of the labor market, testifies to the fact that there is a broad social demand for critical thought and that social science is perfectly capable of responding to it.

And, even so, this same critical thought is terribly weak: on the one hand because it too often allows itself to be enclosed in and suffocated by the academic microcosm (this is particularly conspicuous in the United States, where social critique runs uselessly in circles and ends up biting its own tail, like a dog that has been driven mad after being locked in a closet); and on the other hand because today it finds itself at the foot of a veritable symbolic Great Wall formed by neoliberal discourse and its manifold by-products, which have invaded all spheres of cultural and social life, while in addition to that it must face the competition of a false critical thought which, under cover of apparently progressive tropes celebrating the "subject," "identity," "multiculturalism," "diversity," and "globalization," invites us to submit to the prevailing forces of the world, and in particular to market forces. Just when the class structure is being rigidified and polarized, when the hypermobility of capital gives the transnational

bourgeoisie an unprecedented capacity for domination, when the governing elites of all the great powers dismantle in concert the social safety nets set up in the course of a century of labor struggles, and when forms of poverty reminiscent of the nineteenth century resurge and spread, they converse on the "fragmented society," "ethnicity," "conviviality," and "difference." Where one would need an unflinching historical and materialist analysis, they offer us a soft culturalism wholly absorbed by the narcissistic preoccupations of the moment. In fact, false thinking and false science have never been so prolix and so omnipresent.

What are the main forms that this false thinking takes?

In the United States, it is "policy research" that plays the lead role as a cover and shield against critical thought by acting in the manner of a "buffer" isolating the political field from any research that is independent and radical in its conception as in its implications for public policy. All researchers who want to address state officials are obliged to pass through this mongrel field, this "decontamination chamber," and agree to submit to severe censorship by reformulating their work according to technocratic categories that ensure that this work will have neither purchase nor any effect on reality (over the entrance gates of public policy schools is written in invisible letters: "thou shallt not ask thy own questions"). In point of fact, American politicians never invoke social research except when it supports the direction they want to go in anyway for reasons of political expediency; in all other cases, they trample it shamelessly, as President Clinton did when he signed his welfare "reform" in 1996 (a misnomer since this legislation abolished the right to public assistance for the most destitute to replace it with mandatory precarious wage work via "workfare") despite truckloads of studies showing that this

amounts to a social regression bound to seriously harm the most disadvantaged when economic conditions are no longer favorable.

In Europe, this role is played by sociological journalism, a hybrid genre practiced by those who are nominally academics but in reality spend their time writing slapdash columns, editorials, and minute-maid features, appearing on radio and television, and who are everywhere to discuss all the hot topics, even and especially those for which they have no specific competency. They jump from "social problem" to "social problem," at the whim of media and political demand, without ever asking how it is that such and such a phenomenon, say, "youth violence" or "illegal immigration," is constituted as a subject of collective concern and public intervention, by whom and for what purpose. They occupy nearly all of the small space journalists concede to researchers because they flatter the vanity of journalist by effacing the distinction between the media worldview and the scientific worldview: their analyses, which in the best cases rely on superficial studies (and where would they find the time to undertake serious ones, given all the time they spend in the media, on official commissions, and in the corridors of power?), are so close as to be mistaken for journalistic accounts – so one can readily understand that journalists appreciate and celebrate them!

But the main obstacle to critical thought today is something else: it is the formation of a true neoliberal international, anchored by a network of think-tanks centered on the east coast of the United States and relayed by the great international institutions, the World Bank, the European Commission, the OECD, the WTO, etc., which diffuse the products of false science at an exponential speed in order to better legitimate the socially reactionary policies implemented everywhere in the era of the triumphant market. I tried to show this in Prisons of Poverty for the police tactics of

"zero tolerance," which were "globalized" in less than a decade under the impulse of the Manhattan Institute in New York and its epigones and active or passive "collaborators" abroad, and in Urban Outcasts with regard to the pseudo-concept of the "underclass," which serves in all the countries where it is used to "blame the victim" by attributing the new forms of urban poverty to the alleged emergence of a new group of dissolute and disorganized poor.[1] In "The Cunning of Imperialist Reason,"[2] Pierre Bourdieu and I tried to lay out the lineaments of a critical analysis of the deployment and of the real and symbolic effects of this new planetary vulgate, which presents the world made by the multinational corporations as the final stage of history and the commodification of everything existing as the highest achievement of humanity. One finds this vulgate now on everyone's lips, including those of governments and intellectuals who claim to be "on the left" and think themselves (sometimes sincerely) progressive.

What can be the role of critical thought in the face of the obscenity of the stupendous inequalities produced by the new global capitalism?

Its essential role is to constitute a breakwater of resistance to the crushing of everything by the Moloch of the market, starting with the crushing of thought and all the forms of cultural expression now threatened with violent death by the profit imperative and the unbridled pursuit of marketing success: consider that Mrs. Hillary Clinton received a seven million dollar advance and the CEO of General Electric Jack Welsh got nine million for two execrable books that will be written by ghost writers in which the one will recount her life as First Lady and the other his experiences as a

high-flying corporate tycoon, and that Amazon.com will sell barges of them before they are even printed, while talented writers, poets, and young researchers are unable to find houses willing to publish them for the sole reason that all editors must now raise their annual profit rates in line with those of the television and movie industries within which they have been integrated by the large cultural conglomerates.

Critical thought must, with zeal and rigor, take apart the false commonplaces, reveal the subterfuges, unmask the lies, and point out the logical and practical contradictions of the discourse of King Market and triumphant capitalism, which is spreading everywhere by the force of its own self-evidence, in the wake of the brutal collapse of the bipolar structure of the world since 1989 and the suffocation of the socialist project (and its adulteration by supposedly leftwing governments de facto converted to neoliberal ideology). Critical thought must tirelessly pose the question of the social costs and benefits of the policies of economic deregulation and social dismantling which are now presented as the assured road to eternal prosperity and supreme happiness under the aegis of "individual responsibility" – which is another name for collective irresponsibility and mercantile egoism. In his famous "Letter to Arnold Ruge," published in the *Rheinische Zeitung* in 1844, Karl Marx pronounced himself in favor of a "ruthless critique of everything existing." It seems to me that this program is timelier than ever. We thus return to the primary historical mission of critical thought, which is to serve as a solvent of doxa, to perpetually question the obviousness and the very frames of civic debate so as to give ourselves a chance to think the world, rather than being thought by it, to take apart and understand its mechanisms, and thus to reappropriate it intellectually and materially.

[1] Wacquant, Prisons of Poverty (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002) and Urban Outcasts: Toward a Sociology of Advanced Marginality (Cambridge: Polity, 2003).

[2] Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant, "The Cunning of Imperialist Reason," Theory, Culture, and Society 16, no. 1 (February 1999): 41–57 (see the responses to this piece by Couze Venn, John D. French, Jan Nederveen Pieterse, Jonathan Friedman, Pnina Werbner, and Saskia Sassen, Theory, Culture and Society 17, no. 1 (Feb. 2000)) and "Neoliberal Newspeak," Radical Philosophy 105 (January 2001): 2–5.