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# Who are the greatest critics of the elk today

## or: is an “atopic critique” possible?

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### I

I am going to formulate some thoughts that arose from the methodological gestus – coined by Michel Foucault – of the *diagnosis*. The object of the diagnosis is the “power of critique” in its relationship of tension with “critique as power”. It is about a reflexive exercise: the critical gaze should be self-directed and should achieve an understanding of its own relationship to power in historical terms – in the sense of *a history of the present*.

Although, historically, critique is interwoven with art, literature and music (and especially with exegesis, of course), I don’t intend to discuss art or literary criticism or textual hermeneutics; I will be focusing instead on *social critique*. There is a fundamental reason for this decision, which I mention in passing but cannot pursue in any detail here. From the mid-nineteenth century (or a little later) onwards, the critical activity that deals with textual hermeneutics, literature and art, has taken a different course from the critical

activity that focuses on society. Consequently, despite the similarity of names between the two activities, there is no such similarity between their functions. The meta-discourse of art, music, literature and other textual genres is described today as "critique"; however, it displays the features of *commentary* rather than critique. And so I also believe that the act of deconstruction, as developed by Derrida in a hermeneutic context – this concept that, in the political sense, is nowadays used increasingly as a synonym of, and indeed a substitute for, critique – comes far closer to commentary than it does to critique.[1]

There is a second difference: Michael Walzer claims that a good theory of society is not a prerequisite for a good critique of society. Theory, he maintains, can sometimes even damage critique.[2] Actually there was, and still is, a whole range of critical social theories. There were, indeed still are, lots of theories about critical social theories too. However, you don't tend to find an explicit *theory of (social) critique* all that often. So we're going to regale ourselves with a little lecture by Michel Foucault; he didn't actually want to publish it, nor did he not want to give it the title: "What is critique?".[3] And that is why, for the past two days, we have all been here trying to fill this gap – to formulate theories about critique.

I personally do not believe I have the right to say to this group or that individual that what they are doing is not critique or that it is bad critique, or to dictate to them what critique should look like. Quite apart from the restraint that ethics demands, such an undertaking would be pointless from a purely pragmatic point of view. I am not in a position to tell anyone else what resistance, the courage of one's convictions or critique are in general (and besides, how these concepts relate to one another is also worthy of investigation); I don't know what they are either. A sentence of

Foucault's comes to mind here (from precisely *that* lecture), where he describes critique as an instrument, as a means to a truth that critique cannot know.[4] Critique, as it were, ekes out a parasitical existence in relation to the goal one seeks to achieve. But since I cannot anticipate theoretically all political goals, I cannot know how critique will be constructed as a vehicle to reach that point either. Therefore I do not wish to contribute to a general theory of critique; I want, rather, to analyze critically implicit or explicit theories and practices of critique that I do know – that is to say, not a theory of critique but a *critique of critique*.

## II

What was already obvious to many by the mid-sixties became at the end of the eighties a bitter finality: the attempt to construct a *just* society in line with the instructions of the socially critical texts of Marx and Engels as well as those of certain Marxists had failed. Not that I would have been a supporter of "real socialism" at the time. However, as I sat several times a day watching the TV news, I sensed at that time that, along with these structures, something *else* was irrevocably consigned to the earth. As a result, the questions I am seeking to answer today also gradually took shape. How could the construction of a social form, instituted with the demand for *truth* and *justice*, be all too soon condemned by that very same demand for *truth* and *justice*? How could the most well-founded social critique in the history of the West change into something that would itself become the object of a far more effective critique? To put it another way: why did critique *have to* lead to power – to *become* power? Must it always be so?

One could cite another example, albeit one that is less sentimentally loaded for me, from the art world: what has become

of the artists who organized the *Uni-Ferkelei* *(university obscenity) event at that time? In particular, what has become of those who once were called the "avant-garde"? Does the border between innovation and the mainstream lie in biological age? Do market laws or anthropological-psychological constants such as "Man seeks recognition" adequately explain things for us?

And so I come to the title of this lecture, and hope I may be allowed a brief digression. I chose it for two reasons. Firstly, the quotation is from F.W. Bernstein, the satirist and, as is well known, a member of the Frankfurt School – of the *New Frankfurt School*, so called by Hans Traxler, F.K. Waechter, Bernstein himself and many other artists and writers. This (deliberate) similarity of name with critical theory was the one reason for the group's title. Secondly, the original quote reads differently: "The greatest critics of the elks were once elks themselves." This version may be useful, for instance, to characterize the attitude of militant non-smokers who at one time would have puffed on one cigarette after another. But that isn't exactly what I mean. For me, it is about the critical discourse (personalized in the saying) that at some time or other becomes the very thing it had criticized. So it is the reverse situation that interests me.

And now back to my question. I often hear it answered in such a way that critical discourse itself emerges unscathed: it is the *subjects* of critique that are, supposedly, responsible for the failure. Because they are corruptible, because people lose their critical edge with advancing age or because a smaller group of people is different from the masses, who in the end are what critical projects are actually about. The discrepancy between *theory* and *practice* is also frequently cited as a reason. However, more critical minds among the critics tend rather to shift the blame onto social conditions, the

*structures*, within which critique develops and on which it mostly founders too.

But what if critique – like a genetic program – bore its transformation within *itself*? How would it be if the empowerment *(Machtwerdung)* of critique lay in something not external to critique but *inherent* in it? That's the direction my questions took a few years ago. And I answer them in the following way: it is the *topos* of a critique that gradually invalidates it as critique and that strengthens it as a legitimization or even a form of power.

*Topos* is a concept with many meanings. For example, it means the place – understood in spatial terms – as well as the rhetorical or thematic commonplace, in the sense of '*locus communis*'. I use the concept of *topos* metaphorically. Each form of critique starts at a particular point. Each form of critique also refers to something that does not yet exist (or that perhaps once did and now no longer does), and that could occur through the critical act. Finally, there is a "place" – again in the transferred sense of a perspective – from which the critic speaks: a theory, a values system or an era that could serve as a paradigm. In this *place of speech*, we also find the criteria that critique deploys in order to oppose them as a contrasting foil to its object.

These punctual indications of place alone still do not make a topos. This only occurs when they are codified into a unified, logically compelling whole. In this unity they form the *coordinates* of the critical topos. My thesis is this: when a critical discourse (a critical movement, a critical attitude, etc.) has reached this point of *coordination*, it changes into a defensive, protective, self-perpetuating discourse – critique loses its sting, its flexibility and becomes static.  The rebelling, rejecting striker becomes a guardian of what has been won. Critique is transformed, to use Adorno's

Hegel-critical terminology, from negation into a position. The critic becomes an elk.

## III

I want to list three such topoi, and thus describe three types of critique, each of which demonstrates one of these topoi, and finally pose my "programmatic" question: is a critique without topos, an *atopic critique*, possible (conceivable or already in existence)?[5]

*Esotopic critique*: the topos lies at the point where both critique and the object of critique are to be found simultaneously: in the existing social order. Critique therefore takes up no particular topos for itself. Nor is anything radically different outlined or promised, come what may. Esotopic critique borrows its critical power (and its criteria) from the existing moral values and standards, which – for whatever reasons – are not, however, observed. One must hold a mirror up to society and judge it by its own standards: take human rights, for example. In this way, the critic can always remain active since it is precisely in living democracies that there is always something to criticize, to improve, to reform. I consider Michael Walzer a theorist of this form of critique – his proposal of an "immanent critique" (known also as "connected criticism") allows that the best way for morally critical activity lies not in discovery or invention, but in the interpretation of the values embedded in society.

Esotopic critique has the advantage of not having to forfeit its power. But its power is measured very 'modestly' from the outset: esotopic critique is immanent to and conservative of the system. Its object is formed by industrial accidents, but not by the business itself. The struggle for hegemony or revolution is not its concern.

And outside democratically structured societies, where basic freedoms do not form an ethos, esotopic critique would have little scope.

*Exotopic critique*: the topos of critique is *not* inside the structure within which the object of critique is seen. So exotopic critique talks about a different society from the one that exists, which it seeks to institute. Not only the future but the criteria of critique too, lie "outside" the existing structure. A phrase from Marx neatly summarizes these ideas: "Human anatomy contains a key to the anatomy of the ape."[6]

The present cannot criticize itself since it doesn't have standards to hand that might enable it to lead off into the future. Such standards derive from the analysis of history, but they must be capable of anticipating the *outside*, the possibility of overcoming the previous legitimacy of history in order to critically analyse the present and give analysis the critical power to change what currently exists.

The problems relating to exotopic critique are very much at the core of my questions so I will forego another listing of them.

*Idiotopic critique*: both esotopic and exotopic critical discourses are concerned in their argumentation to lay claim to universal validity. Using either normative (and sometimes, as in Walzer's case, normative *and* pragmatic) arguments or else empirical ones, each discourse seeks to prove that it is right. On the other hand, idiotopic critique is not driven to action by reasoned argument. "What is one's own/private/distinct" (a collectively framed identity) forms the only legitimate topos for it and also supplies the criteria for critique. The fact that the group has experienced inequality, injustice, even oppression, persecution and physical violence in the

past (and still does today) gives idiotopic critique its power. This is based on a right generated by oppression, by the personal experience of marginalization. One of the most important questions it asks is: "Who is speaking?"

Viewed in this light, idiotopic critique constitutes an important component of all revolutionary discourses; this is especially true of the new social movements – at a specific phase in their formation. This type of critique I see particularly in what people refer to as "(self)-empowerment".

Idiotopic critique has the great advantage of being prospective. It is not a legalistic discourse, yet is a representative one that at the same time questions representations. The biggest problem with it is its goal: idiotopic critique always plays for power – it's about the changing of power relations in favour of one's own/private/ distinct collective, which is speaking here. Consequently, the discourse is one of identitarian politics, one around which an identity can be built.

## IV

Having listed these three modes of critique along with their topoi, one has to ask – if only because logic demands it – whether a critique *without* a topos is possible. An atopic critique that doesn't refer to any coordinates: there is no theory, no normative system, no future to precede the critique.  A permanent critique that is mobile, that never stops for longer than is necessary, that absolutely never "settles down" and that has only one fixed point in its sights – the power it seeks to oppose. However, since power is not static but permeates the very capillaries/pores of society,

according to Foucault, atopic critique also becomes a *capillary-level critique*; it is a *microcritique* that opposes micropower.

The topos is not a necessary component of a critique. It is for the most part a construct that is cobbled together subsequently (albeit with materials that are taken from critique). The topos, strictly speaking, is an interpretation, a *commentary on critique*.

We like to quote often Foucault's now famous definition – frequently torn out of the historical context he had in mind: "critique as the art of not being governed quite so much". We know that he stresses here (as he does in his series of lectures on governmentality[7]) the words "quite so much" and adds the expressions "not by them, not like that, not for that" etc. Why do we agree with this reservation of Foucault's, which in my view relates to the historical situation he describes? Why do we not push the question further and ask if it might not also be possible to develop an art of *not* wanting to be governed *at all*?

I believe that atopic critique can prepare the ground for this question. I also think I have answered the question I posed in the subtitle: an atopic critique *is* possible. The question of whether it is also considered necessary might perhaps be answered in our discussion afterwards.

*The present text is the abridged version of a lecture that the author delivered on 20 April 2008 in the framework of the conference on "The Art of Critique".*

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[1] I shall examine this theme more closely in a longer contribution for the print publication of the above-mentioned

conference.  I have discussed in detail the various "secondary discourses" (both of commentary and of critique) in Gürses (1997).

[2] Walzer (2002).

[3] Foucault (1997).

[4] Ibid., 25.

* a term coined by journalists in 1968, when the Vienna Actionists staged the *Kunst und Revolution* event,  transgressing taboos around nudity, sexuality and nationalism.

[5] I have already presented these ideas in my text "On the Topography of Critique" (Gürses 2006); however, I sometimes use different adjectives in this text to describe the *topoi.* In an earlier text, I tried to describe the subject of a "placeless critique": cf. Gürses (2004).

[6] Marx (1973), *Grundrisse. Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus, New York.

[7] Foucault (2007); in particular, lectures 8 and 9.