Toward Critical Practice(s)

Précis for a chapter on *Critique*

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Critical theory has been distracted by internecine struggles of influence among its different branches—Marxist, Freudian, Nietzschean, Foucaultian, deconstructive, feminist, post-colonial, etc.—and these internal wars of influence have prevented us, first, from recognizing the core of critique and, second, taking on the real challenge of elaborating a critical theory of critical practice(s).

Without spending more time on those internecine battles and in order to rapidly move forward to the problematic, I would posit that the core of critical theory is a theory of illusions: the world we find ourselves in, rife with inequalities, injustice, and prejudice, is made tolerable by means of a series of illusions—the myths of individual responsibility and merit, the illusions of liberalism and the free markets, the fantasy of upward social mobility, etc. These delusions are what make our unequal world tolerable. And they are what critical theory unmasks, unveils, reveals—whether through ideology critique, power-knowledge, regimes of truth, wish fulfillment, difference theory, deconstruction, etc. The variations in approach are more like flavors of ice cream, sports teams, or gangs. This project seeks to get beyond the wars of influence. Whether we critique advanced capitalism through the lens of commodity fetishization or the illusion of free markets is, at this point, no longer worth fighting about, in my opinion.

What all these internecine struggles have obfuscated however—over decades, if not centuries—is the next and more important question: how does critical theory relate to critical practice(s)? Does it call for a vanguard party or a leaderless occupation? Does it entail imparting knowledge or creating venues for its production? What processes, methods, tools, ways of relating to each other does it demand? It’s here that I would like to intervene. I have always taken the view that critique does not require proposing alternatives, and that the critic should be satisfied with the unveiling, without then needing to suggest solutions. But this is different. It is not about proposing solutions, so much as thinking through the kind of practices that are suited to critical theory. It is about thinking through kinds of resistance, disobedience, uprisings, revolutions, etc.

The difficulty is that we have been essentially brainwashed by the harm principle and liberal notions of physical/harm to subscribe to a physical/non-physical violence distinction. We always end up privileging physical harm, somehow. We’re just wedded to it, practically unable to see past it. But critical theory has always rested, foundationally, on the fact that we are surrounded by forms of violence we do not acknowledge: private property (and its police enforcement), residential patterns that are no more than racial segregation now imposed by real estate values, the evisceration of public education, the two fists of the state, welfare, mass incarceration… It takes remarkable amounts of violence, tucked away, to maintain this peaceful existence of ours. And critical theory has taught us that there is no non-violent way of proceeding—that no action is non-violent, that any intervention is necessarily violent, and that the matrix of social relations in civil war or class struggle or other racial, gender or other conflict.
For this reason, thinking through critical practice(s) necessarily takes us back to the critiques of violence we know and love. Why? Because the violence of our own praxis is at the heart of the problem—and yet we are rarely willing to face it. One of the most damning features of critical theory has precisely been its inability to translate theoretical interventions into political practice. The idea of “praxis” has remained an elusive ambition, never quite realized. The gap most often has been bridged by borrowing, temporarily, from the liberal register of resistance—turning to the courts or marching in the streets or signing petitions.

To give a concrete example, in the wake of the recent elections of strong-men leaders in countries around the globe—Donald Trump in the United States, Erdogan in Turkey, Putin in Russia, Duterte in the Philippines—the critical opposition has tended to mobilize using traditionally liberal devices. At least in the US, the principal mobilizations have involved (1) civil rights litigation against the Muslim Ban; (2) feminist and undocumented protest marches, such as the Women’s March and now the March for Science; (3) and myriad petitions. Even the critics among us fall back on these conventional liberal methods.

The resistance to the Muslim Ban followed precisely the liberal civil and political rights model: one goes to court, one sues Trump, one offers one’s expertise as an area expert or translator or lawyer, one tries to use the federal courts as a bulwark against forms of discrimination proscribed by the Bill of Rights and human rights conventions. At its most critical, we knowingly deploying civil and political rights—knowingly deploying law—as a weapon of politics. At most, there is some critical consciousness and distance from the rights framework. But is that critical distance and knowledge—i.e. framing litigation as a mere “tool” of the oppressed in a struggle over relations of power that is modeled on a civil war—is that knowledge alone sufficient to turn liberal practice into critical praxis? And if all that critique amounts to, at a practical level, is just a “state of mind,” do we even need it? Could we do without critical theory? An American legal realist also would simply bring litigation down to earth and consider it just another weapon of political struggle. Why not just be realists, then? Why do we need all the critical apparatus?

Now, the project of thinking through the way forward to a critical practice of critical theory cuts across a number of deep and rich debates, each of which could potentially derail the enterprise: the debates over individualism vs. determinism, or agency and structure; the debates over authoritarianism, democratic tyranny, and counter-majoritarianism; the debates over the U-curve, income versus asset inequality, etc. Is it possible to make any headway on the question of critique and praxis given all these oceans of literature and debate? Must they all be resolved? Is it possible to make headway more parsimoniously? I am not sure, but it is worth a try to avoid some of those rabbit holes.

On the narrow question of the relation between critique and praxis, we are not bereft of models. There are practices that qualify as inflected with critique. First, Foucault and the GIP: explicitly an intervention that was designed against the model of the popular tribunal as a way to give voice to discourses that were illegible or unheard. To render legible the voice of the prisoners. That is critically informed. Second, the General Assembly at Occupy Wall Street: a form of political disobedience that prefigures participatory democracy, that tries to be leaderless, non-hierarchical, not means-ends driven, not instrumental, and not coopted by the dominant hegemonic system or conceptions of party politics. Perhaps also the notion of a “politics of spleen” from the context of Lawrence v. Texas.
Now, it is important to emphasize that none of these interventions were or would be favored by all critical theorists. Marxists, in particular, have criticized these efforts. Zizek particularly attacked the Occupy movement as lacking the Leninist vanguard necessary to make a revolution. And Benny Lévi and André Glucksmann preferred popular tribunals. So did Sartre. The fact is, praxis could be understood as vanguardist. It could be interpreted to entail a popular tribunal, Sartrian politics, etc. That would be one direction, and it would flow as well from critique since it too derives from a theory of human emancipation through collective ideals.

Also, neither of the two mentioned practices—GIP and Occupy—have been considered particularly effective. Neither of them are exemplars of terribly successful political interventions. So how does effectiveness factor into the equation? What if, in the process of satisfying critical form, we cede the ground to the neo-fascists? Of what value is critique then? If critical practice(s) result in even worse inequality—the amassing of capital and wealth in the hands of a tiny fraction of the population—then what is the point of critical theory? Moreover, for instance, if the only bulwark to the Muslim Ban is civil rights litigation, then maybe that should tell us something about our theorizing. Remember, “that may be fine and good in practice, but what about in theory?” Should not the effectiveness of practical action tell us something about our critical theories? On the other hand, what is the demonstrated success of liberal legalism? That was, after all, Hillary Clinton and Obama before her. That surely did not stop the rise of national populism.

All of this raises the central question of political violence. Seeking a radical change in equality in society—or even just maintaining the status quo—is necessarily violent in the sense that it necessarily entails redistribution, affects ownership, involves education and reformation: these are all violent impositions. How then can they be justified?

This takes us back, then, to the critiques of violence. Because we are surrounded by such stark violence (police brutality, drones, war on terror, etc.), we most often turn to those critiques of violence as a way to criticize that violence. But we need, instead, to realize that they are rather justifications of violence, not just criticisms of it. Perhaps, then, we need to investigate these critiques in a different way: as justifications of violence. In other words, we need to ask ourselves how, as justifications of violence, they help us make sense of our own violent praxis? How do they help us justify, assess, qualify, prescribe our own violence?

That may be the only way forward. Reexamine, reevaluate, rethink the critiques of violence—and settle on a critical praxis. Is there a way to do that in a chapter?