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Radical Critique as the Paradox of Post-Political Society

Bülent Diken

Social problems can be comprehended only by means of a ‘rectification’ which occurs when the faculty of sociability is raised to its transcendent exercise and breaks the unity of fetisbistic common sense. The transcendent object of the faculty of sociability is revolution. In this sense, revolution is the social power of difference, the paradox of society, the particular wrath of the social Idea.

Despite its position as the most important concept of critical thought, today ‘revolution’ seems to have become an obsolete idea. Ours is, after all, a post-political society that cannot imagine radical political change; a ‘one-dimensional’ society, in which politics is emptied out of its constitutive, transcendent dimension – ‘the political’ – and has become a routinised game, a form of hyper-politics, with no possibility of changing the game itself. Thus today everything can be criticised, but without taking the form of antagonism. Consequently, politics is confined within reality by preventing ‘the social power of difference’, the disruptive ‘revolutionary’ events, from occurring. What is more ‘untimely’ today than the idea of revolution?

Significantly in this respect, radical critique within social and aesthetic theory was directly inspired by the concept of revolution as a libertarian utopia that links thought and affect with its epoch. As Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello argue, there have been two historical forms of critique of capitalism: the Marxist ‘social critique’ based on the notion of exploitation, and the poststructuralist ‘aesthetic critique’ based on concepts such as deconstruction, nomadism, desire, displacement and so forth. However, today’s capitalism has at least partially accommodated the aesthetic critique within the post-Fordist jargon of flexibility, difference and autonomy. With ‘the new spirit of capitalism’, everybody is increasingly subjected to the imperative of regular radical change. In a reticular world, we are told, a stable habitus is not desirable. Today’s ‘grand’ person is a ‘nomad’.2 One who constantly needs to adapt to radical transformations, modify one’s life strategy in tune with the flexible demands of the market, and be always prepared to start all over again. In this sense,
the idea of radical change, of revolution, no longer refers to exceptional circumstances but has become normalised as part of daily life. Ours is a ‘culture’ of permanent revolution in which constant systemic disembedding demands an innovative subjectivity in continuous transformation. What is more ‘timely’ today than the idea of revolution?

Is it, then, possible to redeem the idea of radical critique on the basis of this paradoxical coincidence, the simultaneous absence and presence of the idea of revolution/radical critique in contemporary society? After all, if problems can only be grasped by means of a ‘rectification’, critique must proceed with reference to past events rather than future promises; it must be untimely. As Walter Benjamin put it, radical critique can only take the form of a redemptive disruption, arrest of the indistinct, ‘empty’ flow of chronological time. The critical gesture is necessarily ‘a tiger’s leap into the past’ that turns the origin into a goal, repetition into creation; for the redeemed ‘past’ is not the past in the chronological sense but the whole of time, ‘the entire history of mankind’, that is, the whole time, the time of the virtual. What is essential to the idea of radical critique is a time of immobility, a time that ‘stands still and has come to a stop’.

As such, Benjamin’s revolutionary event/critique is implanted in a Nietzschean ontology of time, in repetition as eternal return, which requires both a disconnection from the given and, simultaneously, a creative connection to what is to come, to the future. What returns is difference, which forces us to think of the present as becoming. In this sense being is not opposed to becoming, being is becoming. Thus the actual, empirical reality is linked to the domain of the virtual, the domain of real but not necessarily actualised potentialities. As such, Benjamin’s ‘leap into the past’ does not imply that the future becomes an empty time, because now every second of time turns into ‘the straight gate through which the Messiah might enter’. The same idea is formulated in a secular language by Herbert Marcuse: what is given, the form in which an object immediately appears, is ‘negative’ in the sense that the object’s ‘real potentialities’ are necessarily not yet actualised. Only in the process of overcoming this negativity, the inherent limitation in the given, does the object attain its truth. In other words, the destruction of the given is necessary for truth; reason dissolves, changes the actual given state of objects, and only through this ‘mediation’ objects become adequate to their virtual idea. Since the truth of a thing is made up of its virtual potentialities as well as its actual state, of what that thing is not, the task of critical reason is to intimate these potentialities. However, such anendeavour to touch the virtual from within empirical reality cannot take place on the basis of reason only: ‘Supposing truth to be a woman – what? Is the suspicion not well founded that all philosophers … have had little understanding of women?’

Take Immanuel Kant’s example in The Critique of Practical Reason, where he emphasises the weight of reason to control desire. Suppose, he says, there is in a bedroom a beautiful woman whom a man lusts after. And suppose the man will be granted access to the room to satisfy his desire, but only on the condition that afterwards he will be hanged on the gallows that stand next to the door of the room. Kant, of course, assumes that, thanks to the gallows deterrent, the man will not act according to his desire. But, Lacan interjects, there are certain conditions in which ‘it is not impossible for a man to sleep with a woman knowing
full well that he is to be bumped off on his way out, by the gallows or anything else ... for the pleasure of cutting up the lady concerned in small pieces, for example'. In perversions, for instance, passionate excesses move beyond the limits assigned to them by the moderate dialectic between transgression and the law, and reach the register of das Ding, the place of drives, which 'have nothing at all to do with something that may be satisfied by moderation'.

On this account, radical critique is a 'perverse' activity that relates to drive, to will, without justifying itself or asking for permission. However, 'perversion' here cannot be defined in relation to a pre-established norm, eg, as abnormality, following an already existing criterion. Rather, it seeks to determine an impersonal virtual field, which is distinct from empirically existing phenomena or consciousness:

... the pervert is not someone who desires, but someone who introduces desire into an entirely different system and makes it play, within this system, the role of an internal limit, a virtual center or zero point.

Critique as a 'perverse' gesture is what introduces a virtual dimension into an actual situation. Philosophical critique does it through concepts, the aesthetic with affects, and science with functions. In each case, critique deals with a (virtual) 'problem' and not merely with its (actual) solutions. Just as an event cannot be reduced to its consequences, a problem is what makes us think independently of its solutions. Hence, critique proceeds in two ways: first, it intervenes in the conditions of the problem, determining the tensions within it, specifying its links to other problems; and second, it condenses the singularities within a problem, actualising a solution:

It is as though every Idea has two faces, which are like love and anger: love in the search for fragments, the progressive determination and linking of the ideal adjoint fields; anger in the condensation of singularities which, by dint of ideal events, defines the concentration of a 'revolutionary situation' and causes the Idea to explode into the actual.

'Anger' here has at once a creative and a destructive dimension, for it is selective as to what to affirm and actualise. Hence anger is, literally, dramatic: just as each repetition of a play enacts a new interpretation each time it is 'replayed', transforming the actor and the play, each actual/historical act is a dramatisation that expresses an Idea in new ways. Dramatisation is transformation through repetition with no goal or final moment to bring it to an end. Dramatic anger thus establishes a link between the actual and the virtual by completing the work of 'love', a link which makes it possible for the agent to see the actual world in a transcendent, metaphysical perspective, without a transcendent God. Hence the test of true critique: the transformation of will/drive into creativity. Which is also to say that, as is the case with reason, drive or will is not the last word on critique either:

To redeem the past and to transform every 'It was' into an 'I wanted it thus' – that alone I call redemption! Will – that is what the liberator and bringer of joy is called: thus I have taught you, my friends! But now learn this as well: The will itself is still a prisoner. Willing liberates: but what is

11. Ibid, p 110
14. Deleuze, Difference and Repetition, op cit, p 157
15. Ibid, p 190
16. Ibid, p 10
it that fastens and fetters even the liberator? 'It was': that is what the will's teeth-gnashing and most lonely affliction is called. Powerless against that which has been done, the will is an angry spectator of all things past. The will cannot will backwards; that it cannot break time and time's desire – that is the will's most lonely affliction.  

One obvious possibility for the 'prisoner' is of course to find release in a 'foolish' way, through nihilistic revenge, which is nothing other than 'the will's antipathy towards time'. One concludes that, since one cannot undo the past, 'everything deserves to pass away'. Or, 'realising' that no deed can be undone, the will redeems itself and willing becomes not-willing. In this sense, the problem of critique is essentially grounded in the problem of nihilism, that is, the denial of life. If, in its origin, nihilism is a will to escape from the existing reality to a transcendent illusory world (e.g., in the case of monotheistic religions), with modernity, or with the 'death of God', this originary nihilism divides itself into two: 'radical' and 'passive' nihilism. The first insists on transcendence by taking the negation of this world to its logical extreme, the annihilation of the actual; the second, becoming content with the actual world, gives up its virtual dimension. On the one hand, the virtual without the actual; on the other, the actual without its virtual dimension – values without a world versus a world without values. There is therefore a strange symmetry between the two nihilisms, between willing nothingness and the annihilation of will. Two opposite tendencies juxtaposed to each other in the same social space, paradoxically united in a 'disjunctive synthesis' the binary poles of which are mutually exclusive but nevertheless presuppose and feed upon each other. The contemporary predicament of 'critique' can be located in such a 'synthesis'. Thus, at one extreme, critique today tends to become emptied out, institutionalised as a pacified, 'decaffeinated' procedure in a post-political, de-politicised society; on the other, it risks becoming terroristic. Indeed, it seems today as if whatever is considered as 'critique' is invented to forget politics. Thus we are told that we live in a 'reflexive' modernity that takes critique for granted. Even traditions today need to justify themselves. Conversely, if a belief insists on its own truth, then we are dealing with 'fundamentalism': a tradition that defends itself in the traditional way, a defence of tradition as such, a doctrine, a-critical manner of refusing negotiation to protect a principle. It is an imperative of reflexive modernity that belief articulates itself in terms of knowledge. And, crucially, knowledge-based disagreement does not take antagonistic forms. Thus, reflexive modernity, Anthony Giddens claimed, is 'Beyond Left and Right'. So, following this logic, we end up with the following scenario: on one side, a diversity of cultural, 'sub-political' struggles; on the other the 'fundamentalists' waging war against progress. A scenario in which passive nihilism, or politics without belief, fights radical nihilism, or belief without politics.

The passive nihilism of post-politics expresses itself as an impossibility of placing reality at a distance, in the impossibility of sublimation in the sense of sustaining the gap between the actual and the virtual, reality and the Real, of maintaining a space for objects considered 'impossible', of giving 'value to what the reality principle does not value'. And when the virtual collapses into the actual, politics disappears, the radical
questioning of the social becomes impossible. In so far as politics involves 'the ongoing critique of reality', post-politics signifies the foreclosure of politics. In this sense, post-politics brings with it an internal perversion of democracy, a 'post-democratic' politics that eliminates real dispute by assuming that everyone is already included in politics and that remaining problems can be dealt with through expert systems.26

Despite its hegemony, however, the lack, or rather the suppression, of antagonism does not make post-politics a peaceful order. Post-politics brings with it a paradoxical violence, the violence of a society bent on neutralising dissent, radicalism and negativity, a violence that aims to put an end to the idea of violence as such and therefore can only be met by hatred:27

... a violence cut off from its object and turning back against that object itself - against the political and the social. It's no longer anarchistic or revolutionary... It's not interested in the system's internal contradictions; it targets the very principal of the social and the political... It answers the systemic exclusion our society practices by even more exclusion, cutting itself off from the social world by indifference or hatred.28

Just as previous forms of violence mirrored the level of conflict, hatred mirrors the level of post-political consensus.29 As if the culture of passive nihilism, its zeal for security, leads to the loss of immunity; like redundant 'antibodies' that turn against the organism in which they live, hatred 'has something of self-aggression and auto-immune pathology about it'.30 Hatred is today's radical nihilist 'fatal strategy' against passive nihilism. So, the lack of antagonism in post-politics is countered with an excess of antagonism, a (self-)destructive will to nothingness. Thus, today's ideological arena looks like a battleground between non-antagonistic politics and ultra-antagonistic fundamentalism: terrorism.

In this scheme, critique is either normalised or takes the form of spite, willingness to destroy oneself in order to destroy the other. Regarding the first, it is crucial to bear in mind that in post-politics we are witnessing also the revival of biopolitical sovereignty as a radical, ultra-political version of the disposavow of the political by depoliticising conflicts via the direct militarisation of politics and sublimation of order as an absolute value in the Schmittian sense.31 The sovereign exception, or biopolitics, is what sustains the disjunctive synthesis between post-politics and terror. After all, when politics is foreclosed, bare life becomes the main object of politics not only for 'terror' but also for the 'state', which increasingly uses a politics of fear as the only way to introduce passion into the world of passive nihilism, to mobilise the hedonist consumer.32

So, in the shadow of the sovereign exception, ours is a society in which exception and normality enter into a zone of indistinction. As Giorgio Agamben describes it, we live in an increasingly fragmented society of 'camps' in which distinctions between culture and nature, biology and politics, law and transgression, reality and representation, inside and outside tend to disappear. There is no doubt that the camp was originally an 'exceptional' space, entrenched and surrounded with secrecy. However, today, the logic of the camp is generalised; the exception is normalised.33 The camp signifies a hyper-modern differentiation (of
‘society’) which can no longer be held together by Emile Durkheim’s ‘organic solidarity’. Concomitantly, it is necessary to reconstruct the problem of critique today on the basis of the paradoxes of the camp.

Carl Schmitt had understood exception not simply as something linked to the rule in a binary logic, but as something that presents a greater intensity; hence his allusion to Søren Kierkegaard: exception ‘explains the general and itself’.34 However, he still presupposed the presence of normality as a background against which the exception can prove itself to be an exception. Our society is one without such a background. It is a society in which exception is the rule. When exception becomes the norm, the norm disappears. But when the norm disappears, exception disappears too. Ours is a world in which McDonald’s can campaign against obesity, state terror can fight against terror, the war against terror can claim to bring democracy to the people it tramples, the resentful ‘victim’ goes berserk and kills even more people than terrorists, and so on.

Herein lies the impasse of critique too: deprived of its productive relation to the domain of the virtual potentialities, critique often functions as a passive nihilist gesture, as a risk-free, permitted transgression which sustains, rather than shatters, a given state of affairs. ‘I repeat, moderate your demands, don’t demand all that is “great and beautiful” of me, and we shall live in peace and harmony, you’ll see’. This is how the devil speaks towards the end of Fyodor Dostoevsky’s The Brothers Karamazov, announcing the ridiculousness of sublimation, of ‘all that is great and beautiful’, in modern times, and demanding moderation. A banal, normalised devil who no longer speaks the language of evil, a devil without evil: a good metaphor to explain the status of critique in a post-political society that has turned moderation into a straightforward injunction. Hence our obsession with ‘critique’ in so far as it is an ‘artificially maintained controversy’35 with no real consequences. A toothless, pacified pseudo-critique that enables us to forget the fact that the ‘Law itself relies on its inherent transgression’.36

The threat today is not passivity, but pseudo-activity, the urge to ‘be active’, to ‘participate’, to mask the nothingness of what goes on. People intervene all the time, ‘do something’: academics participate in meaningless debates, and so on. The truly difficult thing is to step back, to withdraw. Those in power often prefer even a ‘critical’ participation, a ‘dialogue’, to make sure our ominous passivity is broken... Sometimes, doing nothing is the most violent thing to do.37

Interestingly in this context, what is remarkably missing in today’s post-political society is any attempt to distinguish between anger and spite. Indeed, anger and critique are closely related. As Boltanski and Chiapello point out,38 critique presupposes indignation, that is, experiences that prompt protest at the level of emotions. Anger is an asset for social and aesthetic critique.39 And in contemporary society there are a lot of good reasons to be angry. The problem of anger emerges only when it cannot articulate itself in terms of conflict and so turns to nihilistic destruction. In this sense self-destructive spite is the disarticulation of anger. Anger always has a chance, though not a guarantee, to become a social, political relation. Spite, on the other hand, is anger that cannot find, does not want to find, political expression, and therefore is precisely the ultimate transgression and the disintegration of the social.40
Therefore the task of critique today is to redefine itself by resisting the annihilation of will (post-political passivity) and the will to nothingness (terror, spite) simultaneously. In this, the link between the actual and the virtual is decisive. Since reality has both an actual and virtual component, the critique of reality cannot be reduced to causal relations between actual things. Take an artwork: as a cultural object, an artwork can be inscribed into a network of internal and external determinants and can become an object for historical, sociological or political-economic inquiry. As a critical work of art, however, it cannot be reduced to its network because it hides an ‘excess’, an ‘intensity’ that surpasses the conditions of its production and reception. The work is only art if it is a ‘gesture’ of creating an ‘absolute surplus’. Conceptual discourse, art critique for instance, can never capture such critique as the artwork itself formulate, a critique which cannot be subjected to contextual conditions, formal rules or determination by a periodisation. The artwork bestows a persisting promise of redemption, a ‘promise of happiness’ that ‘never ceases transiting intransitively’ through epochs or styles.\textsuperscript{41}

Virtual indetermination is irreducible to actual relations. Critique as a ‘problematic’ event relates to the actual world as something that does not belong to it.\textsuperscript{42} Each (actual) solution changes, displaces, enriches the (virtual) problem. Yet, for the same reason, a problem does not survive without its solutions; it can only ‘persist’ in the solutions.\textsuperscript{43} Despite the fact that it cannot be reduced to its actual circumstances, the event can only ‘express’ itself through the actual. There can be no virtualisation without actualisation; the event cannot take place \textit{ex nihilo}. In this sense Pierre Bourdieu, for instance, is right to insist that positioning the work of art in the structures and struggles within the field of art, its ‘necessitation’, intensifies the experience of art.\textsuperscript{44} But this sociological truth is necessarily misrecognised when an absolute separation takes place between critique and its context, the artwork and its network.

Let us, to end with, return to Benjamin’s sharp distinction between the empty time and the time of the event. He writes that the ‘Kingdom of God’ is not the \textit{telos} of historical development: ‘nothing historical can relate itself on its own account to anything Messianic’\textsuperscript{45} And in turn the domain of the profane cannot be based on the idea of the Divine Kingdom; there is no direct path from theology to the political either. So, nothing actual can relate to the virtual by itself. In turn, the actual cannot be constituted on the idea of the virtual. But there is, for Benjamin, a possibility of mediation: just as a force increases the force acting in the opposite direction, ‘so the order of the profane assists, through being profane, the coming of the Messianic Kingdom’.\textsuperscript{46} Again, the actual is decisive for relating to the virtual, the profane is crucial for the approach of the Messianic Kingdom. In this way, although the immediate Messianic intensity necessitates suffering and misfortune, ‘in happiness’ too which is earthly can ‘seek its downfall’. As such, radical critique, even though it does not in itself belong to the order of the divine, can constitute a ‘precondition’ for redemption. To strive after such mediation is the task of critique.\textsuperscript{47}

Significantly, Benjamin was the first to divide Schmitt’s concept of exception, producing a remainder of it. If for Schmitt exception is a limit concept that presupposes a ‘normal’ situation as its background, the
state of exception aims at the preservation of this normality by extra-
dinary means. In other words, Schmitt’s project was to legitimise the
state of exception, or, to ‘normalise’ it. Benjamin’s project was opposed
to that of Schmitt. Whereas Schmitt wanted to legitimise Nazi power,
Benjamin criticised it. Schmitt was conservative, Benjamin revolutionary.
Hence to Schmitt’s exception Benjamin opposed the suspension of
suspension, a ‘real’ exception, an exception to exception itself:

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of emergency’ in
which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a
conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall
clearly realise that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency,
and this will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism.48

Whereas in Schmitt exception is the political kernel of the law, it
becomes divine justice in Benjamin. Schmitt’s exception is nothing other
than an attempt at avoiding the ‘real’ exception, the idea of revolution,
or, the divine justice. Benjamin’s exception, in stark contrast, suspends
the relationality between the law and its suspension in ‘a zone of anony
dominated by pure violence with no legal cover’.49 Along the same lines,
there seems to appear a division within the concept of critique itself,
between critique as a radical exception and critique as an institutiona-
lised, commodified and mediatised version of exception, which suspends
daily reality only to conserve it, a permitted exception that has become a
norm. A ‘normal’ chaos. The question of critique engages with both the
actual and the virtual: to be and not to be.

49. Giorgio Agamben, ‘The
state of exception’, Lettre
Internationale 1, 2003,
pp 31-3. The reference is
from p 33.