In defense of critique in desperate times

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1. Let me begin with three prefatory remarks: First, knowledge and ideas matter and better knowledges and ideas are vital to any effort to redirect the tides of social change. Bad stories make bad politics, because knowledge informs and shapes strategies and tactics.

Second, within the wide range of intellectual—knowledge producing—activities, at different sites, with different aims and conditions of possibility, the *sine qua non* of the diverse forms of academic knowledge is that, in principle, they embrace the possibility, at every moment, that they could be wrong and therefore, following Native American activist and poet John Trundell, that as academics, we constantly convert the certainty of belief into the processes of thinking. That means, contrary to the common practice of academics (myself included), we must speak, reflexively and self-reflectively, with humility. It means that neither theory nor politics (increasingly understood in ethical terms) can guarantee the “truth” of our ideas.

The price for this specificity is that we must claim the luxury of time; the academy operates with a temporality different from that of surplus value, media deadlines and political urgency --as hard as holding on to the difference may be. Increasingly, we must fight to hold onto this luxury, but often we have contributed to our own inability to defend the privilege of the academy; we have too quickly abandoned the terms on which we might struggle.

Third, knowledge, in any of its forms and loci, is embedded in and the product of ongoing conversations across many borders (and not the product of isolated individual careers), both in and across various academic collectivities and between the academy and other knowledge producing formations. Such conversations refuse to define a “proper” form of rationality, seeing it instead as a multiple and changing construct of the conversation itself. Such conversations do not seek homogeneity, unity or even consensus; rather they involve practices of convivial agonism, a constantly changing dissensus in search of unities-in-difference. They are democratic but not egalitarian: everyone has a right to be heard, but not every contribution is equal—ideally this is a matter of contextual necessities and contingencies rather than assertions of privilege.

2. I understand the work of the academic political intellectual—in the present conjuncture at least-- as **critique**, which includes a spectrum of practices.While critique is driven, in the first instance, by its political passions, it is not simply calling out forms of oppression, nor declaring one’s opposition to domination. Nor does it involve finding a deeper “hidden” reality—which is rarely actually hidden because we almost always already know what is there. (Nevertheless, these are its common mis-representations.) Critique seeks to discover things one does not already know; it means being open to being surprised, having one’s certainties overturned. Critique embraces complexity against any and all forms of simplification and reduction. Not only is everything not about the same thing, but nothing is all about one thing. Critique assumes that reality is always being constructed through the organization of multiplicities, in multiple struggles amongst multiple agents (who are always themselves multiple, fragmented, syncretic), forms of practices (including inaction), determinations, contradictions and contingencies. It embraces specificity against all forms of universalism; it demands that one problematize one’s categories, concepts, and starting points, not simply by denaturalizing or deconstructing them but by concretizing—historicizing, contextualizing--them. One has to explore their conditions of possibilities, to see how they articulate and are articulated by the changing balance between the old and the new—taking history seriously, and by the changing balance of the forces of power and contestation, taking contradictions and multiplicities seriously.

Critique aims to produce better stories (and/or maps—they are not the same), where “better” denies both relativism and perspectivism, as well as any assumption of a necessary, guaranteed relation between knowledge and politics—as if knowledge were always already contaminated by power. Academic knowledge does not have its politics written into its fabric (although sometimes politics overrides the commitment to empirical complexity and theoretical pragmatism, or at least, the political intention may make the relation to politics appear to be necessary; but such efforts undermine the very authority of academic work). The relation between knowledge and power has always to be articulated. Consequently, critique is not politics, or even politics by other means, but it is a condition of possibility of effective political struggle and social change (even if the result is not knowable in advance). Thus, unlike some contemporary notions of the scholar-activist, which tend to place intellect at the service of already defined movements, struggles and strategies, critique remains relatively autonomous, without either closing off the desire to make the articulations to political struggles, or denying the necessity for political action (which, for the intellectual acting as a political citizen, may well be informed by their academic work).

But what makes a “better” story? First, seeking a more profound “pessimism of the intellect,” critique reconceives empiricism, making analysis answerable to the demands—the questions and the complexities—of the conjuncture or problem space (although the problem space is itself partly constructed by the very effort to take account of it). Scholars as diverse as … all have their own version of such a commitment. Isabel Stengers argues that there are witnesses, third parties, that speak back to us; Eve Sedgwick highlights “the necessary accountability to the real;” Stuart Hall advocates for “the discipline of the conjuncture;” Dipesh Chakrabarty calls our attention to the capacity to hear that which one does not already understand;” and finally Michel Foucault calls for ‘an extreme attention to what is real…To know on what field of real forces we need to get our bearings in order to make a tactically effective analysis.”

Critique goes beyond what is already see-able, sayable and even knowable and attempts to discover the complexities we do not yet know how to see or say or even question, and the practices by which they are inaugurated, maintained, and extended, the contradictions that make their apparent taken-for-grantedness always contingent, and the multiple ways people are recruited into supporting, accepting or contesting them, often without full self-awareness (but without assuming that they are dupes, dopes or irrevocably reprehensible). It has to ask how this complicated conjuncture has been and is being constructed and how different people, lives and things are placed in it, and how the multiple structures of power are maintained, even in the face of multiple, sustained challenges. And it has to do this without knowing in advance what questions to ask, or what theories will be useful.

Second, critique opens up unrecognized or unrealized possibilities for change—for struggle, rearticulation or escape. It attempts to identify the contradictions that might be prised apart, to offer up strategic possibilities for engaging and transforming the conjunctural relations of power. This is the site of an optimism, not of the will, but of the intellect. Williams described this as making hope practical rather than despair convincing. Critique offers ways for getting from here to somewhere else, somewhere better, always recognizing the constraints on what is possible. Notice that I am not taking up the question of vision—of values, of where we want to go. This is obviously a vital question, an ethico-political question, but it seems to me to entail a different conversation. Personally, I do not think it is my job as a political intellectual to tell people what they should desire, to direct them to being better—more moral, according to my moral compass—people. As Sedgwick once said, and I take this as a crucial statement of critique, the left should stop telling people what they should feel and start trying to figure out what they do feel, so that we can begin to ask how we move them toward other possibilities, to the very possibility of being and thinking otherwise. Third, critique allows for the possibility of knowledge being spoken in different ways, into the various forms of popular discourses, common senses and mattering maps. That is, critique embraces the pedagogical and communicative dimensions of political struggle.

3. Why do I think that critique (for me, as it is practiced in cultural studies) is vital in the present conjuncture (its preconditions were the defeat of fascism and the contestation between liberalism and state communism, but the conjuncture begins with the attacks, condensing in the 60s and 70s, on the hegemony of liberalism, and perhaps leading us to the morbid symptoms of an interregnum, confronted by the rise of new fascisms)? Because, paradoxically, despite a sustained practice of progressive activism, despite significant moments of progressive optimism, and despite significant progressive victories, the “lefts” (leaving open the question of their definition and unity) are losing and the world continues to be move in increasingly inhumane and unsustainable directions.

And what does this conjuncture demand of critique? That we do a better job understanding both the conditions of possibility of the successes of various articulated alliances among capitalisms, conservatisms, and increasingly, reactionary forces (illiberalisms, and new forms of fascism?) built on re-intensified forms of differentiation and identification, but also, more controversially, the conditions of possibility that have so severely limited the successes of the various forces of progressive change. I believe that, to a large extent, the knowledges on which the lefts have operated have been inadequate to the “discipline of the conjuncture,” the stories they have told have failed to educate people, to move them from their habituated positions, and the strategies they have enacted—both against the forces of domination and for more effective progressive agency, continue to think politics in the binary terms of camps the identities and politics of which are guaranteed. We need more and better critical knowledges, more and better conversations (even in the face of continued, even growing anti-intellectualism in the media, in common sense and even in the academy), more and better efforts to forge unities-in-difference. It is not our job—as critical intellectuals--to celebrate or even, necessarily, to support existing movements; it is our job to raise questions, to challenge and even criticize them, in the effort to enhance the possibilities of significant political change. After all, change does not just happen. The ground has to be prepared, and the best intellectual work possible has to be done.

We need a robust realization that culture matters, that, as Breitbart puts it, politics is downstream from culture. The lefts largely fail to take account of the centrality and complexities culture in contemporary contestations of power; the irony is that culture played a powerful role in the emergence of many of the new social movements. All too often, many lefts (both activist and academic) reduce culture (and sometimes politics itself) to discourses whose meanings and affects are fixed, and often, individuated (and yes, that is a contradiction, which can easily result in practices of personal and public blaming and shaming).

As a result, they underestimate the necessary pedagogical dimensions of a democratic and popular politics. Education does not operate on the temporality of the revolution but of the academy: it is a process that moves people—and opens oneself up to being moved--more slowly than we would like—to challenge one’s assumptions and certainties, to become aware of the ways common sense and the micro-habits of everyday life are shaped by and articulated to the broader patterns of the cultural and political power. Until we can tell better stories about culture, find better ways to intervene into culture, I fear progressive movements will continue to lose, under the shadow of what Nestor Canclini called the “sham of democracy.” We need to find ways to go on thinking, ways that enable us to live with difference, ways of organizing the chaos of multiplicities, without succumbing to new forms of political absolutism, fundamentalism and authoritarianism.