

Thinking
Blue

Marxism and the (Post)Human

Writing

Red

Stephen Tumino



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12.

Critique

The material force of critique comes from its explanation of the actual and phenomenal in terms of the cultural unsaid of class lying ‘outside’ the dominant ideology. Class, that is, not as a floating signifier or a ‘feeling in common’ as it is in the culture wars, but class as the material antagonism in the workday over the hidden unpaid surplus-labor of workers that the owners privatize as profit. The agony over materialist critique in the (post)humanities today represents an inversion of the material force of critique that comes from outside ideology into the immanent vibrancy of matter and the vitality of life as resistant to the conceptual. On these terms, the critique of ideology, because of its foregrounding of class as a product of unpaid surplus-labor in the economic base of society, is rejected, for example, by Michael Hardt for its ‘negative’ stance toward the ‘positive project to generate an ontology of ourselves and create a new social world’ in common.¹ On this account, because ideology critique produces an authoritative knowledge of class as the exploitation of labor by capital and thereby explains why there can be no common while classes exist, it denies the ‘autonomy of those it is aimed to help’, and thus has no place in the process of social change.² Against the radical negation of the existing that comes with ‘grasping things by the root’ in exploited labor, as in Marx, Hardt argues that cultural theory should instead become more affirmative, by having ‘the courage not only to speak the truth to and about ourselves but also to live in a way harmonious with that truth’.³ The harmonious ‘truth’ of the autonomous subject is ‘beyond critique’, according to Hardt, because it ‘seeks to change social life while being a part of it’, rather than

1 Michael Hardt, ‘The Militancy of Theory’, *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 110:1, Winter (2011), pp. 19–35 (p. 26).

2 *Ibid.*, p. 26.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 30.

‘stand above the lives of others [...] as a vanguard’.⁴ Thus, the problem with critique, in this framing, and precisely because of its insistence on producing class-consciousness of the objective material ‘outside’ of ideology lying in unpaid surplus-labor, is its ethical blindness to the desire of the other, who he represents as in ‘voluntary insubordination’ of global knowing.⁵ In place of critique, which negates the ideological ‘inside’ by bringing to bear upon it the ‘outside’ of class that in actuality explains why the task of critique is to expose the false-consciousness of the economic, Hardt puts forward what he takes to be the more ‘positive’ idea that a ‘new mode of life’ comes from within, by a change in ‘moral attitude’ by anyone who so desires it.⁶

At a moment of growing class polarization, poverty, and un-/underemployment in which ever vaster populations are excluded from all social goods, Hardt’s framing of critique as the other of the spontaneous voluntarism of the multitude represents not a new social ethics of solidarity but rather a further privatization of knowledge for the benefit of the ruling class. Critique is necessary for connecting the poverty of the many, including their lack of class-consciousness, to the obscene levels of wealth of the few, in whose interest alone it is to privatize knowledge and celebrate the ignorance of the underlying material conditions of production. The rejection of critique in the name of defending the spontaneity of the multitude is, therefore, part of the larger ideological attack on critique-al knowing as the enemy of the people to make the workers more easily exploitable. By marking critique — which is an investigation of the underlying terms of the capitalist system which are foreclosed from common sense ideas and beliefs — as unethical, the anti-critique-al theory of the (post)humanities not only breaks with the historical role of critique-al thought in transforming social reality — because to do so requires confronting the powers that be — but theoretically underwrites the regressive populism of prideful ignorance which has now been legitimated as the official culture by Trumpism. On the terms of this regressive populism — which in fact is a product of a decades long ideological campaign by corporate institutions — the common sense idea of many rural workers that

4 Ibid., pp. 29, 33.

5 Ibid., p. 22.

6 Ibid., p. 31.

'immigrants' and the urban poor are the source of their social problems, for instance, should not be critiqued as a product of racist propaganda to deflect attention from the ongoing class war in the US, but should be, if not applauded, at least propitiated because it provides them with a feeling in common.

In the manufactured post-factual cultural environment, postcritique, which is really anti-ideology critique, has become the mantra of the (post)humanities advanced by the critical theorists themselves who appear as more reasonable than regular right-wingers because their opposition to critique takes the form of a defense of the common and all that is vital and redemptive in the culture against the rationalizing 'spirit' of capitalism (in Weber's sense). Against the disenchantment and re-enchantment with the spirit of capitalism that underwrites the agony of critique in the (post)humanities now, I argue that what is urgently necessary for transformative social change is to reconnect the spirit with its material body: the systemic exploitation of labor by capital that alone explains the roots of ideology and the necessity of critique as essential to the ongoing praxis of social change.

The dominant attack on ideology critique — whether from the right or the left, from above or below, in the academy or in the popular culture — relies on a sentimentality, which is itself the product of the anti-intellectualism of popular media, that makes complex thinking out to be the other of life itself. The result is to discourage inquiry into the root cause of critique in the social — where, as Marx says, 'critique [*Kritik*] represents a class' whose dehumanized condition stands as the 'ruthless critique of all that exists' — and to direct the focus instead to the alien appearance of critique in the everyday because of its defamiliarization of the 'normal' (in the Kuhnian sense) mode of sense-making.⁷ The popular image of critique as a foreign disruption of normal, everyday life inverts the class basis of critique so that rather than it representing the side of the propertyless in the social struggles — the class, as Marx writes, who 'have no ideals to realize' but whose objective social

7 Karl Marx, 'Afterword to the Second German Edition of *Capital*', *Karl Marx/Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, 50 vols (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1996), 35, pp. 2–20 (p. 16); Karl Marx, 'Marx to Ruge in Kreuznach', September 1843, *Karl Marx/Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, 50 vols (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975), 3, pp. 141–45 (p. 142).

position in the division of labor itself stands as ‘the negation of [the class] system’ — it is instead turned into a cultural sign of the ‘classy’: a sign of social superiority and status rather than an act in solidarity with the oppressed.⁸ The conflict over critique in the (post)humanities is thus really about opposed theories of class which are rooted in the daily conflicts of capitalism: Is ‘class’ a structure of exploitation, the unpaid surplus-labor inscribed in the workday, that necessitates critique because the profit system is ‘based on the unconsciousness of the participants’ who are subject to it, or, is ‘class’ simply a constantly shifting ‘rhizomatic assemblage’ (Deleuze) of desires that provides a sense of common belonging to the multitude ‘beyond’ capitalism?⁹

The class basis of anticritique in the (post)humanities is clarified by turning to the writings of Bruno Latour — which are widely credited along with those of Quentin Meillassoux, Graham Harman, and Claire Colebrook — with effecting a ‘new materialist’ turn in contemporary theory. Yet, what is taken to be material in the new materialism is a vitalist conception of life held immanently in common, by human and nonhuman alike, that opposes critique as ‘correlationism’, the analytical opposition of thinking and being.¹⁰ On these terms, because being exceeds the conceptual, the object world cannot positively and reliably be known but only endlessly interpreted. According to Latour, the radical project of critique has ‘run out of steam’ because the binary organization of power that gave ‘critique its steam and modernism its impetus’ has been displaced by a new ‘flat’ world; a ‘biological and cultural network’ composed of ‘billions of people and their trillions of [nonhuman] affiliates and commensals’ collectively engaged in ‘composing’ a ‘common world’ with ‘the certainty that this common world has to be built from utterly heterogenous parts that will never make up a whole’.¹¹ For Latour, this means that Thatcher had it right when she claimed

8 Karl Marx, ‘Civil War in France’, Address of the General Council of the International Workingmen’s Association, 30 May 1871, *Karl Marx/Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, 50 vols (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1986), 22, pp. 307–59 (pp. 335, 504).

9 Frederick Engels, ‘Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy’, *Karl Marx/Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, 50 vols (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975), 3, pp. 418–43 (p. 434).

10 Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, preface Alain Badiou, trans. by Ray Brassier (London and New York: Continuum, 2010).

11 Bruno Latour, ‘An Attempt at a “Compositionist Manifesto”’, *New Literary History*, 41. 3, (2010), pp. 471–90 (pp. 472, 474, 477).

‘there is no such thing as a society’ because the ‘social’ is constantly being reconstituted, whether by ‘a new vaccine [that] is being marketed, a new job description [...] offered, a new political movement [...] being created, a new planetary system [...] discovered, a new law [...] voted, [or when] a new catastrophe occurs’, as in each instance, he claims that ‘we are no longer sure about what “we” means’ as we are forced ‘to reshuffle our conceptions of what was associated together because the previous definition has been made somewhat irrelevant’.¹² It is of course telling that on these terms, cultural theory must abandon even the ‘mere invocation of the word capitalism’ as a way to systematically connect and explain such cultural events as part of the global series of struggles over social resources: a fact which proves my larger point that without a concept of ‘capitalism’, as its beneficiaries and defenders well know, there is no class system to transform, and thus systemic change is invalidated in advance by an objectless proceduralism oriented on localities.¹³

Latour claims that because the proletariat has ‘passed away’ in the contemporary that the critique of capitalism has lost its ‘political relevance’ to make sense of the daily.¹⁴ Leaving aside Latour’s own correlationism here, in which theory must reflect the existing, in fact the direct opposite is the case and the reality that knowledge claims always reflect class is indicated by Latour’s discourse itself. It is not because class no longer exists that Latour argues that the critique of capitalism no longer has relevance — if anything the proletariat has grown worldwide and the objective divide between the owning class and those compelled to sell their labor in order to live is undeniable — but because Latour, like other postcritique ideologues, has no interest in surfacing the contradictions of capitalism which leads him to deny the existence of, as he puts it in the mock tone of a conspiracy theorist, ‘powerful agents hidden in the dark acting always consistently, continuously,

12 Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 5–6.

13 Bruno Latour, ‘On Some of the Affects of Capitalism’, lecture given at the Royal Academy, Copenhagen, 26 February 2014, p. 4, <http://www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/136-AFFECTS-OF-K-COPENHAGUE.pdf>

14 Bruno Latour, ‘Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern’, *Critical Inquiry*, 30, Winter (2004), pp. 225–48 (p. 226); ‘Affects’, p. 4.

relentlessly'.¹⁵ This is clear when Latour at other moments reveals, despite his claims to the contrary, that critique of capitalism is more relevant than ever before, as when he acknowledges, for instance, what he takes to be the 'worrisome' and 'troubling' fact that a 'gullible sort of critique' of capitalism in which 'Everything is suspect... Everyone is for sale... And nothing is what it seems' has become so popular today.¹⁶ His discourse itself thus inadvertently reveals that it is not because the proletariat has 'passed away' that critique has lost its 'political relevance' for him, but because critique threatens to become, as Marx argues, 'a material force when it has seized the masses', that is causing him to be concerned with critique and precisely because it delegitimizes capitalism.¹⁷

Latour argues that critique represents the dominant today because by reducing 'matters of concern' to 'matters of fact' it marginalizes the voices of 'new unexpected actors' who 'make up their own theories of what the social is made of'.¹⁸ In a parodic reversal, to be 'radical' now, he claims, means to 'abstain from falling into the trap of fighting a system' because it can only stabilize belief in capitalism, which '[1]ike God [...] does not exist'.¹⁹ And yet, the narrative that the scientific critique of capitalism dominates over other voices is contradicted by Latour's own academic celebrity and the rewards accorded to his followers who are busy marginalizing critique-al culture in the academy and beyond. Rita Felski, for instance, a close supporter of Latourian descriptivism and phenomenism in such texts as *The Uses of Literature* (2008), *The Limits of Critique* (2015), and *Critique and Postcritique* (2017), which argue that the historical enterprise of the critique of the literary as a mediation of extra-literary relations of power prevents literary studies from finding new aesthetic pleasures in the text and furthers cultural disenchantment with the literary tradition, was awarded a 4.2 million dollar grant to further apply Latour's anti-critique-al arguments to literary studies.²⁰

15 'Critique', p. 230.

16 Ibid., pp. 229–30.

17 Karl Marx, 'Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Law*. Introduction', *Karl Marx/Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, 50 vols (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), 3, pp. 175–87 (p. 182).

18 *Reassembling*, p. 22.

19 'Affects', p. 10; *The Pasteurization of France*, trans. by Alan Sheridan and John Law (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 173.

20 Lorenzo Perez, 'UVA English Professor Lands Large Danish Grant to Explore

Such projects are so richly rewarded not because of a need to 'save the literary tradition' but because the humanities remains the last redoubt of critical intellectual culture and are thus under increasing social attack by the ruling class which, in times of systemic crisis, is unwilling to tolerate any opposition to its rule. Anti-critique is the umbrella under which the critical humanities of the twentieth century is dismantled in order to ensure a twenty-first century anodyne Arnoldian 'disinterested criticism' of social reenchantment by the dominant ideology.

Critique, in the Latourian discursive universe, because of its 'gesture' of exposing a 'true world of realities lying behind a veil of appearances' has 'the immense drawback of creating a massive gap between what [i]s felt and what [i]s real' that authorizes a 'totalitarian' conception of society as a system.²¹ On this reading, the only 'good' interpretation is therefore one embedded in the local domain which accepts without question that the 'actors [...] have their own elaborate and fully reflexive meta-language' and 'know very well what they are doing'.²² Yet this is, as I have suggested, a populist rhetoric which in fact denies knowledge of class exploitation to social actors and blocks access to any 'outside' to the hegemony of ruling class culture which actually shapes people's supposedly 'spontaneous' beliefs, values, and feelings. The celebration of the 'popular' as an index of the freedom of the self-determination of ideas by people themselves is a mechanism by which not only is the denial of access to intellectual resources and independent and critical thought to the masses underwritten, but this denial is itself then put forward as their means to empowerment.

In the end, the current onslaught of the discursive purging of the critique of capitalism from the humanities is not ideologically very far from how Republican operatives in this country argue for purging the words 'capitalism' and 'class' from public discourse as contrary to the libertarian spirit of the people, or, from how Trump surrogates defend the falsifications of their leader from critique by arguing that they are not 'really lies, because facts themselves no longer exist' as 'everybody

Literature's Social Use', *UVA Today*, 25 March, 2016 news.virginia.edu/content/uva-english-professor-lands-large-danish-grant-explore-literatures-social-use [accessed 8 June 2024].

21 Latour, 'Compositionist Manifesto', pp. 474–5.

22 *Reassembling*, pp. 4, 30.

has a way of interpreting them to be the truth or not true'.²³ But the task of the humanities — if they are to live up to the urgent requirements of the present moment — is to resist the encroaching authoritarianism of this manufactured faux populism and take a stand on the unrelenting necessity of critique against the brutality of class. It is to resist the privatization of the social and the devolution of change into endless local processes cut off from their decisive relation to the global class system, which is now threatening the future of humanity itself. Latour, of course, knows this, and his response would no doubt be yet another ironic comment to suspend critique for the pleasure of the ruling class, as when he says, 'Thesis 11: Economists have hitherto only changed the world in various ways, the point is now to interpret it'.²⁴

23 Chris Moody, 'How Republicans are being taught to talk about Occupy Wall Street', *Yahoo News*, 1 December 2011, <http://news.yahoo.com/blogs/ticket/republicans-being-taught-talk-occupy-wall-street-133707949.html>; Max Greenwood, 'Trump's Lies Aren't Lies Because "There's No Such Thing" As Facts Anymore, His Surrogate Says', *Huff Post News*, 1 December 2016, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/trump-surrogate-claims-no-facts_n_58408f8ee4b0c68e047fd952.

24 'Affects', p. 10.