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Critique, Hope, Power: Challenges of Contemporary Critical Theory

In one of the final texts written before his death, an essay devoted to Kant's essay “What is Enlightenment?,” Michel Foucault defined the ethos of modernity as a “permanent critique of ourselves.” By this Foucault meant a critical social ontology, an attitude of critical experimentation with the established limits of knowledge and social practice. Such a model of critique, Foucault argued, must be understood as an ethos, a “historico-practical test of the limits we may go beyond, and thus as work carried out by ourselves upon ourselves as free beings.” The later Foucault’s qualified affiliation with the critical Enlightenment tradition can be fruitfully compared with the model of philosophical and social critique developed within the critical theory tradition. According to the latter tradition, a critical theory of society not only diagnoses the pathologies of modernity, reflecting upon the experiences of injustice motivating various social movements, but also attempts to offer a positive alternative to prevailing forms of social domination and political injustice. The challenge for critical theory today, as Axel Honneth remarks, concerns “the question of
how we are to obtain the conceptual framework for an analysis which is capable both of coming to grips with the structure of social domination as well as with identifying the social resources for its practical transformation. Such a model of critique implies a diagnosis of the present, an unmasking of the operations of power, an exposure of the disturbing proximity between instrumental rationality and social domination. Not only for Foucault and Adorno, but for Honneth as well, as Jean-Philippe Deranty argues in this volume, the point of a critique of rationality is to expose the subtle complicity between reason, power, and “the infliction of violence upon the human body.”

These aims, of course, are very demanding, particularly in light of recent historical and political events. The profound upheavals in global politics in recent years, and burgeoning discussions of the ‘ethical turn’ in contemporary social philosophy, prompt a number of questions explored in the following collection of essays. What is the status of philosophical and social critique today? What forms of critical dialogue are possible between French post-structuralist and Critical Theory traditions? How can philosophy today most effectively submit our social-historical actuality—our ‘today’—to critique? The essays collected together in this volume address these and other questions by engaging in a philosophical confrontation with different aspects of our social and historical constellation. They are all contributions to the ongoing critical reflection on the history and the legacy, the defects and the possibilities, of the critical Enlightenment project. At the same time, all of the essays included here are informed by an acute sense of the challenges facing critical theory and social philosophy today. They respond to this challenge not by retreating from the possibility of a critical theory of society, nor by finding refuge in ethics as a substitute for social and political philosophy, but by fostering a productive engagement with different philosophical traditions in order to contribute to a ‘critical ontology of ourselves’.

Critique Today is an attempt to reflect upon and explore these issues, to show the pertinence of a transfigured conception of philosophical and social critique for confronting some of the historical events and forms of social experience that demand our philosophical reflection. A number of themes recur throughout these essays: the ongoing dialogue between critical theory and post-structuralism, the productive appropriation of German and French traditions of thought, the relationship between philosophy and social theory, and the prospects for a critical engagement with modernity in light of global political transformations. The latter theme is explored in Genevieve Lloyd’s opening essay, which examines the fascinating Derrida/Habermas debate over terrorism, the Enlightenment, and globalization from the perspective of the secularisation of the historical theme of providence and the history of philosophical conceptions of evil. Other themes also resonate throughout the volume: the importance of social hope for critical theory (the contributions by Nicholas Smith, Craig Browne, and Shane O’Neill); critical engagements with Habermas’ social and political philosophy (John Grumley, Pauline Johnson, and Emmanuel Renault); explorations of Hegelian theories of subjectivity and Honneth’s theory of recognition in connection with recent French philosophy (Simon Lumsden, Paul Redding, Jean-Philippe Deranty); critical interpretations of Foucaultian analyses of biopower and rights (Robert Sinnerbrink and Paul Patton). Taken together, these essays provide a rich cross-section of the dynamic convergences and divergences in recent social philosophy. They reflect some of the vibrant interest in critical theory outside of the more traditional locations of Germany, England, and the United States, notably in Australia, Ireland, and France. In this respect they contribute a welcome perspective on the increasingly cosmopolitan debates within critical social philosophy.

Critique, ‘September 11,’ and Social Hope

According to a familiar model, critique involves the determination of rational standards of evaluation and the application of those standards to given modes of thought and practice. The main task for social philosophy, on this view, is first to clarify and justify the standards by which societies ought to be criticised, and then to apply these principles to the basic institutions of society. In this way, the validity or otherwise of a particular institution, or a basic social structure, can be subject to ‘critique’. For instance, institutionalised discrimination on the basis of race, gender or religious identity can be ‘critiqued’ for falling short of a principle of equal freedom (or equal dignity) justified by philosophical analysis. To give another example, a basic social structure that gives rise to massive economic inequalities can be ‘critiqued’ by appeal to a philosophically well-grounded principle of just distribution. In both these cases, the meaning of the object of critique—social discrimination and economic inequality—is relatively uncontroversial: one needn’t be
a philosopher or a social theorist to understand it. For the sake of this mode of critique at least, the empirical meaning of the object—say, sexism, racism, and poverty—is clear, though of course the details and extent of its occurrence are a matter for empirical investigation. What ‘critique’ brings to empirical social science, on this model, is a reflexively redeemable norm (or series of norms) against which the validity of a given social practice can be assessed.

Critique Today opens with Genevieve Lloyd’s essay, “Providence Lost,” that articulates a complementary conception of the tasks of philosophical critique. According to this conception, critique aims not so much at the justification and application of norms, nor even the diagnosis of social pathologies. Rather, as Lloyd makes clear, it takes its departure from the occurrence of a particular historical event whose very meaning is in question, and develops a historical reflection on the meaning of the present in light of such an event. And there are certain events whose meaning is so problematic—as Lloyd discusses with reference to Susan Neiman as well as the debate between Habermas and Derrida—that they seem to challenge the limits of our received forms of historical intelligibility. These are events in which the ‘impossible’ happens; and in happening, they can force observers to reconsider their most basic assumptions about themselves and the world. The terrible events of November 1, 1755, the day of the Lisbon earthquake, provoked such philosophical reflection, as did the discovery of the unspeakable horrors of ‘Auschwitz.’ According to Lloyd, ‘September 11’ signifies an event of comparable unintelligibility, in so far as it too elicits a ‘mind-numbing incomprehension’ that throws into question fundamental, for the most part unnoticed features of our self-interpretive scheme. Drawing on Habermas’ and Derrida’s reflections on the philosophical significance of ‘September 11,’ Lloyd connects these features to central themes of Enlightenment thought, especially its notions of providence and cosmopolitanism.

As becomes clear in his discussion with Giovanna Borra dorri, Habermas’ response to the event of ‘September 11’ is to emphasise that religious-political fundamentalism must be understood as a distinctly modern phenomenon. According to Habermas, it is a reaction against the Enlightenment ideal of a secularised public sphere, and the unequal distribution of the benefits and the burdens brought by mass communications and economic globalisation. As Lloyd observes, this means that the impact of terrorism, in Habermas’ view, can be analysed with reference to the ‘pathology of communicative disorders’. Religious fundamentalism is a distinctively modern disruption of the modern ideal of the secular public sphere as a space of rational communicative interaction: it poses an external threat to the ideal of secularisation that is intrinsic to the Enlightenment project. Hence the appropriate response to ‘September 11’, Habermas argues, is a reaffirmation of the ideal of a pluralistic public space of reason open to communicative contestation and social transformation, and an acknowledgement of the way that social and economic inequality generate religious-political fundamentalism as a response to globalisation.

While Lloyd deals sympathetically with Habermas’ interpretation of the symbolic content of ‘September 11’, she suggests that Derrida’s response is more finely attuned to the singularity of the event and the challenge this presents to philosophy. For this challenge, as Lloyd reads Derrida, amounts to nothing less than a ‘total’ and ‘ongoing’ threat to ‘the world’, though in a peculiarly Derridean sense, indebted to Heidegger and Benjamin, that Lloyd strives to clarify through Derrida’s reflections on the ‘messianic’ structure of events, and the openness to futurity signified by the ‘to-come’. In addition to the empirical trauma of the people directly affected, ‘September 11’ is said to signify a kind of metaphysical trauma, a sudden realisation of the obsolescence of deeply entrenched concepts, ideals, and interpretive norms. It is as if the world not only changed that day, but in accordance with the logic of ‘autoimmunity’, it brought about its self-destruction as a world.

As Lloyd observes, Derrida’s point here is hard to summarise, and we must be careful to distinguish the philosophical content of Derrida’s talk of world-disintegration from the apocalyptic political rhetoric used to justify unrestricted war on some ‘threat without limit’. According to Lloyd, Derrida points to the way ‘September 11’ shows how fragile is the presumed invulnerability of the American ‘new world order’. It marks a threshold indicating the ongoing destabilisation of the post-Cold War world of American global triumphalism. The Cold War threat of nuclear proliferation between states has given way to an indeterminate threat of proliferation from anonymous and in calculable forces. This in turn generates an ‘autoimmune’ response, according to Derrida, in which Western democracies attack their own principles and institutions (international law, civil liberties, freedom of the press), while at
Craig Browne’s paper, “Hope, Critique, and Utopia,” contains a wide-ranging discussion of the recent revival of interest in the category of hope amongst philosophers and critical social theorists. He is, however, ambivalent about the worth of this development. On the one hand, Browne suspects that the ‘theological background’ to the category of hope undermines its theoretical value, a view he takes to be supported by Castoriadis’ work. In claiming this Browne departs from Smith, who maintains that hope and theology are only contingently—if, for us, powerfully—connected. On the other hand, Browne argues that the widespread thematisation of hope in theory as well as in everyday life tells us something important about the current state of capitalist society. Drawing here on Ulrich Beck’s analysis of the ‘risk society’, Browne suggests that the perception that social and economic development is out of control, or at least no longer amenable to conscious, rational steering and assessment, leaves a slack which can be taken up, however adequately, by hope. Browne also draws attention to the paradoxical processes of inclusion and exclusion whereby capitalist development promises abundance for all, thus generating hope, whilst indefinitely postponing the delivery. The changing significance of hope in what Browne calls the ‘capitalist imaginary’ is certainly a matter that deserves much further investigation.

Another theme in Browne’s paper is the utopian dimension of Habermas’ critical theory. While Browne observes that Habermas’ reorienting of critique around the intersubjective procedures of democratic will formation retains utopian elements, he seems to agree with critics who regard Habermas’ discourse-theoretic approach as too limited in its conception of the radical democratic project. But as Pauline Johnson brings out clearly in her essay, “Habermas: A Reasonable Utopian?,” Habermas faces a real dilemma here. For in Habermas’ view, critique must be capable of expressing utopian aspirations for an emancipated future while at the same time undertaking reasonable, rationally justified analyses of present possibilities: without the latter, Johnson points out, critical theory would lose its engaged character, that is, its confrontation with actuality. It is only with this (hardly avoidable) dilemma between radicalism and reasonableness in view, Johnson argues, that we can appreciate the motivations behind Habermas’ conception of the tasks and methods of critical theory. While this interpretive strategy enables Johnson to present a strong defence of Habermas’ method, she also suggests that the
utopian vocation of critique may generate productive tensions with reasonableness that Habermas has not quite been ready to countenance.

**German Critical Theory Today**

The question of ‘critique today’ obviously invites a reflection upon the current state of critical theory understood in the narrower sense of the Frankfurt School project of a post-Hegelian and/or post-Marxist critical theory of society. A significant number of contributions in this volume deal with the question of how this particular theoretical project might be pursued today, what specific conceptual, political and methodological challenges it faces and what potentialities it still harbours. To a great extent this question of ‘Critical Theory today’ remains the question of the interpretation of Jürgen Habermas’ work. Another central question emerges within these debates: it is less the interpretation and use of Marx today that is at issue, even though some articles clearly show post-Marxist concerns, but rather the interpretation and use of Hegel—one of the pressing philosophical issues of our time.

In his article “Hegel, Habermas, and the Spirit of Critical Theory,” John Grumley revisits some of the key aspects of Habermas’ complex relationship with Hegel. Indeed, Habermas’ critique of Hegel raises problems and arguments that are still at issue in conceptualising a consistent critical approach to the modern world. These include Habermas’ critique of Hegel’s absolute idealism, his partial acceptance of the Hegelian critique of Kantian morality, and Hegel’s comprehensive theory of modern institutions. Grumley reminds us of Habermas’ scepticism towards intersubjectivistic interpretations of Hegel, clearly the dominant current in English-speaking Hegel scholarship.11 Such interpretations, Habermas claims, underplay the textual implausibility of a deflationary reading of absolute spirit and as a consequence they underestimate the subsequent methodological implausibility of such readings for contemporary theoretical concerns.12 What Habermas borrows from Hegel is the recognition that political theory must show how normative principles correspond effectively to ethical and institutional practices that engage individual subjectivities. However, as a result of his leanings towards a Hegelian solution to the ethical problem, Habermas also shares Hegel’s tendency to strive for ‘reconciliation with reality’. Grumley thus questions the capacity of Habermas’ most recent thinking to provide the proper normative and conceptual tools for a thorough critical theory of the present. He remarks in conclusion that “a critical theory needs more than historical and institutional points of reference like those that issue from Habermas’ Hegelian reading of immanence: it needs to grasp these values in the context of the concrete constraints and alternatives making for their practical exercise.”13

With his article entitled “Critical Theory, Democratic Justice and Globalisation,” Shane O’Neill offers an original contribution to the debate about the adequacy and, possibly, the required corrections and developments of Habermas’ latest theoretical framework.14 Drawing upon this framework, O’Neill argues that the realisation of justice is “best understood in republican terms, as the realisation of a democratic form of life in which free and equal citizens engage one another in the collective task of autonomous self-governance.”15 O’Neill insists on the social preconditions for the realisation of any such democratic form of life: “an egalitarian social structure is a precondition for the inclusion of all citizens as effective participants in the democratic process.”16 Since inequality affects individuals inasmuch as they belong to specific groups or classes, and since the latter play a central role in the political mediation of justice claims, contemporary critical theory needs to develop a coherent analytical and normative concept of ‘structurally constituted social groups’.

The first part of the article proposes such a conceptual analysis, dealing particularly with the potential pitfalls of essentialism and individual oppression. This model allows O’Neill to take a critical stance on current post-Habermasian models (mainly Fraser, Young, and Honneth). In the last part of the article, O’Neill shows that any discussion about institutional reform at the level of the nation-state must be framed within a broader discussion that takes into account the global aspects of social injustice and of struggles against it. O’Neill defends the thesis that the imperative of a necessary formation of a global public sphere should not lead to the conclusion that struggles at the national level are outdated. On the contrary, nation-states remain important political agents in the fight against global injustice; global struggles run the risk of entrenching local forms of injustice if they consistently bypass the national level. As O’Neill argues, true democratisation, with the challenge to social inequality that goes with it, is called for both within and amongst nation-states, and relies upon both global and international movements. With this, the Habermasian theory of justice receives a welcome extension of its scope.
Whereas O'Neill argues from within the Habermasian framework, Emmanuel Renault's article, "Radical Democracy and an Abolitionist Concept of Justice. A Critique of Habermas' Theory of Justice," is a thorough challenge to that framework itself. Renault's point of departure is informed by Axel Honneth's objections against Habermas' discourse theory of law and democracy. As Honneth has argued, the experience of social injustice is not limited to the experience of a contradiction between a social situation and abstract legal or moral principles: more often than not it is rather the experience of the narrowness or inadequacy of such principles. Secondly the demand that claims of justice be expressed in the universal grammar of practical reason runs the risk of misrepresenting or even ignoring the specificity of real, lived injustices. Renault systematizes the critical perspective thus opened and focuses on the experience of injustice to develop a thorough critique of the Habermasian model, and through it, more generally, of liberal theories of justice. Against the commonly shared assumption that political theory is the search for the universal principles allowing a normative definition of justice, Renault suggests that justice is in fact an "abolitionist" concept, that "its meaning is not defined by an abstract reference to equality, or to universality, but by the necessity to transform unjust social situations." As a consequence, political theory must focus its analytical efforts on the experience which is the "logical and practical context of justice," the experience of injustice.

Renault describes this experience as 'relational', linked to a specific social situation; 'qualitative', lived as being unbearable in a particular way; and 'dynamic', as potentially triggering a practical reaction against the injuries it causes. We can retain the properly political dimension of justice, Renault argues—the critical and transformative dimensions entailed in the notion understood in an abolitionist sense—only if these three dimensions are not sacrificed in the search for universal principles that are required for the purpose of rational justification. In contrast, Habermas' theory of democracy, with its emphasis on the universalisability of claims within public deliberations, produces a 'decontextualisation' of justice from the experience where it is grounded as a counterfactual claim. This decontextualisation, as in liberal theories of justice, leads to an abstract definition of the political, but also to the relativisation of social rights against formal and political rights. For individuals suffering from degraded conditions of existence, however, it is clear that social rights are often not relative. In a social situation that is unbearable for the individuals involved, the qualitative, relational and dynamic aspects of the experience define a critical perspective upon the discourses of justification. This is why Renault argues for the specific cognitive and practical potential harboured in the experience of injustice. Finally, Habermas' reduction of politics to deliberations within the public sphere does not sufficiently acknowledge the structural exclusion of some forms of injustice, often the most severe, from public debate. Renault's article therefore advocates a radical departure from Habermas and suggests a new, alternative model of social and political theory grounded in the phenomenology of injustice and contemporary social movements.

The potential and limitations of Honneth's model are analysed in the contribution by Jean-Philippe Deranty, "The Loss of Nature in Axel Honneth's Social Philosophy. Rereading Mead with Merleau-Ponty." Deranty's critical perspective on Honneth's theory of recognition highlights a problem also afflicting Habermas' critical theory, namely the lack of a full normative account of nature, and the lack of a proper consideration of non-human beings. Applying Honneth's own method of immanent critical reconstruction, Deranty shows that the 'loss of nature' was not necessarily a consequence of Honneth's initial project. This project aimed to overcome the abstractions perceived in Habermas' model by returning to the tradition of German philosophical anthropology (Feuerbach, Gehlen, Plessner and Heller) and to the writings of American pragmatist, George Herbert Mead. With the help of arguments borrowed from these authors, Honneth wanted to develop a formal anthropological of 'practical intersubjectivity': namely, to study the minimal anthropological, indeed biological, preconditions of human action (hence 'practical'), on the assumption, drawn from Feuerbach, Mead, and Habermas, that such preconditions are essentially intersubjective. The rationale for such a programme of research was gained chiefly from Honneth's immanent critique of the theory of communicative action, according to which the restriction of the domain of normativity to linguistic practice generates major abstractions in Habermas' social and political theory. A more 'embodied' version of the intersubjectivistic turn was needed.

Honneth therefore saw the need to reframe the theory of social action, to elaborate a new theory of praxis, by grounding it in an anthropological
within the family, leading to the acquisition of specific dispositions, can be interpreted as the remainder within post-traditional societies of the type of social integration along binary, body-centred categories prevalent in pre-modern societies. Reflective, objectivistic thinking, by contrast, emerges only within societies that have broken with mythopoetic thought. Thus Redding is able to compare Bourdieu's genealogical account of the *épître*, the leisurely activity severed from habitual life which, on the ground of its apartness from social necessity, can first aim at objective knowledge, with Hegel's parallel theory about the emergence of modern social sciences within modern bourgeois-capitalist society. For Bourdieu, Hegel of course represented the kind of intellectualist approach that represses its historical and social contingency and projects its theoreticist prejudice upon its object domain, with the social categories informing social action being transformed into the conceptual categories of a 'cosmic' self-thinking and realising itself through history. Redding, however, as a prominent advocate of the kind of post-Kantian, intersubjectivistic reading of Hegel that Habermas rejects, proposes a quite different perspective and conclusion. If, in a deflationary reading, spirit is interpreted as the gradual emergence of a "complex of recognitively mediated conditions adequate to human freedom," what remains is Hegel's attempt to mediate between 'immediate' and reflexive forms of ethical life and of thought. This is precisely the type of dialectic that Bourdieu used to describe the space where his reflexive sociology was to be rooted. Redding thus provides a vivid illustration of what a Hegelian critical theory looks like, while also defining a robust Hegelian critical perspective upon the great tradition of Durkheimian and post-Durkheimian sociology. Given the central importance of Durkheim for German as well as for French critical theory, one can see how fruitful an application of such critical Hegelian perspective could be.

The French-German Connection: Negativity, Biopower, Rights

Manfred Frank once remarked that the important dialogue between German and French philosophical traditions still remained a task for the future. The essays in the final section of Critique Today make a significant contribution to fostering this dialogue, opening up new perspectives for thinking critically about reason, power, and rights. While there are many convergences between the perspectives developed here and other articles in the volume (Simon
Lumsden’s critical reading of Nancy’s Hegel, for example, resonating with Paul Redding’s neo-Hegelian reading of Bourdieu) there are also significant differences in critical orientation (Robert Sinnerbrink’s genealogical critique of Foucault’s concept of biopower dialoguing with Paul Patton’s Nietzschean defence of an ‘externalist’ reading of Foucault on rights). Taken together they provide a rich sample of the productive differences shaping debates in critical social philosophy today.

Simon Lumsden’s essay, “Reason and the Restlessness of the Speculative,” continues the dialogue between neo-Hegelian theories of intersubjectivity and the post-structuralist critique of reason. Long vilified by post-structuralists as the paradigmatic thinker of totallising metaphysics, Hegel has again returned to prominence within recent French philosophy. Lumsden takes up this return to the ‘French Hegel’, presenting an illuminating discussion of Nancy’s provocative interpretation in light of the influential Anglophone ‘non-metaphysical’ reading of Hegel. To this end, Lumsden contrasts Nancy’s approach with the tendency among other post-structuralists to demonise Hegelian thought for exemplifying the identitarian subsumption of difference and alterity. Nancy, by contrast, takes seriously Hegelian speculative thought, above all the power of the negative—the disruptive, open, and restless aspect of thought—that Nancy presents as the power of speculative thought’s own self-transformation. Indeed, this self-transformative power of negativity, Nancy argues, is what ultimately shapes the more familiar Hegelian concepts of Spirit, dialectic, and speculative reason. Lumsden explores the self-surpassing character of Hegel’s conception of thought, bringing this to bear on Nancy’s interpretation of the negative and his reflections on the notion of sense (sens) as the unthematisable background condition of intelligibility.

For all his Heideggerian rhetoric, Nancy should be regarded, according to Lumsden, as rejecting the crudely ‘metaphysical’ reading of Hegel largely responsible for Hegel’s reputation as a totallising thinker of identity. Indeed, Lumsden shows how Nancy’s ‘non-metaphysical’ reading complements recent Anglophone approaches to Hegel (Pippin, Pinkard, Redding) as a radical post-Kantian thinker concerned with the immanent development of rational cognitive, moral, and social norms. Along with other ‘non-metaphysical’ readers, Nancy’s Hegel also rejects the ‘myth of the given’, and proceeds to find a way of overcoming the concept-intuition dichotomy by thinking spirit as a self-transforming power of negativity. Despite Nancy’s emphasis on the self-transformative power of the negative, Lumsden concludes with a criticism of Nancy’s neglect of any developed account of the ‘self-correcting’ character of reason, or indeed any sustained explication of the Hegelian conception of freedom. In order for subjectivity to be possible, particularly in the sense of self-determining autonomy, the power of negativity must also be a power of constructive unity. As Lumsden points out, the negative moment of Hegelian thought, which Nancy emphasizes, must be complemented by the positive moment: Freedom is not only the power of the negative but also the power of autonomous reason as the capacity of freely assuming, but also transforming, historically articulated social norms and practices.

Peter Schmidgen continues the dialogue between French philosophy and the German tradition with his exploration of the relationship between Levinasian and Arendtian approaches to intersubjectivity and the constitution of public space. Levinas’ phenomenological reflections on dwelling, labour, and ethical alterity can be supplemented productively by Arendt’s more developed theorisation of labour, work, and political action. Indeed, the limitations of the Levinasian ethical critique of the sphere of politics, Schmidgen argues, can be overcome by interpreting it within an Arendtian framework of human plurality. Schmidgen’s essay thus proceeds to examine the contrast between the pluralist ‘polytheism’ of Arendtian political intersubjectivity and the ‘monotheism’ of Levinasian ethical intersubjectivity and its foregrounding of the singular encounter with the face of the Other. Arendtian political pluralism coupled with Levinasian ethical singularity, Schmidgen concludes, provide a useful framework for reflecting on questions of public space, cultural difference, and democratic community.

The question of ‘Critique Today’ also implies a historical reflection on concepts that have come to prominence in recent social and political thought. Robert Sinnerbrink’s “From Machenschaft to Biopolitik” thus presents a genealogical critique of the concepts of biopower and biopolitics, commencing with Heidegger’s reflections on ‘machination’ [Machenschaft], analysing Foucault’s account of biopower exercised over the biological life of the population, and concluding with Agamben’s meditations on bare life and the camp as paradigmatic of the biopolitical condition of modernity. Sinnerbrink
examines the prefiguration of Foucault’s conception of biopower in Heidegger’s discussion of machination or Machenschaft in his Nietzsche lectures of the late 1930s. For Heidegger, the concept of ‘machination’ describes the manner in which beings are disclosed in modernity as representable and manipulable resources. Not only living beings but also human beings are reduced to resources to be managed, optimised, enhanced, and produced. This theme is then transformed, in ‘ontic’ socio-historical directions, through Foucault’s genealogical reflections on biopower as the social power exercised upon the biological life of populations. As has become increasingly clear, however, Foucault’s critical analyses of biopower soon gave way to his later interest in neo-liberalism as a form of governmental rationality oriented towards the efficient social management of populations. This turn towards analysing neo-liberalism as a prevailing biopower regime, Sinnerbrink argues, provides the backdrop for understanding the later Foucault’s much vaunted ‘ethical turn’ during the early 1980s.

Finally, Sinnerbrink shows how Agamben’s work on the biopolitical foundations of modernity articulates a middle way between Heidegger’s ontologically grounded conception of machination and Foucault’s historically particularist genealogy of biopower. Indeed, Agamben presents biopolitics—the originary breach between naked biological life (zoe) and organised social life (bios)—as the metaphysical foundation of Western political rationality in its historical unfolding from the Greeks to Auschwitz. The nihilism of contemporary liberal-democratic regimes, for Agamben, is indicated by the increasing presence of biopolitical figures, reduced to ‘bare life’, such as the refugee and ‘enemy combatant’ in so-called ‘detention camps’. Nonetheless, Sinnerbrink’s critique of the concepts of biopower and biopolitics in Foucault and Agamben underlines the tension they evince between ontological and ontic dimensions: a ‘short-circuiting’ of universalist and particularist dimensions resulting in a loss of concrete specificity in social and political analysis. Sinnerbrink thus questions Foucault’s exploration of the ethical possibilities of self-formation within neo-liberalism, and Agamben’s gesturing towards a messianic, utopian community to come, for their adequacy as political responses to the dangers posed by contemporary biopower regimes.

The significance of a renewed Foucaultian sense of critique is elaborated in Paul Patton’s “Foucault, Critique, Rights,” an important contribution to the philosophical and political understanding of Foucault’s recently published lectures on biopolitics and liberalism. Patton defends Foucault against the commonplace charge that his later work provides no normative foundation for social critique by presenting a Nietzschean account of Foucault’s historicist and naturalistic approach to rights. For Foucault, rights must be understood as socially sanctioned degrees of power whose validity is normatively justified according to historically available discourses of right. Patton argues that the later Foucault’s call for a non-sovereign, anti-disciplinary form of right is compatible with externalist theories of rights discussed in recent Anglophone political philosophy. According to the latter, the normative force and justification of rights resides in historically specific forms of social practice and institutional arrangements rather than in any putative universal property of human beings or ahistorical conception of the good life. Patton adopts this contemporary argument to defend the Nietzschean-Foucaultian view that rights are historically specific, grounded in social power relations, with their normative force being dependent upon historically available beliefs, norms, and discourses (using indigenous rights in Australia as an historical example).

Following Nietzsche’s genealogical account of the origins of rights and duties, Foucault argues that rights can be understood in terms of power relations between individual and collective agents. As Foucault maintains, power itself is not simply repressive but productive; power relations signify the capacity to act in certain ways, to exercise strategic action upon the actions of others. On this Foucaultian view, rights are acknowledgements of capacities of power that are sanctioned and preserved for pragmatic reasons within a given social and historical context. Such rights are historically variable, open to social and political contestation, and subject to historical transformation given shifts in regimes of power. Patton thereby argues that a Foucaultian account of rights as recognised degrees of power navigates a course between an ahistorical foundationalism, which overlooks the concrete conditions necessary for the effective exercise of rights, and an extreme historicism that threatens to deprive rights of their normative force altogether.

From this Foucaultian perspective, the normative force of rights can be derived only from historically available discourses of right. These discourses took two different forms historically: the revolutionary path of the American Declaration of Independence, Rousseau, and the French revolutionaries,
grounded in the universal rights of man; and the path of radical liberalism, grounded in a complex utilitarian calculus of individual and collective interests. Such historical discourses of right (roughly, revolutionary-universalist versus utilitarian and liberalist theories of radical interests) remain for us active and available forms of political legitimation and contestation. Foucault’s call for a non-sovereign, anti-disciplinary conception of right is thus grounded in a descriptive account of the rights already operating within modern societies, and in a normative claim that these rights “can provide an effective counterweight to disciplinary power.” Drawing on Foucault’s 1978-79 lectures on liberalism as a form of governmental rationality, Patton argues in conclusion that the normative bases of the critique of disciplinary power “must come from the liberal tradition of governmental reason” that Foucault analysed in his final years. Here we find the clues for understanding Foucault’s call for a non-sovereign, anti-disciplinary form of right that would provide a way of challenging established forms of political right. In this way, Foucault’s conception of critique as experimenting with going beyond the limits of what it is possible to say and do within a given milieu might provide, one presumes, an effective counter-discourse to the prevailing hegemony of global neo-liberalism.

The essays in Critique Today present a rich sample of the converging, but also competing critical voices debating the legacy of Enlightenment thought and the prospects for critical theory. They inspire the sense that critical social philosophy, far from languishing in a condition of post-political quietism, or retreating into ethics as a critical disavowal of the political, remains a dynamic force concerned with confronting our contemporary historical actuality. In bringing thinkers from the German and French traditions into productive dialogue, they suggest the possibility of a philosophical ‘new wave’ of critique capable of comprehending some of the challenges facing us within the new global Empire. In this sense, they amply fulfill Foucault’s dictum that the ethos of modernity must be practised as a ‘permanent critique of ourselves’.

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Notes

3 Ibid., p. 122.
6 As Lloyd notes, however, Neiman goes on to argue that ‘September 11’ did not represent any fundamental shift in the history of conceptions of evil.
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Deleuze’s remark is representative of an influential current of post-structuralist anti-Hegelianism: “All these signs [Heidegger’s philosophy of ontological Difference, the structuralist project, the modern novel, the power of repetition in psychoanalysis, language, and art] may be attributed to a generalised anti-Hegelianism: difference and repetition have taken the place of the identical and the negative, of identity and contradiction.” C. Deleuze, Difference and Repetition, trans. P. Patton, New York, Columbia University Press, p. xviii.


Ibid., p. 284 below.