

conceptions of
critique in
modern and
contemporary
philosophy

edited by
karin de boer and ruth sonderegger



Conceptions of Critique in Modern and Contemporary Philosophy

Edited by

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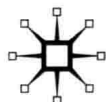
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Introduction

Is critique a machine invented in the seventeenth century, an instrument among many others designed to destroy the remains of a feudal and theological worldview? Is it a machine that during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries constantly adapted itself to new challenges, feeding itself on targets produced by the very modernity from which it issued? Is critique a machine that today, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, has finally run out of steam, as Bruno Latour has recently suggested?¹ And if critique may seem to have come to a standstill, is this because it does not find new targets anymore or rather because it has torn to pieces the very possibility of distinguishing between a truth grasped by the critic, a set of norms to be criticised and masses in need of enlightenment? Has critique thereby devoured its very condition of possibility?

Latour's worry primarily concerns the way in which politicians abuse his view that there are no facts. But he is also concerned about the incapacity of critical philosophy to point out why such political propaganda is wrong. For haven't philosophers and theorists precisely spent decades deconstructing oppositions such as that between truth and appearance, between right and wrong? Who are we to tell politicians at this point that they ought to call a fact a fact? Latour is not the only one to have raised doubts about the future of critical philosophy. Coming from a completely different direction, Alain Badiou presents his work as a form of philosophy that 'does not submit to the critical injunctions of Kant', considers 'the Kantian indictment of metaphysics as null and void', and upholds, 'against any "return to Kant", against the critique, moral law, and so on, that the rethinking of the univocity of ground is a necessary task for the world in which we are living today'.² If critical reflections on conditions of possibility have not led us anywhere, as Badiou believes,

then why bother? Should we not rather spend our energy on explaining the structure of the universe, as he takes Spinoza and Deleuze to have done? Or, as Latour suggests, simply take our lead from the sciences?

One might respond to the questions raised by Latour, Badiou and others by pointing out that their conception of critique is vague or limited, or by arguing – as is done in this collection of essays – that Spinoza was a critical philosopher in his own right or that Kant did not simply oppose metaphysics. Yet we believe that a more sustained reflection on what is said to be losing its force or is declared to be ‘null and void’ is in place. The crisis that critique is going through – assuming that it is one – might be an incitement to step back from what we have been doing all along and to examine the very concept of critique as well as the practices to which it gave rise.

What is critique? What is it that has animated so much of modern and contemporary philosophy? Obviously various philosophers, including Foucault, have raised this question and offered tentative answers.³ Yet to our knowledge this collection of essays is the first to offer an account of the vicissitudes of the concept of critique from Spinoza to Habermas, Derrida and Rancière. However, its aim is not primarily historical. Through critical analyses of key texts it rather seeks to achieve a better understanding of how philosophers struggled with the guise of critique that they inherited from their predecessors and, while gearing their criticism towards actual cultural, social and political problems, attempted to shed those of its assumptions no longer deemed tenable.⁴ The various contributions to this collection make it abundantly clear, we hope, that these struggles do not belong to the past, but continue to define – or to haunt – critical philosophy and theory taken in a broad sense of the term ‘critical’.

Yet what is it to which we take recourse in order to draw the line between critical and non-critical philosophy? Surely there is no fixed concept of critique that allows us to do this unambiguously and without distortion. Nevertheless we would venture that critique always seems to arise from the need to draw a line between, on the one hand, forms of knowledge, culture or politics alleged to have become inadequate and, on the other hand, forms of knowledge, culture or politics considered to possess a liberating, emancipatory or future-oriented force.

Even though Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* is not the origin of philosophical critique as we would like to understand it, Kant was undoubtedly the first modern philosopher who attributed the task of critique not only to intellectuals, but also to philosophers concerned with the fate of philosophy itself.⁵ Through critique, he writes,

our judgement is allotted a standard by which knowledge can with certainty be distinguished from pseudo-knowledge, and, once critique has been fully enacted in metaphysics, it will ground a mode of thinking that subsequently extends its wholesome influence to every other use of reason, thus for the first time exciting the true philosophical spirit.⁶

Kant held that he, by investigating the sources of any form of cognition, had discovered the criterion by means of which the line between true knowledge and pseudo-knowledge could be drawn once and for all. This clearly illustrates that the negative moment of critique – its effort to shed stifling forms of thought or life – rests on a positive determination of the criterion that allows the critic to draw a fixed line in the first place. In other words, the destruction of such forms necessarily relies on the construction of an ideal, if only an extremely thin one. It is this positive moment of critique, we would suggest, that opens any particular form of critique to the possibility of being criticised in its turn, delivering it to the turmoil of finite modes of thought that seek to prevail over the other.

Obviously, the activity to which we refer as critique is not confined to the domain of philosophy, but is part and parcel of everyday forms of reasoning as well. Whenever someone claims a finding to be a fact, a judgement to be true, a view to be emancipatory or a practice to be recommendable, she or he exposes such claims to the scrutiny of others, who may well refuse to accept these claims at face value. Whereas this moment of refusal can be said to inhabit any form of culture, politics and cognition, it is likely to acquire a force of its own when prevailing forms of culture, politics and cognition are experienced as inadequate, oppressive or illusionary. This is especially so in cases where thought cannot ground its claims in empirical research. In such cases, critique can only resort to conceptual means, for instance by positing other findings as facts or other views as emancipatory. Yet critique can also proceed – as in Socrates' cross-examinations – by letting someone compare her or his stated view with the ground it presupposes, such that the former emerges as an inadequate determination of the latter.

These two forms of critique – external and immanent critique – can be said to have animated the history of Western science, culture, politics and philosophy as a whole.⁷ Yet the critical force of thought developed in particular when, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Europe became the stage of the struggle between those who sought to preserve a feudal and theocratic system and those who attempted

to liberate science, culture, politics and philosophy from the grasp of this system. From then onwards, intellectuals deployed the critical force of concepts such as autonomy, freedom, rationality, equality or progress to fight dogmatism and oppression. By so doing, we would submit, they equally emancipated the activity called 'critique' from the subordinate role it had played in preceding centuries. Conceived in this way, critique is deeply entrenched in the cultural paradigm commonly referred to as the Enlightenment.

This is not to say, however, that 'critique' and 'enlightenment' have always taken the same course. Long before Kant identified the age of critique with the age of Enlightenment, various philosophers had elaborated forms of critique that targeted not only religious, scientific or philosophical dogmatism, but also crucial elements of what was to become Enlightenment thought itself. In his contribution to this volume, André Tosel presents Spinoza as a point in case. Interpreting Rousseau as an early critic of modernity, Philip A. Quadrio likewise suggests that pre-Kantian forms of critical philosophy may be more relevant to contemporary thought than is often assumed.

Yet even Kant's own philosophy cannot simply be relegated to the side of those who opposed the metaphysical tradition. While Kant certainly embraced the emancipatory ideals of the Enlightenment, it is not quite clear how exactly these ideals translate into his *Critique of Pure Reason*. Challenging Foucault's reading of Kant in this respect, Colin McQuillan argues that Kant aimed not so much to confine reason to the realm of experience as to liberate metaphysics from the dogmatic form that it had achieved within former metaphysics.

That Kant's conception of critique constitutes a pivotal moment in the history of philosophy is also borne out by the fact that many of the philosophers discussed in this volume define their own position primarily in relation to Kant. Thus, Karin de Boer maintains that Hegel, drawing on Kant's idea of a self-critique of reason, elaborated a method that later became known as immanent critique. For Hegel, criticising the Enlightenment meant drawing a line between its dualist ontology and its conception of human freedom and progress. Post-Kantian philosophy, we would suggest, derives its energy not so much from the promotion of Enlightenment values as from the need to redraw the line in ever newer ways. According to this account, any criterion brought into play by philosophers to criticise their own age seems to have been turned into a target by subsequent guises of critique.

Marx, Nietzsche and Freud preeminently exemplify this self-critical impetus of critical philosophy. For Marx, Hegelian ideas such as an

autonomous reason and a sovereign state conceal the true causes of the oppression of the masses, thus perpetuating the reign of capitalism. Rejecting the very idea of pure theory, moreover, he put his critique in the service of the emancipation of society in an unprecedented way. Yet according to Robin Celikates, Marx' theory only remains a compelling option today if it is conceived not as a science, as Marx himself tended to do, but rather as a contribution to actual critical practices. Also targeting the ideas of scientificity and necessary progress, Nietzsche appears to turn against the Enlightenment even more radically than Marx. According to James I. Porter's reading of *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche did not criticise the enlightened conception of morality from an external point of view, but rather, through parody and exaggeration, by displacing its various elements from within. In her essay on Freud, Elizabeth Rottenberg brings out Freud's deep ambivalence vis-à-vis the legacy of the Enlightenment. Whereas Freud's early critique of religious dogmatism remained indebted to an enlightened conception of reason and science, she takes his later work on the death drive to address 'a resistance at the heart of reason that reason can neither assimilate nor eliminate'. As we see it, Freud's struggle against criteria that he had earlier taken for granted exemplifies the self-criticism that modern philosophy had been engaged in from at least Spinoza onwards. Accordingly, each of the philosophers treated in this volume might be considered a 'master of suspicion' with regard to the criteria embraced by their predecessors.⁸

We would suggest that during the twentieth century, critique has developed along three different paths.⁹ One of these developments can be said to consist in a radicalisation of nineteenth-century self-criticisms of critical philosophy. Philosophers such as Benjamin, Adorno, Foucault and Derrida held that any criterion – whether reason, freedom or the good life – is necessarily implicated in the systems under critique and therefore cannot straightforwardly be used to criticise society, culture or philosophy. According to Thijs Lijster, the specific character of Benjamin's critique of literary and theoretical texts ensues from his rejection of the idea of necessary progress. If critique cannot project a future untainted by prevailing myths, then it can only proceed by violently interrupting such myths wherever they occur. This is also Adorno's view. Relentlessly criticising the tendency of critique to draw on positive norms, he nevertheless seeks to prevent his own critique of society from collapsing into nihilism, as Fabian Freyenhagen stresses in his contribution.

Foucault and Derrida, in turn, appear to challenge the very possibility of drawing a fixed line between the objects of critique and the criteria

it must adopt. Thus, Foucault refuses to make a clear-cut distinction between oppressive or excluding forms of power and forms of power that resist oppression and exclusion, which seems to entail that critiques of prevailing forms of power can emerge at any point and at any time. While Foucault does not use the term 'critique' to refer to his own work without hesitation, Derrida seems to be even more cautious in this regard. Emphasising that any form of critique is from the outset contaminated by the discourse from which it seeks to distance itself, his work can be considered to exhibit most radically the aporetic implications of the concept of critique. Even though Derrida continues to affirm the necessity of critique, deconstruction can no longer be regarded as one of its many guises, as Olivia Custer argues in her essay. If this is the case, then deconstruction may well mark the endpoint of the self-reflective track that critique has taken during the twentieth century.

The second path that we would like to distinguish consists in a reaction against the first. Returning to Kant, Habermas argues that a critique of society can only gain force by drawing on criteria that allow the critic to tell right from wrong, true from false or alienation from self-realisation. However, Habermas derives these criteria from idealisations that he takes to be implied in any use of language rather than from pure reason. According to Maeve Cooke, Habermas' theory – despite the many objections raised against it – allows for a further development that does not fall prey to the authoritarianism implied by its classical form.

Yet it might be argued that even this second form of contemporary critique remains empty-handed, leaving the actual work to social scientists, journalists or citizens engaged in local forms of resistance. Abandoning the efforts of critique either to ground itself or to expose its proper groundlessness, a third path that critique has taken appears to lead beyond the confines of philosophy and theory at large. Although their conceptions of critique vary widely, what binds theorists such as the later Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, Jacques Rancière and Judith Butler is their effort to wed theoretical insights and commitments to actual practices of social and political critique, however local they may be. Their critique is directed against forms of injustice and their oppressive concealment, but no less against the incapacity of earlier guises of critical thought to turn its insights into action.

By engaging in actual critical practices, intellectuals run the risk of acting as prophets who tell others what they ought to do, as the later Foucault points out time and again. Christina Hendricks's contribution

examines Foucault's genealogical account of the role of the intellectual in this light. As she sees it, he may not always have gone far enough in his own efforts to avoid prophetism. Confronting Bourdieu's critical sociology with Rancière's conceptualisation of emancipatory dissensus, Ruth Sonderegger suggests that critique should, on the one hand, be aware of the difficulty to bring about social and political emancipation, but, on the other hand, should make visible actual critical practices that in many cases go unrecognised. Critically reconsidering Kant's *The Conflict of the Faculties*, among other texts, Judith Butler's opening chapter addresses forms of oppression that arise from the silent, yet relentless, limitations of the very domain of the speakable. Whenever prevailing social structures implicitly cast forms of life and thought as non-existing, unthinkable or rogue, Butler argues, they not only curtail the scope of critical action and reflection in an alarming way, but also threaten to annihilate various subject positions. Focusing on the timely issue of academic freedom, she thus seeks to preserve, gain or regain a space for dissent of any kind.

It has not been the aim of this collection of essays to decide whether critique as such – or at least the guises that it has so far assumed – has or has not lost its force. What we have tried to do is to achieve a better understanding of the self-criticisms of critique that have accompanied the development of the modern world. Whatever the effects of critique on actual forms of dogmatism, alienation or oppression may have been, by continuously challenging, destroying and transforming itself critique has forged a history that testifies to a tremendous wealth, energy and reflexivity. Yet the reflexive forms of critique that result from this history do not necessarily possess the force required to bring about actual changes – which is also something of which critique must time and again remind itself. Today we are awakened from our academic debates and reflections by practices of critique that erupt in parts of the world where we would least have expected them, making it yet more difficult to draw a line between modernity and non-modernity or between forms of enlightenment that we ought to endorse and forms of enlightenment that we have become used to suspect.

As we see it, the tension between, on the one hand, the reflective forms of critique developed within the conceptual domain and, on the other hand, the local, national and global struggles against injustice and oppression that we witness today ought to continue to irritate critical philosophy and theory. Critique might react to this irritation by developing new forms of reflection, strategies and ways of enhancing actual forms of resistance. But what it can do – and ought to do – at any

rate is to identify and discard the clichés, superficial images, abstract oppositions and repression of alternative voices that continue to proliferate within and without the academic world. Whether or not critique will have a future is not decided by philosophy. Yet it is our hope that the many voices of critique that arise from the present volume will produce effects – new doubts, new insights, new challenges or new resources – that none of them could have achieved on their own.

Karin de Boer
Ruth Sonderegger

Notes

1. B. Latour, 'Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern', *Critical Inquiry*, 30/2, 2004, 225–248.
2. A. Badiou, *Deleuze: The Clamor of Being* (Minneapolis, MN and London: University of Minneapolis Press, 1999), 45–46.
3. See the contributions by Judith Butler and Christina Hendricks in this volume.
4. Of the few books devoted to philosophical and theoretical forms of critique only Kurt Röttgers' *Kritik und Praxis: Zur Geschichte des Kritikbegriffs von Kant bis Marx* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1975) adopts a historical perspective. Röttgers covers one of the most productive eras of critical philosophy, but hardly relates his findings to contemporary questions. Two recent collections of essays, on the other hand, focus on contemporary challenges to philosophical theories of critique: R. Sinnerbrink et al. (eds), *Critique Today* (Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2006); and R. Jaeggi and T. Wesche (eds), *Was ist Kritik?* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2009). A third volume defends the political impact of contemporary theoretical accounts of critique: B. Mennel, S. Nowotny and G. Raunig (eds), *Kunst der Kritik* (Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2010). Contrary to these works, the present volume is based on the view that discussions about the contemporary relevance of particular forms of critique cannot be divorced from investigations into their history.
5. See the transcripts of Foucault's last courses at the Collège de France for an account of the strong affinity between modern critical philosophy and its precursors in antiquity: M. Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others: Lectures at the College de France, 1982–1983* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); and M. Foucault, *The Courage of Truth: Lectures at the College de France, 1983–1984* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).
6. This passage is taken from Kant's critical response to the review of the *Critique of Pure Reason* by Garve and Feder, which he presented as an appendix to the *Prolegomena*. See I. Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics That Will Be Able to Come Forward as Science*, translated by G. Hatfield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 133–134, translation modified. Kant's conception of critique is in line with the meaning of the Greek *krinein*, which means to separate, discriminate, discern or judge. Cf. R. Sonderegger, 'Kritik', in S. Gosepath, W. Hinsch and B. Rössler (eds), *Handbuch der politischen Philosophie und Sozialphilosophie* (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 2008), 669–674.