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Critique & Praxis is nothing short of a colossal achievement, which will be discussed for years to come

I.

Critique and Praxis can be read as a remarkable intellectual history of critical theory in the broadest sense, which demonstrates a highly sophisticated, original understanding of its concepts and methods, its historical, social and political contexts, as well as its unquestioned assumptions and limitations. Harcourt's scholarship and depth of thought are impressive.

But *Critique & Praxis* is much more than that. It is a genuine intervention within, and a major contribution to, the field of critical theory, which Harcourt understands as a constantly renewed demand or exigency, at once theoretical and practical. Throughout, Harcourt insists on the necessary unity between the critical concepts and models he analyzes or constructs, and his own, multi-faceted praxis. This unity is itself a function of the feedback, transformative effects that theory and praxis produce on one another. This means that critique—its objects, concepts and practices—is never fixed in advance or set in stone. It is best described as a dynamic or process, one that is always responding to a specific situation, an evolving set of circumstances requiring tailored concepts and practices. His relation to the plethora of critical thinkers he draws on and engages with is driven by the (Foucauldian) idea that bodies of thought are conceptual toolboxes, which one should *use* (or not), and contribute to, but not criticise or polemicise with. The version of critical theory Harcourt offers us is pragmatic and open-ended.

Finally, *Critique & Praxis* is a philosophical credo, a political call to arms, an autobiography in the sense Du Bois uses when he speaks of *Dusk of Dawn* as an autobiography of a Problem. Harcourt's autobiography is that of a Struggle (or a series of struggles), rooted in a strong political affectivity, and in forms of indignation in particular. His struggles—as a litigator in favor of those condemned to death or wrongfully convicted; representing indigent tenants being evicted or disabled people who are denied benefits; or demonstrating, marching, and occupying—are carried out in the name of social justice, equality, and dignity. They are aimed at the punitive society, and carry an abolitionist agenda: of the death penalty, the prison, the police, racial discrimination and oppression, the free-market economy that generates precarity and inequality, the Counterrevolution, digital surveillance, etc. The struggles in question involve different strategies and tactics which, following Foucault, Harcourt describes as “counterconducts.”

From the point of view of its method, *Critique and Praxis* is of course critical. But critique unfolds on three different levels: descriptive (or expository), hermeneutical (or interpretative), and prescriptive.

The book describes historical situations and social movements, sometimes at length, as in Chapter 15, where Harcourt discusses a range of leftist strategies and tactics, including Bernie Sanders' “political revolution,” Chantal Mouffe's Left Populism, #BlackLivesMatter, BYP100, the recent occupation and assembly movements, Butler's Theory of Assembly, Hardt and Negri's organizational principles for leftist revolt, the history and philosophy of political and civil disobedience (to which Harcourt himself contributed), secession, insurrection, etc., all of which, he claims, are justifiable tactics. Yet, for reasons that I will turn to later, this narrative, expository account of counterconducts is itself a function of Harcourt's conception of critical praxis, which is entirely situation-specific

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and time-sensitive: there never was, or never will be, a single rule or model to follow. Tactics need to be invented, reinvented, adapted, and questioned.

The book is also an interpretation of critical concepts and key events. It is rooted in a specific (yet minimalist) concept of meaning related to that of illusion. I will return to this hermeneutical aspect of Harcourt's conception of critique.

Finally, it is prescriptive, yet in a way that displaces and neutralizes the tradition question "What must we do?" by raising the more personal question "What (more) can I do?", to which Harcourt devotes the fourth and final part of his book. He is explicit about the normative framework that drives his reconstructed critical theory. It is, he claims, "guided by the values that critical philosophy has always placed front and centre: equality, solidarity, social justice, and autonomy" (p. 230). This list is not exhaustive. It is not grounded in reason or rationality or science or God. It is context dependent. Depending on the historical situation, these values can lead to a greater or lesser sense of urgency, and even give way to new values. And they can be served or implemented through different means and tactics, different counterconducts, from revolutions to revolts, strikes, demonstrations, occupations, microinsurrections, litigation, and so forth. The one horizon or "promise" Harcourt seems to reject as no longer realistic, or even desirable, is that of Revolution, at least defined as the control of state power by a union of workers, pitted against the bourgeoisie. But more broadly, Harcourt rejects the very idea of a single, universal, and permanent solution. Struggles for equality and justice are endless, and always contextual. They need to be invented or adapted as the distribution and organization of power evolve (p. 435); they must never "exceed what is strictly necessary" (p. 436).

II.

The core ambition of the book is to return to the roots of critical theory, that is, to the (originally Marxist) demand that we *change* and not just *interpret* the world. This, in turn, requires "a new vision of critical praxis theory for the 21st century" (p. 15, 21, 48, 49), which seeks to address the failure of critical theory to remain true to the Marxist imperative after it had given up on Revolution as the true form of praxis and retreated in pure theory, unable as it was to imagine (and even at times recognize) other, socially progressive forms of praxis and resistance. Harcourt mentions the many insurrectional movements and leaderless assemblies of the last fifty years, which rose "on the crumbling foundations of class struggle" (p. 340). This failure, Harcourt, claims, can be corrected not by adhering or returning to a Marxist truth (in fact, as we'll see, the renewal of critique requires that we abandon the will to truth altogether), but by including another critical tradition, inherited from Nietzsche and especially Foucault. One of the challenges Harcourt faces is to reconcile and uphold those two senses of critique and traditions, without ever claiming that they are identical or subordinating one to the other. At the same time, much of the book is devoted to a critical assessment of those thinkers and to the reasons why, where, and when necessary, we ought to distance ourselves from certain positions or tendencies inherent to their thought: from the positivist and/or utopian tendencies of Marxist and post-Marxist thought (especially of the early Frankfurt School); but also from the inability of critical thinkers such as Foucault or Deleuze to hear the voice of the postcolonial subaltern (p. 242). The reason for that is simple: while sharing many traits with the social, ethical, and political problems described by those great critical philosophers, our current situation is different and requires a constant reappraisal of the conceptual tools and the priorities we face as critical thinkers today. On this point, Harcourt succeeds where many would fail and manages to construct a new vision of critical praxis by reviving the spirit of Marxist critique and the methods drawn from archaeological and genealogical critique. But the reason why he is able to do so has to do with his claim that critique is necessarily situational and, therefore, non-dogmatic; that it is forced or shocked into existence through what is often a visceral, affective reaction (this political affectivity remains implicit in the book and would deserve to be developed for itself).

Harcourt faces another, related and equally demanding challenge. It consists in showing how, by virtue of being brought together and given equal importance, the very meaning of theory and praxis is transformed; for they condition one another. This means: interpretation does not underpin action or change, does not make it possible. Equally, though, interpretation does not follow from action, as a belated justification or explanation. Between the two, there is no order of foundation. This is one of the reasons why Harcourt defines critique as neither foundational nor anti-foundational, but as *counter*-foundational: the “counter” expresses precisely the unity of the theoretical and the practical, independently of any truth claim or commitment that would *ground* and *legitimize* critique. It is both a tactical notion, which reveals a form of opposition to, or refusal of, the distribution of forces and places within a given field, and a hermeneutical device, which reveals the lack of foundation, and therefore ultimate authority, of a normative system and epistemological apparatus. And the lack in question is a function of the *illusory* nature of the beliefs—most often presented as truths—that define such a system. The “illusion,” “illusory belief,” or “myth” (p. 521) in question can be that of free markets, the neutrality of the law in liberal democracies, or the threat of internal enemies. Yet what motivates Harcourt’s use of this vocabulary is not the knowledge of another, truer, human nature, in the name of which critique would be carried out. It is the very idea of human nature that is illusory. If Harcourt retains the idea and notion of illusion—“despite, or perhaps over the objection of Foucault, the Frankfurt School, and others” (p. 203), who flirted with, and at times used, the notion of illusion, before replacing it with, they thought, the more adequate notions of ideology, *epistemes*, and regimes of truth—it is “because it captures best ... the idea of a misleading solid belief that masquerades as truth” (p. 208). Truth is not the authority of thought and action; it is not what authorizes one to think and act. The power of truth is one we should be concerned with and weary of. In place of truth, we should concern ourselves with justice, dignity, and equality.

At first sight, and independently of the reticence of some of Harcourt’s favorite critical thinkers to adopt it, his use of the notion of illusion might seem confusing. For this is a notion that is central to Kantian critique, and to the analytic of truth for which it stands—central, that is, to the discourse that is concerned with the power and limits of our faculties, with what we can and cannot know, with the conditions of possibility of truth claims, etc. An illusion, Kant claims in the context of his *dialectic* of pure reason, is not a mere error, from which an adequate method can guard us. Rather, it is the result of a deeply seated or “transcendental” tendency, which attributes an epistemological or cognitive value to an Idea of Reason, such as freedom, the immortality of the soul, or the existence of God, the legitimate realm of which is only practical, or moral. But the illusions Harcourt has in mind are not generated *transcendentally*, by reason alone. They are historical constructions. Yet they are not illusions in the strictly Marxist sense either, that is, ideological products of real social relations, defined by their *material* conditions of production. If this were the case, the recognition of the existence of the latter would suffice to dispel the former: illusions would be nothing but the surface effects of a deeper, more real (for material) reality. Critique, according to Harcourt, who is close to Foucault on this point, cannot be mere *ideology* critique. Harcourt’s commitment to the notion of illusion, which is neither Kantian nor Marxist, is perhaps best understood through Beauvoir who, Harcourt claims, unveiled “the illusions of patriarchy and male superiority” by “decoupling gender from sex” (p. 189). This move opened a new space for praxis and struggles for gender equality. At the same time, it “reinforced notions of binary gender and a certain essentialism that would later be unveiled and critiqued by queer theory” (p. 189). By lifting the veil of gender illusions, Beauvoir did not reveal an essential truth, which would close the gender debate once and for all. She did not unveil this illusion as the mere appearance of a deeper, hidden truth, concerned with the essence of “man” and “woman,” or with class interests. But she did unveil power relations and struggles, ways of establishing identities and hierarchies. In that respect, critique in the sense that Harcourt promotes is only and always strategic. It is always an intervention within an already constituted field of forces. As such, it is always and necessarily limited. For if it might help change the state of play and minimize the relations of power that define it, it does not seek nor believe in their total eradication, or in the possibility of building a new order from the ground up, which would itself be devoid of such power dynamics and illusions. For—as the Beauvoir example reveals—it is impossible to say in advance how a given critique will evolve, the kind of hidden assumptions and power lines it will introduce, or even reinforce.

This brings us to the question of interpretation, and to Harcourt's claim that one of the central aims of critique is to provide a "better interpretation" of a given situation. Better in what respect, from what perspective? And why interpretation rather than construction or problematization? Again, it seems that Harcourt uses the term interpretation in a minimalist sense. He is not advocating a strong hermeneutics, despite his use of the vocabulary of veiling and unveiling: by lifting the veil of illusions, one does not uncover an original meaning or founding event (or truth), but a particular, multi-layered, historically contingent yet normative assemblage of knowledge and power relations. But this critique of illusions does not hold the promise of an end (of illusions, of power relations, of struggles) either. To "interpret better" can therefore only mean to fail better and recognize this failure as our only salvation. It is neither an epistemological enterprise, aimed at uncovering a buried and reluctant truth, nor a moral one, aimed at "deciding on a rule of action of rothers" (p. 221). If anything, it is an ethical and political task aimed at defining one's own conduct based on one's effort to interpret and problematize one's own situation.

III.

Let me end this brief review by pointing to what I see as three difficulties or tensions running through, or occasionally appearing in, Harcourt's book. They all revolve around the central ideas of illusion and interpretation.

The first is methodological and concerns the concept and question of violence, which Harcourt discusses in Part II. Harcourt situates his discussion in the context of a line of thought that, he claims, runs from Sade to Hegel, Nietzsche, Bataille, and Pasolini, and attributes violence to a *will* to dominate, master, prevail, and punish. This strikes me as an instance of a naturalization of a phenomenon, namely violence, which the entire book rightly claims to resist and sees as a source of illusion. To attribute violence to "the darker side of our psyche," "the unsavoury dimension of the will to power, the desire for recognition, the ambition of mastery" and speak of the "productivity of violence" (p. 292), is to presuppose a philosophical anthropology, possibly a metapsychology, if not a philosophy of life, the foundations, assumptions, and consequences of which Harcourt does not clarify or justify. In addition, it is difficult to see how they are compatible with the anti-naturalist stance adopted throughout the book. There is, Harcourt argues, such a thing as an inherent human desire to inflict harm and impose one's force, such a thing as the productivity of violence; and this is a fact that he finds both unbearable and impossible to ignore. This venture (or relapse?) into something resembling a philosophical anthropology is relatively brief and could be easily dismissed as a digression. Harcourt even warns the sensitive reader that they might wish to skip the two chapters in question and move straight to Part III instead. At the same time, he claims that the problem of violence in the context of critique and critical theory is unavoidable (he returns to it in Chapter 16). In order to justify certain types of counterconducts and actions, Harcourt needs to justify the use of violence. He wants to do that not simply by showing how the liberal state and order rest on and produce their own form of violence, and therefore recognize counterconducts as counterviolences, but by being able to legitimize violence as such, "to distinguish legitimate from illegitimate violence" (p. 295). Why does Harcourt begin to talk about the "human condition" (p. 295), "human existence" and "human experience" (p. 311), "human self-development" (p. 315), and does so precisely and only in relation to the problem of violence? Why, having dismissed the liberal, utilitarian view of human nature, and the discourse of human nature itself as an illusion, does he feel the need, indeed the necessity to fall back on what looks very much like a philosophical anthropology, very much rooted in Hegel's *Phenomenology*, and especially Kojève's interpretation of it? In what sense is the idea of the human mobilized here, and the values of dignity and respect Harcourt associates with it, not itself an illusion? How can we distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate forms of violence without appealing to a core human nature against which this violence would be perpetuated? Violence, Harcourt claims, is "legitimate" only to the extent that it is carried out not just *with* but *in the name of* compassion, respect, and dignity (p. 295). The struggle for justice and equality, whether in the form of revolution, uprisings, or social transformation in general, is "unavoidably violent" (p. 432). It affects ownership, rights, and possession, as well as education and social status. But its legitimacy comes from the

values in which it is rooted. Whilst the values in question are central to critical theory, and the work of Honneth in particular, they can be traced back to a liberal line of thought and a philosophy of recognition that run through Rousseau, Fichte, and Hegel. To be sure, this is not the laissez faire liberalism of utility and self-interest, but the liberalism of the left, rooted in the values of love, respect, and dignity. But what makes them less illusory? Inasmuch as they appeal to a certain view of human nature should it not be subjected to critique?

There is another related reason why I think the problem of violence is unavoidable. It is related to, in fact intertwined with, the question of interpretation, and Harcourt's conception of critique as the (endless) task of providing a "better interpretation." As Nietzsche never ceased to remind us, interpretation is not a neutral, benevolent operation: it is a grasping, a taking hold, an imposing, with a view to dominate and assert one's power. Violence is not simply in need of interpretation (p. 303), an *object* of critique. Critique is itself a primordial form of violence. The "creativity" of interpretation, which Harcourt recognizes and embraces, the fact that knowledge, or what we claim to know, is an "invention" (p. 304), carry within them a degree of violence. On one level, and even though he does not say it explicitly, Harcourt recognizes the violent nature of interpretation by claiming that every interpretation requires its own critique and counterinterpretation. It is not just our political struggles that are violent, in their means and sometimes aims, but the meaning we attribute to situations and events, the concepts we forge and the grid of intelligibility we apply to reality. And the Nietzschean, but also explicitly Foucauldian, point is that justice, what we ordinarily call justice is itself an expression of power, a certain organization of power.¹ Are political struggles an expression of our desire to achieve greater justice, or do we call them just because we desire them, and because they increase our power (or so we think)? Is class struggle a struggle for equality and justice, or for greater power? Is the outcome of the Russian or Chinese revolution a more equitable world, or a redistribution and new organization of power relations? Harcourt is so egalitarian in his approach that even violence, he claims, should be distributed equitably and never exceed what is necessary (p. 433). But what is this necessity, and how can it be defined, if not by the increase of power of one group over another? How can the struggle for justice—which I can only understand as a given group's struggle to increase its power to act and own interest—ever be raised independently of that group's perspective or *interpretative* lens, from the point of view of "eternal" values such as dignity, respect, and compassion? Why does Harcourt feel that he needs to appeal to the very values of which Nietzsche provided a critical genealogy, revealing their origin and emergence, their complex history, the specific interpretation of the world on which they relied?

My second objection concerns the scope and breadth of the book. Harcourt operates with an extremely open and generous conception of both critique and praxis, aspects of which he embraces, others he leaves out. In fact, his thought draws on just about all the traditions which, in one way or another, embrace, develop, or transform the multifaceted concept of critique, inherited from Kant (from Deleuze to Foucault and Habermas), Hegel (from Kojève to Honneth and Jaeggi), Marx (from the early Frankfurt School to Fraser, Žižek, Badiou, Hardt, and Negri), and Nietzsche (Foucault and Deleuze again), and the equally multifaceted social and political tactics associated with critique, from revolution to revolt, insurrection, occupation, civil disobedience, political disobedience, etc. Given his pragmatic, non-dogmatic conception of critique and praxis, every existing version of critique, and virtually every praxis of resistance, is given a degree of legitimacy, depending on the circumstances. At times, this approach generates tensions within the text, which Harcourt leaves unaddressed. How compatible are they after all, methodologically and substantially? Let me take just one example. Harcourt mentions occasionally, and obliquely, the form of critique found in Deleuze and Guattari. But he does not tell us how this strand of critique, which is systematically critical of the vocabulary of interpretation, illusion, and even revolution, is compatible with the kind of critique he advocates in Part I. The task, Deleuze and Guattari claims, is precisely *not* to "signify and interpret," but to "experiment, machine, assemble," to find or create one's own lines of flight and deterritorialization.² It is not to unveil illusions, but to construct new assemblages, new desiring machines, through writing or other means (we don't fight capitalism, or fascism, or liberal legalism by recognizing them as illusions, but by desiring differently, and

something else). The task is not revolution, or the installation of a new class as the universal, but to eat away at the universal through a *becoming* revolutionary, which is always, and necessarily, a becoming *minoritarian*. This is a form of critique that is concerned not with values such as respect, dignity, compassion, recognition, or even justice, but with the maximization of one's power to act and think, with the cultivation of joyful encounters, with the power of the multitude understood not as a class, but a combination of singularities. At the conceptual level, it privileges the singular, difference, and intensity, over the universal (and the particular), identity (albeit self-differentiated), and actuality. In the end, it converges with Harcourt's desire and every effort to not be governed *at all* (rather than with the attempt to be governed less, or differently), and therefore with what I see (and applaud) as his radical anarchism. But it does so in the name of different values, and on the basis of an onto-ethics that is qualitatively different from, and critical of, the liberal tradition I mentioned, and to which (it seems) Harcourt remains attached.

One final point, which takes us back to the (strongly present but never explicitly addressed) question of political affectivity in relation to that of interpretation. Harcourt ends his book by claiming that "the critical Left needs to challenge New Right Interpretations and impose our own, better interpretations" (p. 527). Leaving aside the question of whether the term interpretation is the most effective or useful, and the question of the violence of interpretation itself, I wonder whether this is what we really need, or only what we need. I wonder whether the critical Left does not also and especially need something like a myth or narrative, and therefore something like what Harcourt calls an illusion, to counter those of the New Right. Following Spinoza, I wonder whether superstition is not, after all, what governs the multitude most effectively, and whether the critical Left, in order to defeat the nationalist, supremacist, xenophobic right, does not need to weave a narrative that speaks to the heart (and not just, or even primarily) the mind of the people, to develop a political affectivity oriented not toward hatred, exclusion, and fear, but love, inclusion, and hope—however illusory those affects may be. In other words, I wonder how far the critique of illusion can or even should go in the political context, and how irreducible the politics of the imagination and sensibility are. Is it not also on the level of affectivity that we can distinguish the people from the lynching mob, a multitude that leads to the greatest possible degree of accord and harmony from the multitude that leads to discord or, worse still, civil war?

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ENDNOTES

¹ This point comes across very clearly in the 1971 discussion, on Dutch television, between Chomsky and Foucault. See F. Elders (ed.), *Reflexive Water: The Basic Concerns of Mankind* (London: Souvenir Press, 1974), 135-197. On this question, Harcourt seems closer to Chomsky than Foucault.

² Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. B. Massumi (London: The Athlone Press, 1988), 139; G. Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues*, trans. H. Tomlinson and B. Habberjam (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 45.

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