

As You Like It: Critique in the Era of an Affirmative Discourse

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I like. You like. He likes. She likes. We like, and we like a lot. Three billion two hundred million of mostly likes but also comments have been generated by users daily in the first quarter of 2012 according to Facebook.¹ The counterpart of an 'I dislike' or Hate button is neither existing nor is it planned. An efficient trick: Facebook barely needs to discipline its users, instead it rather designs their actions, and these are positive. It is not that there can't be disagreement on Facebook. It is only that its utterance is made more elaborate as it needs to be declared in the comments. Thus, it cultivates the approach of agreement instead of critique with a design that visually prefers affirmation. At first sight, this approach of Facebook can be explained by the fact that friends generally have positive things to say to each other. They have some things in common, respect each other, and share some interests. Facebook, however, isn't simply a network of friends, but of several millions of friends. This is precisely why the affirmation cultivated on Facebook has a social dimension – it is much more than just a private matter among friends. When its basic design avoids the dialectic order of the modern discourse, for or against, to replace it with the affirmative proposition 'I like', it unfolds a discursive style that is about to become more and more dominant in our societies: the rise of an affirmative discourse. Can critique be saved?

Auschwitz? I Like!

A couple of days after the Unlike Us conference in Amsterdam in 2012, the liquidation of the Jewish ghetto in Cracow had its gloomy anniversary. In order to commemorate the event that had started on March 13th, the following post could be read on the page of the Auschwitz Memorial Museum on Facebook:

On 13-14 March 1943 German liquidated the ghetto in Cracow. The action was supervised by SS-Sturmbannführer Willi Haase. Around 6,000 Jews who were able to work were transferred to the Plaszow concentration camp. Around 1,000 people were murdered in the streets of the ghetto. On 13 March a transport of around 2,000 Jews was sent to Auschwitz. After the selection 484 men and 24 women were registered in the camp. The remaining group, around 1,492 people, were murdered in gas chamber II.²

Seventy-seven people have clicked the Facebook button to like this as of October 2012. Of course, these people are no Nazis. As there is no alternative button, one indicates that we will not forget an incomprehensible genocide by liking the horrible details that it gets broken down into on this site.

¹ Tina Kulow, Facebook Corporate Communications Manager, email message to author, 20 July 2012.

² Auschwitz Memorial / Muzeum Auschwitz, 'On 13-14 March 1943 German [...]', Facebook update, 13 March 2012, 13:25, <http://www.facebook.com/auschwitzmemorial/posts/10150592000141097>.

Facebook's structure allows one to publish several postings a week and not just one article, leaving room for individual stories and the smaller, but no less crucial, day-to-day events we barely ever hear. In 2009 the Auschwitz Memorial Museum decided to use Facebook in this exemplary way in order to keep remembrances alive through the new communication platforms of our society.³ In addition to this it has also done something else: when the historic horror of the Holocaust integrates itself only disruptively into the affirmative default of Facebook, it reveals that there is something new governing social discourse. The page of the Auschwitz Memorial Museum on Facebook is a good example to sketch out how our social discourses are now subject to Facebook's affirmation – if you want to be part of the new digital public, you need to be on Facebook. And to make the matter worse, the governance of affirmation is a case not only by, but far beyond Facebook: this social network is only the platform where the new domination of this discourse becomes perfectly apparent.

Let's pause for a moment with sociologist Bruno Latour to understand this paradoxical position in which we find Facebook. 'Even the simplest techniques are sociotechnical', he writes.⁴ Here we find an interesting ambivalence at play: are technologies an effect of the social or is the social an effect of a technology? As our complex realities teach us, both seems to be the case: Facebook's design clearly imposes the discourse of affirmation upon us, but when we look around (which we will do in a moment) we can also sense it in society, so its appearance in Facebook might well be nothing but a social trend a smart developer like Mark Zuckerberg decided to take up. With Facebook making affirmation apparent, let us now turn our attention to the political reality we live in, in order to see if we can sense it being used as a tool in today's social discourse of power.

In politics, the degeneration of the dialectical order has been evident for some time in both domestic and foreign affairs. Concerning internal politics, the old categories of 'right-wing' and 'left-wing' parties, established for the seating arrangement of the French National Assembly of 1789, have been questioned in most industrial states. Concerning foreign affairs, the division of an east and a west bloc collapsed with the fall of the Berlin wall. So where to now that the dialectical order has fallen apart? It must be said, that the idea of a 'third way'⁵ didn't take us very far. Today, it slowly becomes apparent that a certain type of affirmation has widely replaced opposition, and the British government's attitude towards the European Union is a very good example of this.

Comparing the approach of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and Prime Minister David Cameron, one can not very surprisingly say that their attitude stays the same:

³ See the Facebook profile of the Auschwitz Memorial Museum at, <http://www.facebook.com/auschwitzmemorial>.

⁴ Bruno Latour, 'A Collective Of Humans And Nonhumans', in Bruno Latour, *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 210.

⁵ Anthony Giddens, *The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy*, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1998.

as it befits a British Conservative both are rather critical towards the EU. However, the direct comparison of two YouTube clips of their speeches in Parliament demonstrates that the representation of their critical attitude couldn't differ more. While the Iron Lady defiantly belts out a 'No, no, no!' towards the EU, 21 years later Cameron hides his opposition in a far off corner of affirmation: he went 'seeking a deal' and responded for a treaty change 'in good faith' 'genuinely looking to reach an agreement'.⁶ It is obvious that the discourse of power has changed and with it its rhetoric. While Thatcher's political power is clearly visible in her negation of the EU, Cameron's power enacts the same but operates subversively under the cover of affirmation: it's not his fault that he vetoed a fiscal pact 25 other EU states had agreed to join, he wanted an agreement.

Both the Auschwitz Memorial Museum and Cameron's re-interpreted refusal examples make it apparent that not only on Facebook, but in a very general sense, the order of our social discourse has embraced affirmation. And being critical towards this, we find our next question: how does power operate in the governance of affirmation?

Let Your No Be No & Your Yes Be No, Too.

To explore this question, let us stick with Facebook as an example, and analyze how the company deals with resistance. On the 19th of August 2011, the Independent Data Protection Center (Unabhängiges Landeszentrum für Datenschutz) of Schleswig-Holstein decided that its region should become the famous Gallic village opposing the Roman Imperium that today is named Facebook. Shortly before, the social service had introduced a feature that would enable it to reach far beyond its platform. It redesigned its Graph API and allowed websites to implement its 'I Like' button with Mark Zuckerberg announcing at the F8 conference in San Francisco on April 21, 2010: 'We are building a web where the default is social'.⁷ Harry Halpin's illuminating talk at the Unlike Us conference in Amsterdam⁸ illustrated how Zuckerberg managed to do this: Facebook had joined the World Wide Web Consortium to deploy their open standards for building not an open, but a giant closed global graph.

The Data Protection Center in Germany decided they wouldn't accept this, having the following objections: the retrieved data from the Facebook button on an exterior

⁶ Videos are available at: 'Margaret Thatcher No No No', http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tetk_ayO1x4; 'British Prime Minister David Cameron defends EU treaty veto', <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u-LePwTb53s>.

⁷ Dan Fletcher, 'Facebook Looks to Get Personal', *Time*, 22 April 2010, <http://www.time.com/time/business/article/0,8599,1983721,00.html>.

⁸ Harry Halpin, 'The Hidden History of the "Like" Button', Unlike Us: Understanding Social Media and their Monopolies Conference, Amsterdam, 8-10 March 2012. Documentation of the talk can be found at: <http://networkcultures.org/wpmu/unlikeus/2012/03/10/harry-halpin-on-the-hidden-history-of-the-like-button>.

website – information about who visited what, when, and if they ‘liked’ it – wouldn't remain with the websites. In order to analyze this, the Facebook service transfers traffic and content data to the USA. Websites that implement the neat thumbs up Facebook satellite don't supply sufficient information about this to users. Furthermore, Facebook doesn't meet the legal requirements relevant for compliance of legal notice, privacy consent, and general terms of use.⁹ As such, the Center decided to prohibit the implementation of the Facebook button on websites registered within the region of Schleswig-Holstein. By the end of September 2011, website owners within the region who still made use of the service would be punished with a fine of 50,000 Euro.¹⁰

This sparked an intensive dialogue. Facebook's Director of Policy for Europe, Richard Allan, signaled the company's willingness to talk, and Schleswig-Holstein's Data Protection Center described their exchange as of a 'friendly atmosphere'. However, from the perspective of the Center technically nothing changed. According to them Facebook firstly offered to handle their web traffic analysis, called Insights, more transparently, but then never delivered corresponding technical documents that could sufficiently support this offer.¹¹ When asked about this in a second conversation, the German Director of Policy Dr. Gunnar Bender conveniently could not ensure them this material either as Facebook operates in Europe as an Irish company, and as such isn't within the jurisdiction of its German Director of Policy.¹² The Schleswig Data Protection Center learned it needed to contact the data protection authority in Dublin, a call that Facebook then would have to answer.

Playing hide and seek in a globalized world is how power in the era of affirmation operates: dodge responsibility, just indicate good will – we are not the ones responsible, indeed we also don't like this problem and agree with you. This discursive style – duck and cover with affirmation – has already found its talking head in the humble Rupert Murdoch, a businessman who claims not to be responsible for his business, the company News International. Today executives just sign, but don't leave signatures in their company's culture. Illegal phone hacking, as it came to light in the scandal of July 2011, might have been a practice in not just one, but several of his publishing houses. Yet still, he explicitly stated he would not accept his ultimate responsibility and instead handed failures down further and further until they were out of his reach and rested with the regular guy on high

⁹ Unabhängiges Landeszentrum für Datenschutz, 'ULD an Webseitenbetreiber: "Facebook-Reichweitenanalyse abschalten"', Unabhängiges Landeszentrum für Datenschutz, 19 August 2011, <https://www.datenschutzzentrum.de/presse/20110819-facebook.htm>.

¹⁰ Unabhängiges Landeszentrum für Datenschutz, 'ULD an Webseitenbetreiber'.

¹¹ Unabhängiges Landeszentrum für Datenschutz, 'Facebook Sucks – Objection is Still and Once Again Necessary', Unabhängiges Landeszentrum für Datenschutz, 16 May 2012, <https://www.datenschutzzentrum.de/presse/20120516-facebook-sucks.htm>.

¹² Unabhängiges Landeszentrum für Datenschutz, 'Facebook im Gespräch mit dem ULD: Keine Verbesserungen beim Datenschutz', Unabhängiges Landeszentrum für Datenschutz, 24 July 2012, <https://www.datenschutzzentrum.de/presse/20120724-facebook-stillstand.htm>.

street: 'I hold responsible the people who I trusted to run it and the people they trusted.'¹³

Summing this up, it is clear that the friendly reply of Facebook to Schleswig-Holstein's data security center, Prime Minister Cameron's 'good faith', and Rupert Murdoch's 'humble' response, and surely numerous other examples, share a specific gesture. These indicate good will, but hold others responsible. This characterizes power in the era of affirmation, and here Facebook, the new imperium, is just one among many.

Irritation as a Tool of Critique

When Schleswig-Holstein's data privacy center decided to intervene, it looked unpromising: a small institute located in Kiel was facing-off against an internationally operating corporation employing a brigade of lawyers. In addition, the center couldn't reach for Facebook directly, but needed to attack the social platform via the detour of regulating other websites in their region who were using Facebook's service. In this instance, critique seemed to drip off of Facebook like rain from a raincoat: the company was out of reach, and the rain fell onto others. Elusiveness of this kind is symptomatic of power in the era of affirmation. This is also the case with Rupert Murdoch because while he stayed in business, 200 journalists were made redundant when closing down his hacking flagship *News Of the World*. Here, negative critique isn't effective anymore, for what is negated has made a side-step out of reach, and indication of good will by the offender often even concurs with the critique. Here, the Hegelian power of negation, that once fueled resistance, finds itself without effect. This is worrying not only for the opponents of Facebook, but for our society in general. In this context what becomes of critique? Can it be saved?

Negative critique has been conceptually important for pushing our societies forward. Hegel, for example, gave it a central role when he described that an existing condition is enhanced by its negation, and both the condition and its negation, are synthesized and 'sublated' to a new level.¹⁴ 'That which enables the Notion to advance itself' he says, 'is the already mentioned negative which it possesses within itself; it is this which constitutes the genuine dialectical moment'.¹⁵ It is the negative that 'enables to advance' as it introduces progress to a society, for even in its most general sense of faultfinding, negative critique aimed to make the world better (despite cynics who might object, saying it made the faultfinders feel better). Negative critique was about improving, and if critique no longer reaches the one it means to oppose, one has to ask 'how can our societies make progress?'

¹³ '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>.

¹⁴ Alexandre Kojève, 'The Dialectic of the Real and the Phenomenological Method in Hegel', in Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969, pp. 169-260.

¹⁵ Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, *Science of Logic*, London: Routledge, 2002 (1969), p. 55.

Clearly dialectics as much as negative critique hasn't just been a philosophical concept. Far beyond the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, they are central to human emancipation, and their signature left a deep mark on modernity in general and democracy in particular. All democratic societies rest on the assumption that we have a government and an opposition that by negating the government's policy doesn't simply control it, but also challenges it for the better, as in progress. Opposition in the form of positioning a left and right structured our public social life, parliaments, as well as newspapers and media organizations. Thus, when the concept of critique is at stake, our modern democratic societies have reason to worry.

Knowing about the importance of negative critic, however, doesn't change the fact that in the current affirmative discourse it grasps at nothing: the opponent simply agrees and indicates good will, too, while of course nothing is supposed to be changed. 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. Besides *aporia*, very much loved by Kant,¹⁶ there is *chiasm* beloved by Derrida,¹⁷ or historic comparison and tracing transformations often used by Foucault,¹⁸ as well as deductive and inductive reasoning. As a matter of fact, the term critique itself has been used in ways other than to indicate negation. Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, and later Walter Benjamin's *Critique of Violence* referred to the term in order to signify the examination of a subject.¹⁹ This indicates that critique is not reduced to negation, and elaborating on this train of thought the philosopher Kathrin Thiele recently proposed an affirmative engagement with criticality. Still, there is a problem: what becomes of resistance? If we let go of the concept of negation, we lose the tool of opposition. How can power be controlled? Again, this question can be followed up if we return to Facebook and its way of processing power.

When power operates in the new discourse by going underground, when power isn't exercised but must be investigated, analyzed, and unveiled to become visible, its mode of operation has obviously changed. At first glance, the strategy of the Data Protection Center's opposition to Facebook failed as it just caused trouble for some websites in Schleswig-Holstein, with about three of them awaiting trial in the administrative court before the end of 2012. Regarding Facebook, however, the small Data Protection Center didn't agitate in vain. While it couldn't reach the company directly, its actions have caused productive trouble. It stirred up attention

¹⁶ Immanuel Kant, *An Answer to the Question: 'What is Enlightenment?'*, London: Penguin Books, 2009 (1784), p.1.

¹⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Aporias (Meridian: Crossing Aesthetics)*, trans. Thomas Dutoit, Palo Alto, California: Stanford University Press, 1993.

¹⁸ Michel Foucault, 'What is Enlightenment?', in Paul Rabinow (ed.) *The Foucault Reader*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1984, pp. 32-50.

¹⁹ Walter Benjamin, 'Critique of Violence', trans. Edmund Jephcott, in Walter Benjamin *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, London: NLB, 1979 (1921), pp. 236-252.

with media reporting worldwide about the Center's undertaking, with articles making people aware of several facts including: that what Facebook calls an Open Graph is technically a walled garden, that there are very real ways that their very personal data travels, and that it is operating as a generally hard to reach Irish company. The Center's action has also reminded Facebook that it needs to respect the law, instead of operating in the independence of cyberspace used by big players pushing others around. Furthermore, by reserving the right to question Facebook even though the situation seemed unpromising, the Data Protection Center opened the space to claim that people don't 'want to be governed like this' as one could say, loosely based on the words of Foucault.²⁰

While a direct opposition couldn't reach Facebook, the actions of the Data Protection Center disturbed its circles. It has not been able to directly force the company to enact change, or to win the argument, but it caused irritation and drew attention to a problem that couldn't be hidden anymore. Thus it can be said, that today irritation is a technique of enlightenment, and a forceful one: negation can be appropriated, irritation can't. As we find negative critique neutralized by the mantra of 'generally agreeing with the cause' and 'not being responsible', negative opposition comes to nothing. Here, irritation doesn't allow the covering up of problems and forces us to look into the details to learn about what's going on. From this position the notion of critique can also be re-appropriated.

Stay with the Trouble

Philosopher Katherin Thiele, while debating critical thinking of today at a conference in Berlin, 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.²¹ Quoting Donna Haraway's approach of 'staying with the trouble'²² this concept of critique as a radical affirmative gesture proposes to get attached to the matters at stake, maneuver them, and negotiate them into a 'different' future, instead of the tendency to 'separate', 'distinguish', and 'distance' ourselves from what we don't like. A gesture that stands critique on its feet in a Kantian way as it enacts critique much in the same sense that he had regarding enlightenment: as a 'strenuous exercise', and not as a 'fantasy of omnipotence',²³ 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 the absence of a preconfigured dialectical world neatly tidied up in two opposing sides, we need to organize ourselves newly 'against alignment with the way of the world, against withdrawal from engagement with the world', as the British philosopher Peter Hallward put it when he conceptualized a

²⁰ Michel Foucault, 'What is Critique?', trans. Lysa Hochroth and Catherine Porter in Sylvère Lotringer (ed.) *The Politics of Truth*, Los Angeles, Semiotext(e) 1997, p. 44.

²¹ Kathrin Thiele, 'In Critical Condition or Fully Out of Steam? Critical Thinking Today', *International Conference 'Gegen/Stand der Kritik*, International Conference' by of the DFG-Graduiertenkolleg 'Lebensformen und Lebenswissen', Berlin, June 28-30 June, 2012.

²² Donna Haraway, 'When Species Meet: Staying with the Trouble', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 28.1 (2010): 53.

²³ Thiele, 'In Critical Condition or Fully Out of Steam? Critical Thinking Today', p. 8.

'prescriptive practice of politics'²⁴ worth looking into. For we need to find new answers. In today's world, things are complicated and complex which is as exhausting as it is an interesting challenge.

This challenge is given with Facebook. While there is reason to make the point that we do 'not want to be governed like that', not after these rules, it isn't simply our enemy. Despite the affirmative, thumbs up design of the platform, it can also be a critical social tool, and furthermore one that does not only collect data from its users but also provides security for them. In the revolutionary uprising that started December 2010 and was later coined the Arab Spring, Facebook among other social media sites was used to organize demonstrations and protests as well as to record and report violence. Ordinary people started to publish clashes with security forces in the streets, and film brutal violence and devastating funerals using their camera phones. After many other video sharing sites had been blocked in Tunisia by the government, Facebook became an alternative news agency, and found itself soon in the focus of the country's security force. These forces used the internet service providers to introduce a malicious piece of code to steal users' login information when they went to site. Here, Facebook's Chief Security Officer Joe Sullivan responded smartly with two technical solutions: in order to encrypt the information sent they rerouted it to an https server, but to really ensure that the right person had logged into the account, they made him or her identify their friends in photos.²⁵ A simple but effective trick. Here, the following becomes obvious: in the era of affirmation there are always more than two sides. Still, we need to make a stand, and we can. Instead of negating, critique in the affirmative discourse holds on to issues in order to stubbornly guide this world into a different future.

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²⁴ Peter Hallward, 'Politics of Prescription', *South Atlantic Quarterly* 104.4 (Fall 2005): 770-71.

²⁵ Alexis Madrigal, 'The Inside Story of How Facebook Responded to the Tunisian Hacks', *The Atlantic*, 24 January 2011, <http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2011/01/the-inside-story-of-how-facebook-responded-to-tunisian-hacks/70044/>.

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