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Facing Our New Monster: On Critique in the Era of Affirmation

Working in the field of philosophy of technology with an expertise in digitalisation, the question about the current status of critique for me can't be avoided: 'I like'-buttons and recommendation-algorithms are characteristic for our new public space, the online environment. There, you can't help but notice that critique in its classic sense of questioning or even negating the existing world is rather absent (or has morphed into the non-reflexing forms of trolling and flaming). Secondly, big corporations like Facebook or Google don't act to exploit their users – well, only partly – but also support important critical causes from the Arab Spring to Open Education. In short, they act like 'frenemies'.

In the following paper, I'll read this performance of power as a shift that is exceeding the digital area; to exemplify this, I'll turn to Rupert Murdoch and the phone hacking scandal that shook up one of today's Western regime of truth, journalism, in 2011. Discussing the use of acknowledgment and affirmation as a response to and neutralisation of negative critique, I'll try to make the following apparent: to escape the politics of negation becomes more than it ever was a political necessity. As power operates in new ways, 'what becomes of critique?' is a question indeed at stake.

1 Negation & Critique

It is well known that negative critique has been conceptually at the centre as it was pushing our societies forward. To whatever extent it has been challenged, it is Hegel's dialectics that fortified its central role¹ when describing how an existing condition is enhanced by its negation, and both are synthesized and 'sublated' to a new level:

'That which enables the Notion to advance itself is the already mentioned negative which it possesses within itself; it is this which constitutes the genuine dialectical moment.'²

In the 20th century, Hegel's notion of the negative that 'enables to advance' has frequently been picked up, albeit sometimes critically: challenging critique is central to Adorno and Horkheimer ('Dialectic of Enlightenment'), Sartre ('Critique of Dialectical Reason'), to Foucault ('What is Critique?'), and Butler ('An Essay on Foucault's Virtue'), and recently to Latour ('Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?'). There is reason for this. Even in its most general-sense of fault-finding, one could claim that negative critique aimed to make the world better, despite cynics might object rightly with Adorno that it just made the fault-finders feel better. But whether constructive or destructive, negative critique could surely claim to be about change. Well, until recently.

2 Neutralising Negation

In the current climate, the power of negation, that once fueled resistance, finds itself more and more often without effect. Exemplary for this strategy of power is the following. In July 2011, illegal phone hacking of several newspapers came to light, a scandal that shook up the journalistic public of the UK. Several publishing houses, all owned by the businessman Rupert Murdoch, had failed. Stating that this was the most humble days of his life, he acknowledged that there were failures. But he handed them down further and further, until they were out of his reach to rest with the regular guy on high street: 'I hold responsible the people who I trusted to run it and the people

¹ Well captured by Alexandre Kojève, 'The Dialectic of the Real and the Phenomenological Method in Hegel', in: Introduction to the Reading of Hegel, Basic Books, 1969 (1947), p. 169-260

² Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, Science of Logic, London, Routledge, 2002 (1969), p. 55

they trusted.³ 200 journalists not responsible of actual phone hacking were made redundant, when he closed one of his newspapers instead of just firing its management (as the BBC did when shaken up by the Saville-pedophile-scandal). A year later, when UK's prime minister met campaigners against phone hacking, the humbleness was gone, and Murdoch called them publicly "scumbag celebrities pushing for even more privacy laws" on Twitter.

There are a more examples that indicate this strategy has become mainstream, but I'll leave it here. For now, I think we can notice the rise of a new discursive style – duck and cover critique with the pretence of affirmation: the opponent simply agrees to the critique, but as few as possible is to be changed, of course. Not setting norms like in the disciplinary society, but playing hide and seek, seems to be the new style, how power operates: we are not the ones responsible, indeed we also don't like this problem and agree with you. In such a discursive environment, concepts that allow us to escape the politics of negation become more than they ever were a political necessity.

3 On the potential of diffraction and irritation

Fortunately, negation isn't the only drive for making progress. Negative critique surely has been one of the most used rhetoric techniques, but argumentation can follow many ways in order to push at the borders, as there is also aporia, chiasm, disruption or subtly deductive and inductive reasoning – the thought has many arms. As a matter of fact, the term critique itself has even been used in ways that didn't indicate negation: Kant's 'Critique of pure reason' as well as later Walter Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence' referred to the term, for example, in order to signify the examination of a subject. Still, there is a problem: What becomes of resistance? If we let go the concept of negation, we lose the tool of opposition. How can we hold power in check?

³ The Telegraph, 'Rupert Murdoch: I do not accept responsibility for wrongdoing at News of the World', *The Telegraph*, 19 July 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/phone-hacking/8647802/Rupert-Murdoch-I-do-not-accept-responsibility-for-wrongdoing-at-News-of-the-World.html>.

Debating critical thinking today on a conference in Berlin, the Dutch philosopher and feminist Kathrin Thiele⁴ made an interesting suggestion: to read critique not as a process of detecting, uncovering and fighting contradictions, but as an immanent practice, i.e. to engage. Quoting Donna Haraway's approach of 'staying with the trouble'⁵ this concept of critique as a radical affirmative gesture proposes to get attached to the matters at stake, manoeuvre them, and negotiate them into a 'different' future, instead of the tendency to 'separate', 'distinguish', and 'distance' ourselves from what we don't like. This gesture stands critique in a Kantian way on its feet as it enacts critique much in the sense that he had put enlightenment: as a 'strenuous exercise', and not as a 'fantasy of omnipotence'⁶ as Thiele points out. In order to not again live in a self-incurred tutelage, we need to have the courage to use our own understanding: in today's world, things are complicated and complex which is not only annoying but also an interesting challenge – there is new reason to pick up the fight. A tool theorists should look into to arm themselves seems to me the methodology of diffraction in the reading of Iris van der Tuin. Following Donna Haraway and quoting Karen Barad, she points out that a "diffractive strategy" entails to rework (and not negate) concepts, and uses their interferences with the aim to disrupt fixed casualties (van der Tuin 2011). Instead of negating, it irritates.

Again, it becomes obvious that in (what I call for now) the 'era of affirmation', there are not simply anymore two sides given. Still, we need to make a stand, and we can. In the absence of a preconfigured dialectical world neatly tidied up in two opposing sides, the struggle must continue: now we need to organize us newly 'against alignment with the way of the world, against withdrawal from engagement with the world', as Peter Hallward once put it when he conceptualized a 'prescriptive practice of politics'⁷. Under the governance of an affirmative discourse, this concept proves itself quite useful. Encircled by the monsters of this decade, the 'frenemies', we might lack the convenient clarity of a 'natural given' opposition we have conventionally turned to. Borrowing Hallward's concept, however, we still know our

⁴ Kathrin Thiele, 'In Critical Condition or Fully Out of Steam? Critical Thinking Today', International Conference 'Gegen/Stand der Kritik' of the DFG-Graduiertenkolleg 'Lebensformen und Lebenswissen', Berlin, June 28-30, 2012

⁵ Donna Haraway, 'When Species Meet: Staying With the Trouble', in: *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 28 (1), 2010, p. 53

⁶ Kathrin Thiele, 'In Critical Condition or Fully Out of Steam? Critical Thinking Today', International Conference 'Gegen/Stand der Kritik' of the DFG-Graduiertenkolleg 'Lebensformen und Lebenswissen', Berlin, June 28-30, 2012, p. 8

⁷ Peter Hallward, 'Politics of Prescription', in: *South Atlantic Quarterly*, Fall 2005 104 (4), p. 769-789

way being guided by an axiom – equality, transparency, privacy to name some examples – that we apply to a specific situation with the aim 'to crystallize hitherto inconsequential aspects of a subject in a newly consequential form'⁸. This concept is also to our advantage as guided by an axiom our resistance doesn't depend from our opponent anymore. Instead it gains autonomy from their moves and forces a situation while at same time rooting itself in a new ground, the specificity of a situation.

It is this approach to politics as an 'agential cut' (Karen Barad)⁹ that turns out to be a useful weaponry under the governance of an affirmative discourse, whose outlines aren't rough anymore but very real. Thus, instead of fighting against we now fight for, and instead of negating critique, the diffractive discourse holds on, in order to stubbornly guide this world into a different becoming. In the 'era of affirmation' we'll say 'yes', too: we will stay with the trouble.

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⁸ Ibid., p. 782

⁹ Karen Barad, Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter, in: *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 28.3, p. 815