

# **O**n **C**ritique: **Butler, Foucault, Spivak, Latour**

## **A Minicourse**

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## Readings

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## On Being Critical

Critique generally means a critical method of enquiry and exposition, referring more specifically to a detailed analysis and assessment of something, or the evaluation (from within a theory or practice) of something in a detailed and analytical way. Etymologically, it draws from Aristotle's *kritike tekhnē*, "the power of discerning, separating, judging" (critical art and skill) (Aristotle, *De Anima*, 432a, 16). The term was for the longest time a referent or signifier of positive analysis, but now has somewhat of a negative connotation (e.g., critical comment, critical v poststructural).

Critique, as dialectic, is part and parcel of the liberal arts, which were actually reduced to seven "disciplines" as medieval European universities established a fairly uniform curriculum based on the *trivium* (grammar, dialectic [logic] & rhetoric) and *quadrivium* (arithmetic, geometry, music & astronomy). The *artes liberales* did not refer to arts as we understand them today, but rather to the Greek and Latin sense of skill and techniques. Liberal arts provided a foundation of higher knowledge or freedom (Latin *liber*) of thought, and eventually were prerequisite to the three higher faculties of law, medicine and philosophy/theology (scholasticism). Dialectic, or the art and skill of reasoning or disputation was

used in two senses, (a) the art of definition or discrimination of 'ideas', (b) the science which views the inter-relation of the ideas in the light of a single principle 'the good'; corresponding broadly to logic and metaphysic. By Aristotle, the term was confined to the method of probable reasoning, as opposed to the demonstrative method of science. With the Stoics, rhetoric and dialectic formed the two branches of logic, in their application of the term; and down through the Middle Ages *dialectica* was the regular name of what is now called 'logic', in which sense accordingly *dialectic* and *dialectics* were first used in English. (*OED Online*)

Kant gave critique its modern place in philosophical analysis, most notably in *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) and *Critique of Judgment* (1790). The basis of critique is found in condensed version in "What is Enlightenment?" published in a Berlin newspaper in 1784. According to Foucault (1983/2007), Kant "founded the two great critical traditions which divide modern philosophy."

Let us say in his great critical work, Kant posited and founded this tradition of philosophy that asks the question of the conditions under which true knowledge is possible and we can therefore

say that a whole side of modern philosophy since the 19<sup>th</sup> century has been defined and developed as the analytic of truth. But there exists in modern and contemporary philosophy another type of question, another kind of critical questioning... The other critical tradition poses the question: What is our actuality? What is the present field of possible experiences? It is not an issue of analyzing the truth, it will be a question rather of what we could call an ontology of ourselves, an ontology of the present... an ontology of the actuality. (pp. 94-95)

Foucault (1981/1988) clarified that

critique is not a matter of saying that things are not right as they are. It is a matter of pointing out on what kinds of assumptions, what kinds of familiar, unchallenged, unconsidered modes of thought the practices that we accept rest.... Criticism is a matter of flushing out that thought and trying to change it: to show that things are not as self-evident as one believed, to see that what is accepted as self-evident will no longer be accepted as such. Practicing criticism is a matter of making facile gestures difficult. (pp. 154-155)

## **Critical Theory, Pedagogy, Literacies, Thinking & Inquiry**

1. Critical theory v. critical pedagogy v critical thinking v. critical inquiry
  - a. **Critical theory** generally derives from Max Horkheimer's (Frankfurt School) 1937 essay "Traditional and Critical Theory." Horkheimer responded to the problem of founding the human and social sciences on the natural sciences, which reinforced individualized "liberalist bourgeoisie" attitudes of independence. "Under the condition of monopolistic capitalism," he wrote, "a relative individual independence is a thing of the past. The individual no longer has any ideas of his own. The content of mass belief, in which no one really believes, is an immediate product of the ruling and political bureaucracies, and its disciples secretly follow their own atomistic and therefore untrue interests; they act as mere functions of the economic machine. The concept of the dependence of the cultural on the economic has thus changed. With the destruction of the classically typical individual, the concept has as it were become more materialistic, in the popular sense of the term, than before" (1937/1972, p. 237). In this short description is critical theory's objective of theorizing power, capital, culture, the individual and the masses. The Frankfurt School drew on Marx and political economy (ideology, alienation, reification, historical materialism), and Freud and psychoanalysis (desire, repression, sublimation), and directed theories / critiques of the "culture industry" toward this objective.
  - b. "Often erroneously used to refer to contemporary theoretically informed criticism in general, critical theory was a specific and hugely influential school of thought also known loosely as the 'Frankfurt School.' Much preoccupied by 'mass' society in the 1930s and early 1940s, when fascism so successfully mobilised mass opinion and action, critical theory's most influential work was Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which argued that the Western intellectual tradition of instrumental rationality— using reason as a tool to manipulate the world— was complicit with capitalism's managerial approach to organising human life in the interests of production and ultimately with the totalitarian impulse to use people as mere disposable raw material. The ferocity of this Marxist-influenced critique was especially directed at the mass media and the

- 'culture industry' that they sustained, the latter viewed as manipulative, deleterious and distracting people from any political consciousness" (Fleming, 2000, p. 68).
2. **Critical pedagogy** draws from this basis of critical theory. According to Shor, critical pedagogy is learning and teaching that address "habits of thought, reading, writing, and speaking which go beneath surface meaning, first impressions, dominant myths, official pronouncements, traditional cliches, received wisdom, and mere opinions, to understand the deep meaning, root causes, social context, ideology, and personal consequences of any action, event, object, process, organization, experience, text, subject matter, policy, mass media, or discourse" (Shor, 1992, p. 129).
    - a. Being critical generally means that first, "there is the element of evaluation or judgment." And second, "there is the element of knowing closely and 'for what it is' that which is being evaluated: the object of evaluation or judgment" (Peters & Lankshear, 1996, p. 54). **Critical literacy**, for example, then involves:
      - b. having a critical perspective on literacy or literacies per se;
      - c. having a critical perspective on particular texts;
      - d. having a critical perspective on— that is, being able to make 'critical readings' of— wider social practices, arrangements, relations, allocations, procedures, and so on, which are mediated, made possible, and partially sustained through reading, writing, viewing, or transmitting texts. (Peters & Lankshear, 1998, p. 55)
  3. A **critical pedagogy and literacy of new media and technology**, for example, prompts and guides students to ask fundamental questions about what particular media and technologies offer (**perception and description**), what the media and technologies mean with their embedded values (**analysis and interpretation**), and the particular media or technology's worth (**judgment**). How do specific media and technologies frame ecology, equity or quality of life? A critical pedagogy of new media and technology is not an *anti-technology* stance, but a fund of knowledge toward public understanding, regulation, and sensibility. It encourages a critical attitude toward questioning technocratic assumptions, and technologies' interaction with notions of autonomy, determinism, and progress. Questioning acknowledges the voice of those marginalized by western styles of mediated, technological and cybercultural practice, such as aboriginal peoples, the financially disenfranchised, differently abled, racially and sexually segregated, feminists and ecologists.
  4. **Critical thinking**, however, is much more of a liberal practice and to this day there continue attempts to define the concept as neutral (e.g., "critical thinking is the art of analyzing and evaluating thinking with a view to improving it" (Foundation for Critical Thinking, 2006, p. 4).
  5. **Critical inquiry** is split, partially parceled out to the liberal, neutral notion of critical thinking and partially to critical theory. For example, critical inquiry is often defined as "using various modes of inquiry and interdisciplinary perspectives or methodologies to conceptualize, investigate, and derive meaning. It implies that learners are active learners, self-motivated learners, and learners who understand the ambiguities and uncertainties of achieving absolute knowledge, as well as the implications of various courses of action" (Skidmore College, 2005, <http://www.skidmore.edu/administration/assessment/> \*See "Critical Inquiry Report").
    - a. The journal *Critical Inquiry* was founded in 1974 for authors who "value examination of the assumptions underlying particular discriminations... and insist upon the highest standards of evidence relevant to conclusions drawn in practical criticism... criticism that aspires to be a special kind of 'learning'— not in any sense dispassionate or impersonal but something akin to that fusion of human

commitment with objectivity that Michael Polanyi characterizes as 'personal knowledge'... disciplined criticism" (Sacks, 1974, p. iii). Hence, *CI* "aims to be independent of any theoretical bias. It promotes discussion and controversy about current critical trends, as well as reviving debate about more established critical traditions [i.e., critical theory and Kantian philosophy]."

- b. In "Critical Pedagogy and the Futures of Critical Theory," Peters (2002) cautions, however, that critical inquiry as merely disciplined inquiry "does seem to rob critical theory of its original critical intent or to tame it, recasting it as a method of inquiry in the service of democracy... it is too easily denatured and stripped of its critical intent and reduced to 'thinking skills,' critical or otherwise."  
<http://construct.haifa.ac.il/~ilangz/oslo/peters.htm>

## Critical Inquiry and Methods (a sample)

**Critical Aesthetics**— Critical aesthetics takes seriously the problem that Benjamin, in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," defined as the aestheticization of politics (e.g., practice) contra the politicization of art. How is life aestheticized and politicized at the same time, and how can a critical aesthetics provide infrastructure or incentive to radical practice? Early Marxist aesthetics suggested that all art is "somehow conditioned by the relations of production, class position, and so on" (Marcuse, 1978, p. 14). With a long history most poignantly rooted in Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, the practice of critical aesthetics became specifically defined within the Frankfurt School as a process of generating an aesthetic that could withstand or undermine bourgeoisie and fascist aesthetics. In capitalism however, with artists increasingly integrated into systems of consumption, production, regulation, and representation, it became doubtful that aesthetics could be revolutionary. Critical aesthetics is far from the practices of art criticism, and nor is it anti-art or anti-aesthetics.

**Critical Ethnography**— Critical ethnography is "concerned with situating the gestures of others within the often seemingly arbitrary systems of signs and relations of power and meaning that animate them. Of importance therefore is the dialectical interplay of these systems. Texts must be understood within contexts and equations of power and meaning must be assigned value. What must be comprehended is that contexts and values are also analytical constructions that reflect the anthropologists' own assumptions about the social world" (McLaren in McLaren & Giarelli, 1995, p. 278). Critical ethnographers explore issues of class, ethnicity, gender, race and sexuality as these constructs are mediated through cultural identity, representation and power.

**Critical Discourse Analysis**— "Critical discourse analysis provides a means of dealing with latent issues of text quality, such as ideology and symbolic meaning. Discourse refers to recurrent statements, themes and wordings across texts, which represent orientations to the world. Discourse analysis is a method of text analysis, where text can represent the spoken or written word, image, narrative or media; text is the artificial representation of the world. It is a method that assists the researcher in linking text to structural formations and relations of power. Questions central to critical discourse analysis are: "How is the text positioned or positioning? Whose interests are served by this positioning? Whose interests are negated? What are the consequences of this positioning?" This method draws historically from hermeneutics, linguistics, rhetoric and semiotics, or more generally from critical and post-structuralist theory. On one level, this involves a critical reading of how texts are constructed. On another, it involves a critical reading where text and context are culturally (re)located and interests identified. Critical discourse analysis is a means of tying texts together and of demonstrating the political and powerful nature of seemingly mundane statements and symbols. In education, uses have ranged from demonstrating how schools govern through surveillance and moral regulation to how textbooks embody sexist and racial discourses and structure thought processes" (Petrina, 1998).

**Critical Gerontology**— “Critical gerontology serves the necessary role of casting a critical eye on society and the field of gerontology itself. Informed by the critical theories of Marxism and political economy, the Frankfurt school of philosophy, the postmodern theories of Foucault, and various feminist theories of the late 20th century, critical gerontology looks inward, as well as outward, critiquing the structures, assumptions and practices of mainstream gerontology, along with the sociopolitical environments in which we age.... Critical gerontologists, therefore, challenge the status quo, enlivening thought and stimulating debate, with the intention of keeping mainstream gerontology (and gerontologists) from becoming complacent. Some of the critiques posed by contributors to this issue include challenges to scientism and the hegemony of biomedical research in gerontology... the normative construction of the life course... insensitivity or indifference to gender, race, class, and age relation... an untheorized concept of the body... uncritical constructions of life narratives and the narrative process in old age...” (Ray, 2008, pp. 97-98).

**Critical & Poststructural History (Archaeology & Genealogy)**—Critical history, sometimes referred to as social or cultural history, involves co-generating and finding voice with or for the marginal and submerged that ‘lie a little beneath’ history—the voices of the mad, the delinquent, the disempowered, the oppressed. If history tends to be written as victor(y) and progress narratives, then critical history provides an antidote by allowing for stories or explanations that run counter-intuitive to tales of smooth progress. At one time, critical history was said to focus on conflict rather than consensus. Nowadays, however, the focus is on microhistories. Critical history has been called a history of the present that demonstrates links between knowledge and power. (<http://omni.cc.purdue.edu/~felluga/theoryframes.html#NewHistoricism>)

“Following from the pioneering works of Michel Foucault, historians have begun to look for hidden clues to power relationships in the ways that categories of knowledge are constructed. The new cultural history pushes Foucault's interest in prisons and asylums further into the mainstream of society, and develops his insights in an increasingly historicized context. Thus, the new **cultural history** is new in the sense that it represents a different way of thinking about certain questions. In particular, it questions power relationships as they are played out in everyday lives, usually of everyday people. While it is difficult to pin down a single definition of the new cultural history, it is even harder to find a single origin for this turn in cultural history” (Gordon, 2004).

Foucault used what he called “archaeology” to explore the strata of history wherein one would uncover the “conditions of acceptability of a system [discourse] and follow the breaking points which indicate its emergence.” Changes, discourses, etc. are not realized or “analyzed as universals to which history, with its particular circumstances, would add a number of modifications” (Foucault, 1997, *The Politics of Truth*, p. 62). Foucault used archaeology and genealogy to explore relations between power, knowledge, and the body by uncovering layers of the past and to problematise power relations in the present by tracing power through the past (Sawocki, 1991). Genealogy, for Foucault, was “a form of history which can account for the constitution of knowledges, discourses, domains of objects, etc., without having to make reference to a subject which is either transcendental in relation to the field of events or runs in the empty sameness throughout the course of history” (Foucault, 1980, *Power/Knowledge*, p. 117). Foucault studied discourses and power/knowledge. For example, he studied madness instead of specific people who were mad or controlled the mad, sexuality instead of specific manifestations of gender or sex.

**Critical Narrative (Resistance or Counter Narrative)**— Narratives that run counter to everyday domination and oppression. Demonstrates that power is distributed and productive, as Foucault described it.

**Critical Ontology**— In simple terms, critical ontology is the methodological re/integration of phenomenology with critical theory. It addresses the problem of how subjects are produced in a world saturated by capitalism and the circulation of capital. Critical ontology is a method for researching the ways in which nature of (human) nature are free at times and determined at other times; ways in which capital pervades immediacy.

**Critical Psychology and Psychiatry**— “Critical psychology is a movement that challenges psychology to work towards emancipation and social justice, and that opposes the uses of psychology to perpetuate oppression and injustice.... Critical psychology is a strategy aimed at politicizing all subdisciplines in psychology. It is a metadiscipline in that it enables the discipline of psychology to critically evaluate its moral and political implications. Just as methodology enables psychology to understand and measure human phenomena, a critical dimension makes it possible to assess the moral and political repercussions of psychological theories and practices (Prilleltensky, 1994, 1999; Walkerdine, 2001). Critical psychology focuses on reshaping the discipline of psychology in order to promote emancipation in society” (Austin and Prilleltensky, 2001).

**Critical Race Theory**— Integration of jurisprudence and research to interrogate race, racial profiling, racism and the general conditions surrounding ethnicity and race in society. It is anti-racist in intent. “Critical Race Theory can be regarded as an academic niche carved out from liberal legal theory in virtue of its alliance with some of the basic tenets of Critical Legal Studies, including especially the thesis that law is indeterminate and fundamentally an instrument of political power, and the related thesis that, typically, that power is exercised to sustain existing socio-political hierarchies. But CRT has also carved out an approach, characterized by a more pragmatic assessment of the value of rights talk in legal discourse, and by an explicit focus on the actual experiences of minorities of color in the legal system, which distinguishes it from CLS scholarship.... Perhaps the most distinctive feature of CRT scholarship is its “narrative turn” — the business of telling concrete stories, sometimes fictional, sometimes autobiographical, as a more effective method to “get the word out” about the real lived experiences of people of color vis-à-vis the legal institutions” (Nunan, 1999).

**Critical Sociology**— “Critical sociology attempts to avoid both the deep skepticism about the effects and ethics of sociology common in Western postmodern circles and the positivistic and dogmatic nature of a good deal of sociological work in the former Eastern bloc. The guiding principle is that sociology is not only a means of describing society, but also an agency in guiding it. For it to be effective, however, sociology must become more critical, particularly of its own practice. It must also relate its subjects of study to society as a whole. Such sociology will have to start with an examination of its own apparent powerlessness in the current situation” (Critical Sociology Network).

**Cultural Studies**— “Cultural Studies is a study of cultural practices and their relations to power. Its goal is to expose power relationships and examine how these relationships influence and shape cultural practices. An objective is to understand culture in all its complex forms and to analyse the political and social context which it manifests itself. Culture is both the object of study and the location of criticism and action. Cultural studies attempts to overcome the division constructed between low status forms of knowledge (tacit, popular, working class) and high status forms (objective, science). Cultural studies is committed to a moral evaluation of modern society and a radical line of political action” (Sardar & van Loon, 1997, p. 9).

**Resistance Postmodernism**— Appropriation of postmodernism for critical projects (see Critical Narrative).

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