
Critique and Post-Critique

Jonathan Luke Austin

Critique is changing.

Democratizing, in fact.

Whether we like it or not.

Social critique was once perceived as an intellectual endeavor. This was true despite the many actors who have always engaged in critique of a kind: citizens, journalists, terrorists, militias. Today, however, such ‘ordinary critique’ can no longer be ignored. Instead, it forces itself upon us in ways that amaze and alarm. Deleuze is gleefully employed by militaries, the New Right embraces Gramsci, while media conglomerates control us via Jameson (Austin, Bellanova, and Kaufmann 2019; Austin Forthcoming). These forces engage critique *and* transform our worlds in doing so. Their emergence represents a dramatic shift, analogous to the 19th century rise of a reading public: the growth of a new critical *writing* public (Yancey 2004). If, with Derrida (2016), the original idea of science and critique emerged during a specific epoch of writing, then a new epoch of writing has produced new critical publics. Publics that draft their own manifestos, philosophize in their own words and worlds, and take their ideas towards the streets with furious anger.

The question that must now preoccupy those who believe critique should represent something other than the instrumental use of reason for parochial ends is thus less why we need critique and more how we can make a different critique matter today. Whomever you start with – Kant, al-Haytham, Marx, etc. – critique has been associated with change: with enlightenment, denaturalization, social (re)ordering, and beyond. Critique possesses authority because its procedures can produce change. But how this occurs is mysterious. Critique is a source of possibility but one we are unsure how to harness. Marxists remember the revolutionary days, unable to relive them. Liberals hold high enlightenment ‘progress,’ as the world runs aground. The postcolonial majority seek different futures, knowing their colonization continues. Critique holds the hopes of many. But how to make it matter? That’s always the question.

In the face of these challenges, critique *within* the walls of academia must be re-imagined. It has already changed elsewhere. It is our duty to change it for different purposes. In this, critique must become kinder in its engagements and sharper in its targets (Austin, Bellanova, and Kaufmann 2019). It must renounce the specter of totalities and their futile denunciation: those old images of neoliberalism, fascism, and nationalism, and instead subvert from within. It must engage with those it sees as enemies, earnestly: there can be no blanks (Austin Forthcoming). But it must also regain the future. It must build different futures over regretting present states in reactionary terms. We must criticize the present only to reach a different future (Bloch 1996). Call that future emancipation, fully-automated-luxury-communism, feminist ecology, or whatever you like: the demand of the day is to take a position. We must take that risk, sincerely. The intellectualism of critique must again be enjoined with the older ethos of being critical (i.e. political).

And all this, of course, is the message of contemporary events. 2019 hardly represents a uniformly ‘better’ or more ‘secure’ world. Instead, with the Syrian writer Sadallah Wannous, we are “condemned to hope” that “what’s happening...” in the world at the moment “cannot be the end of history.”¹

Critique of the status quo is needed more now than ever before.

But the disasters of today demand a different kind of critique.

Something ‘post’ critique as we now know it.

¹ These remarks from Wannous are widely cited to have been made at the March 1996 World Theatre Day address.

References

- Austin, Jonathan Luke. Forthcoming. "A Parasitic Critique for IR." *International Political Sociology*.
- Austin, Jonathan Luke, Rocco Bellanova, and Mareile Kaufmann. 2019. "Doing and Mediating Critique." *Security Dialogue* 50 (1).
- Bloch, Ernst. 1996. *The Principle of Hope*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Derrida, Jacques. 2016. *Of Grammatology*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.
- Yancey, Kathleen Blake. 2004. "Made Not Only in Words." *Composition and Communication* 56 (2): 297–328.