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What Are We Capable Of?

From Consciousness to Embodiment in Critical Thought Today

Marina Garcés

Revised by Erika Doucette

Two centuries of modern critical thought have brought forth many definitions of critique, which differ based on the object and context of the critique. I would like to start by proposing a definition that summarizes the main aspects of a critical tradition in quite a transversal manner: *"Critique is a kind of discourse that has practical and liberatory effects on what we can see, what we can be, and what we can do."* I am sure you may appreciate this classical definition. After years of crisis of critical thinking, I believe this definition and its demands are still valid today. Its validity certainly depends on our capability to endow critique with new meaning, that is, situate it within the real conditions of our present world and to manifest it in the way we determine our actual mode of existence, which I will show in my intervention here. This will be composed of three moments.

Following the abovementioned definition of critique, I will begin by referring to:

1) What we can see – I will elaborate on a new form of dogma that critique is faced with, a dogma without any pretence: the *self-evidence* of globalized capitalism.

2) What we can be – I will point to the question of embodying critique and consider what it means to *be affected*.

3) What we can do – I will question the conditions for *creating critical thought today* based on my experience in the project Espai en Blanc ("blank space" in Catalan)[1].

What We Can See

In nearly all its different meanings and traditions, critique has something to do with the idea of showing or bringing light to that which we do not see: a hidden truth, the conditions of possibility, a contradiction, an irrationality, the intolerable, the limits of our existence, and so on. Therefore, critique is like an effect of vision; it is not reflective but is supposed to possess the power of transformation: to transform conscience, the subject, history, forms of existence, etc.

However, one of the main characteristics of globalized capitalism—which presents itself as the only possible concept of the world—is that it no longer wears any masks, for it has nothing to hide. The secret of production no longer exists. After having shed all its masks, its self-evidence is its legitimation. This world conveys to us "everything there is already exists."

Since the fall of communism and its disappearance as a vision of social transformation, much has been said about the triumph of capitalism. If we observe the state of the world today, even in its superficial appearance, it is clear that capitalism's triumph has not

been a real success. Its promises, virtues, and achievements are no longer the basis for its legitimacy. It rests on the self-evident truth that capitalism is the only possible reality in this world. Because capitalism is not forced to defend or justify itself its self-evidence has become a new form of dogmatism. This dogmatism without masks
cannot be demystified or combated by any form of exposure.

The world today cannot be freed from this illusion by bringing capitalism's self-evidence to light, although it is a sort of enchantment. This enchantment *neutralizes critique*. The self-evidence of this world neutralizes critique and reduces it in three ways to:

1) *a moral judgment*: we approve / condemn the state of things

2) *an aesthetic judgment*: we like /dislike this reality and choose different styles of living in this world

3) *a psychological judgment*: we feel good / bad about this reality, which only becomes worse in view of the number of new mental diseases in Europe and "developed" societies.

Regarding these three forms of reduction, critique finds itself trapped between impotence and indifference. I analyzed precisely this oscillation between impotence and indifference from an ontological approach in my book *En las prisiones de lo posible,* Ed. Bellaterra (2002) *(In the prisons of the possible)*. My analysis addresses the paradox of living in a world where everything is possible but cannot be changed, which led me to develop the concept of "irrevocable contingence."

From a political point of view, prisons of the possible more specifically signify the kidnapping or expropriation of the world as

something we are capable of transforming collectively and as a reality that we develop together at the intersections of collective action. Globalization can be considered as the configuration of a unique world without a common dimension. We enable and experience the proliferation of countless lived worlds that remain separate from yet confirm one another and conform to a unique reality. Some have studied this as a consequence of the privatization of existence. From the point of view of these lived and privatized micro-worlds we can see the world in its self-evidence and we are able to assess it (using the three ways of judgment mentioned above) although this vision does not directly haven an effect of transformation. What is necessary for these effects of transformation to happen? How can we be affected by our own experience of the world?

What We Can Be

Something has to tear us away from our powerless and indifferent existence. Something has to tear us away from our role as victims and spectators.

In Spain, we have experienced something that can contribute to illustrating this issue. A process of critical resignification took place following the 11-M bomb attack in Madrid.[2] Survivors or those who lost someone in the trains created an association rejecting the category of the victim, which was the term that was officially used up until that point. They began to call themselves "the affected." The transformation that took place thorough the use of this the term is very interesting transformation, particularly in terms of their political situation. This transformation can be summarized by three main aspects, raising three sets of questions:

1) They reject the passivity and receptivity of pain to open up the possibility for a wider transformation of oneself. Victimization is a unidirectional process that has a very specific effect. However, what does it mean to be someone who has been affected? Where do the effects of being affected begin and end?

2) Reparation (punishment for the guilty and indemnification for the victim) is no longer the only desire after suffering acts of aggression. What does someone who has been affected expect? What is his/her hope? What kind of horizon does his/her condition open up?

3) The perfectly individualized victim identity fades into a common field of experience. Who are the affected persons? What kind of institutions recognize or do not recognize them?

The spectator can only condemn the bomb attack and feel the horror of that vision. The victim can only suffer pain and expect reparation. But what is an affected person capable of? What can the affected do? That's the question *Foro* opens up. It's also the question they pose to us.

This allows the creation of a new framework for questioning the possibilities of critique today. Critical thought has always claimed to "raise consciousness." Can we maintain that? Is a call to raise consciousness relevant despite the self-evidence of our reality? If we are able to see and know just about everything (i.e. the world is already illuminated) and still nothing happens, the problem we are concerned with is the embodiment of critical discourse: how can critical thought acquire a body? If consciousness only leads to individual judgment as to the evidence of the word [world], affectation opens up a common field of experience and, as shown

above, another horizon of expectations where we do not know exactly what we are capable of.

The shift from consciousness to affectation moves us from focusing on the mind to focusing on the body. In other words, it brings about a shift from the duality of light/darkness to the *ambivalence of vulnerability*. In what sense is vulnerability ambivalent?

On the one hand, vulnerability refers to our emotional incapacity and incompetence. I refer to an expression taken from the interesting book *Therapy Culture. Cultivating Vulnerability in an Uncertain Age* (London 2004) written by Frank Furedi. That is what a new form of power called "therapeutic power" cultivates: a need for institutional intervention in almost every aspect of our existence and in the management of our precarious and privatized lives.[3] That is also the dimension that is more exploited in the everyday, widespread experiences of precariety today. In this sense, vulnerability also represents the base on which the entire exploitation of our lives is constructed.

On the other hand, vulnerability also enables us to fundamentally bond with others, tying our existence to others' existences. In Judith Butler's recent book *Precarious Life* she analyzes this sense of vulnerability. The starting point for her analysis is the experiences of violence and grief, both of which are relevant to the experience of a terrorist attack, such as 11 S. She views violence and grief as capable of bringing out from within us the dimension of our existence that makes us something more than an individual and creates a bond that not only connects us but also constitutes our existence and poses the question of a "WE," of a commonality.

11 S and 11 M have brought about a new vocabulary, which could perhaps provide us with a new political starting point. However, it

would be a missed opportunity if these new semantics were to remain only within the context of catastrophe, disaster, and life-threatening situations. It is important to emphasize that vulnerability is not only a determination of a passive human existence that is only related to pain and suffering. Vulnerability is not simply receptive. It also signifies our real capability of exposing ourselves. To be vulnerable is to be capable of exposing oneself. Or, in other words, vulnerability entails our capacity to be affected. In this sense, vulnerability is not a form of being incapability but a potential, which is necessarily a collective power.

This second sense of vulnerability, following Butler's work and going beyond the field of suffering and pain opens up an approach to vulnerability that is not defined by powerlessness but rather by the revelation of the impossibility of being an individual. It is a means of discovering interdependence. Experiencing interdependence, experiencing "WE" as a dimension of our own existence, is a way of taking back our world today. In a world held hostage by globalized capitalism, interdependence can only emerge in the shadow of a threat: the threat of the destruction of the planet through human action. This is a heteronomous sense of interdependence that lets everyone know our existence is in the hands of others. But as we have seen, there is another autonomous sense of interdependence, through which we realize the world is the common dimension of our particular existence. If we are able to acknowledge that dimension interdependence is the real meaning of autonomy, not in the sense of individual property that must be protected from the world and others, but in the sense of a common virtue.

This relationship between interdependence and autonomy is not self-evident, in fact, it is not obvious at all: it shatters the self-evidence of our world. Interdependence does not mean that my life

is jeopardized through connecting it to the actions of others, but that my existence always contains a "WE" dimension even if it is repeatedly proven otherwise. How can we get to that dimension? How can we experience it? Through the work of critique, through a transformation that radically changes what we can see, what we can be, and what we can do. Foucault defines critique as the creation and critique of ourselves in our autonomy. For me, this autonomy means what I have been saying here. Being a mature subject capable of judgment is no longer most important, it is much more significant to have the courage to engage in a mode of existence that dares to be affected and exposed. It is no longer about the conquest of freedom as subjects move toward becoming independent from the world and others; it is now more about the conquest of freedom in our interlacements. To explore these in all their autonomy as a collective virtue is, from my point of view, the scope of critical thought today.

What We Can Do

What I have mentioned here profoundly affects how we should construct critical discourse today. If we pretend critical discourse has the practical liberatory effects I mentioned in the beginning our goal must be to provoke, awaken, and arouse this "WE" dimension of our existence. In this sense, critique remains a practical form of discourse that pretends to show us something we do not see. This is no longer a vision of our consciousness and cannot simply be announced or declared. It must be done. It must be manifested, but how?

We could always say that words are actions still comfortably rest within the role of critical thinkers, and just listen to ourselves. But that is not enough, in fact, I think we have all experienced how the

field of critique often reproduces a ghetto, just another one so many other ghettos, making it impossible to break the chains of impotence and indifference.

It is obvious that it is not up to us to decide on or program a revolution. It is, however, urgent that we question and alter the conditions for creating critical discourse today. This means enabling a shift of at least two things:

1) From the centrality of the object of critique, which is always in front of us, always cut off, and isolated by its distance to the question of WHO is affected by the problems we pose and analyze. That is what embracing critique means. The discourse commonly constructed around "THEM" (taking its cue from the analyst or expert rhetorician) shifts to become a question of "WE," for which there is no longer an object of analysis, but a common field of experimentation.

2) From the legitimacy of qualified voices (intellectuals, proletarians, students, precarious, immigrants, and so on) to the proliferation of an anonymous voice whose limits are difficult to define--so difficult, in fact, that the question of who the affected are remains open. These anonymous voices remove the legitimated voice from its chair, not to silence it, but to point to its incompleteness and to force it to encounter its "WE" dimension. Then, critique is a discourse no longer presented to others, but a discourse that is crafted together with others.

If we desire liberatory effects on what we can see, what we can be, and what we can do in a world of privatized modes of existence and if we seek to aim for the possibility of an autonomous experience of interdependence, then these two ways of shifting critical discourse

and the conditions for creating critical discourse are still imperative today.

In the beginning, I mentioned the *Espai en Blanc* project. It is based on collective and practical thought and developed five years ago at the intersection of philosophy and activism. In the beginning, we said we had wanted to make thinking exciting again. To us, exciting meant giving it its own life, that is, to be exposed and affected by our own thought. To some extent, everything I have mentioned here has been a result of this collective experience. Over the past five years we have done several different interventions, publications, etc. The critical intervention in Barcelona that has shaken so many people was not based on what we said void of any context, but how we said it. Over the last two years, we have been organizing monthly gatherings in a bar in the center of Barcelona where everyone is invited to come and discuss a problem that we announce using on posters, by using blog, and via a mailing list. No lecturers are invited; no names mentioned... and therefore there is no public or spectators. Those who take part come to think together with others. It is so simple, but it has really revolutionized the way we are affected by what we think and the way we embrace new questions and problems. This year, more than a hundred people came each time. We tried to open it to a forum on Internet to include even more voices and expand the temporal dimension of the discussions. But it did not work. Why not? The point of this gathering is to be there. To be affected by the silence and by the words we search for together and sometimes manage to find. There is no idea or knowledge of individual consumption at these encounters, instead they invite the public to strengthen their views and voices together.

I will close with this very modest example, because in our world, we hear big words every day that have no effect. They are too often

used as a shelter to protect us and to maintain a distance between the world and us. Critique must destroy that distance and help us not to find a shelter but the courage to engage in our interdependent autonomy. Canetti says this wonderfully: "only together can men free themselves of the ballast of their distances."[4]

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[1] For more information about *Espai en Blanc* see at: http://www.espaienblanc.net.

[2] Margarita Padilla and Amador Fernández-Savater have done invaluable work on this issue. See their contributions"Las luchas del vacío" in *Espai en Blanc* nº3-4, "La sociedad terapéutica" Bellaterra (ed.) (Barcelona 2007) and in the *Red Ciudadana tras el 11-M. Cuando el sufrimiento no impide pensar ni actuar* by colectivo Desdedentro (Acuarela Libros & A. Machado, Madrid 2008).

[3] See the *Espai en Blanc* publication nº3-4, "La sociedad terapéutica," Bellaterra (ed.) (Barcelona 2007)

[4] Canetti, E.: *Crowds and Power,* transl. by Carol Stewart, Farrar Straus Giroux, New York, 2005.*y poder,* Mondadori, 2005, p. 69