

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

## **A Minicourse**

Stephen Petrina, Professor  
Department of Curriculum and Pedagogy  
University of British Columbia

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## Readings

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6. Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 271-313). Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
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## On Critique

Etymologically, critique draws from Greek *κρίσις*, *krisis*, derived from *κρίνω*, *krínō*, *krinein* (Latin *iudicium*, *discrimen*). Nearly all Sacred Books include various references to judgment (e.g., in Revelation 18, a form of uncompromising judgment of merchants and luxuries as God [YHWH, *Θεός*, *Deus*] proceeds to level Babylon). Critique etymologically draws from ancient script but Indigenous cultures have deep histories of complex language and references to judgment. Traditions of philosophy and rhetoric are nearly part and parcel with critique and criticism. In *Statesman*, Plato uses *kritikós* (*κριτικόν*) to refer to an ability to discern or judge, or divide (260b). And in *The Republic*, Plato coins the term *dialektiké* (*διαλεκτική*) to refer to a form of division in dialogue and a method of undermining assumptions to discern first principles and truth (533c-d). Similarly, Aristotle uses *κρίνομεν* to refer to the faculty of judgment, generally understood as the power of discerning, separating, or judging (critical art and skill) (Aristotle, *De Anima*, 428a3, 432a16).

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 *τέχνη* 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 metaphysics. 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*)

Foucault found that "since the Classical age, commentary and criticism have been in profound opposition.... until the connection between language and representation is broken, or at least transcended, in our culture, all secondary languages will be imprisoned within the alternative of criticism or commentary. And in their indecision they will proliferate *ad infinitum*." Commentary "halts before the precipice of the original text, and assumes the impossible and endless task of repeating its own birth within itself." It is a glossarial practice of drawing "copious deductions" and illuminating a text; *pia interpretatio*, reverent interpretation. Criticism questions language and the text "as to its truth or falsehood, its transparency or opacity... examines the forms of *rhetoric*: the analysis of *figures*, that is, the

types of discourse, with the expressive value of each, the analysis of *tropes*, that is, the different relations that words may have with the same representative content... defines its *relation* to what it represents.” Commentary “sacralizes language” and criticism judges and “profanes it.”<sup>1</sup> In erudition, Foucault is careful to concede that commentary and criticism are mutually pedagogical even over time when “*commentary* has yielded to *criticism*.” Critique and criticism range from what Foucault dubbed “the high Kantian enterprise to the little polemical professional activities,” albeit too often mistakenly distinguished by differentiating between objects— criticism of works versus critique of practices and positions.<sup>2</sup>

In *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), Kant developed critique as a method to set limits on what can be known beyond the ground of experience and how to firm this up as the empirical and objective ground of reason (p. xix). Rather than “criticism of books and systems,” Kant founded critique to “expose the groundless nature of the pretensions of” two faculties, reason and understanding (p. 54). He proceeded with the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1785) and *Critique of Judgment* (1790), and a critique of *Religion within the Limits of Mere Reason* (1793) in the face of a Censorship Edict and charges of insubordination by the King after the second edition in 1794. Critics adjusted the method (i.e., simply put, “expose the groundless nature of the pretensions of...” or “critical theory” to an increasingly open field of objects. Kant (1781) proclaimed: “Our age is the age of criticism, to which every thing must be subjected,” including the “sacredness of religion,” “authority of legislation,” power of steam and natural liberty of capital (p. xix).

By the time Kant wrote *Critique of Pure Reason*, the opposition between commentary and criticism was elevated to an opposition between religion and critique. Kant was clear about which was ascendant. One problem was completing the little polemical criticisms with critique. Kant gave critique its modern place in philosophical analysis. 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 kind s 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)

## On Critique Minicourse

### 1. Part I. Lecture: On Critique (30 minutes)

### 2. Part II. Minipaper: Commentary (in class writing activity, 1 hour)

- a. Choose one of the readings or texts wherein you have done a close reading or would like to do a closer reading. Choose a section of this text and write a 500-600 word commentary.
  - i. One could reduce writing to four registers, narrative, description, commentary and critique. For this activity, you are writing a commentary. Let's assume here that texts are not only iconic but are also communicative and referential. The point here is that a text and its commentary have pedagogical functions.
  - ii. Commentary makes a text meaningful and enables interpretation. Hence, commentary differs from interpretation.
    1. Chambers (1978) clarifies: If the function of commentary is to create meaningfulness, it follows that it will be particularly valuable in cases where the narrative/descriptive elements of the text are not, in and of themselves, meaningful. (pp. 326-327)
    2. In short, it is an invitation to interpret and a guide to interpretation. As an invitation to interpret, commentary presents itself as a form of textual strategy aimed at involving the reader in the concerns of the text. (p. 329)
    3. The "contextualizing function" of commentary "is productive of what we have called meaningfulness." Commentary does not only gesture towards its text, it also designates a "world" [or contexts] to which the text is relevant. (p. 331)
    4. Commentary does not in any way designate the right way to read a text; it must, on the contrary, be read as part of the text, and most particularly as forming part of the text's strategies of meaningfulness. (p. 335)
    5. Commentary's "function is the production of meaningfulness, not truth; and the function of the production of meaningfulness is to give literature its social role" of mediation (p. 335).

### 3. Part III. Microteaching: Commentary (in class teaching, 5-6 minutes each student = 1 hour)

- a. Take 5 minutes to focus on this section of text and teach from your commentary.
- b. Reading the section of text and commentary is one common, scholarly approach to this pedagogical function.
- c. The options are yours.

## 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>

## References

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London, Tavistock, 1970), 80, 81. On commentary, see Eva Matthews Sanford, "Renaissance Commentaries on Juvenal," *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 79 (1948): 92-112, on 93; Gerald Snare, "The Practice of Glossing in Late Antiquity and the Renaissance," *Studies in Philology* 92 (Autumn 1995): 439-459. Sanford quotes Conrad of Hirschau to define the practice of commentary: "to draw copious deductions from brief statements, and to illuminate the obscure words of others." Lanigan summarizes this section of Foucault as a contest between "language as grammar" and "speech as rhetoric:" "It is a contest that may be won or lost under both the semiotic guise of a *rhetoric of science* and under the phenomenological guise of a *science of rhetoric*." Richard L. Lanigan, "Foucault's Science of Rhetoric: The Contest Between Practical Discourse and Discursive Practice," *symplokē* 4 no 1/2 (1996): 189-202, on 190. See also Philip Smallwood, "Problems in the Definition of Criticism," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 36 (July 1996): 252-264.

<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, "What is Critique? In *The Politics of Truth* ed. Sylvère Lotringer, trans. Lisa Hochroth and Catherine Porter (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 1978/2007), 41-83, on 42. For the distinction between critique and criticism, Childs and Fowler posit that "*Critical theory* too should be distinguished from criticism, since it concerns itself with the analysis of concepts rather than works." In a helpful discussion of critique, they state: "when critique, and the forms of literary criticism associated with it, question the prevailing distribution of political power, the alarm bells start to ring. By contrast, the apolitical forms of critique are a tolerated part of the intellectual scene. But this distinction between the political and the apolitical is not itself invariable and we cannot necessarily know in advance what form of critique will strike a political nerve." Peter Childs & Roger Fowler, *The Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 38, 41.

What Is Critique? The Critical State Of Critique In The Age Of Criticism. Sverre RaffnsÃe, Copenhagen Business School. Abstract: Since the Enlightenment critique has played an overarching role in how western society understands itself and its basic institutions.Â It is this nebulous nature that makes critique itself the object of criticism. As the state of critique becomes critical with the age of criticism, the question becomes a matter of urgency: âWhat is it to offer a critique?â<sup>TM</sup> A critique is your impression of something or what you think of something such as a book, a movie, a painting ect. Another words, if you read a book you would give your critique on it-you would say "I like this book becuae....." Or "I thought this book was poorly written because...." Hope this helps critique meaning, definition, what is critique: a detailed explanation of the problems o...: Learn more.Â An offshoot from the phenomenological critique developed into a group of researchers known as the ethnomethodologists.â What generalized the appeal of Paisley's critique of the unionist Ãlites was the accession to power of Terence O'Neill.â