Review

Critique & praxis: A critical philosophy of illusions, values, and action

Bernard E. Harcourt

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Although Marx's famous thesis, according to which philosophers have mostly interpreted the world, while the point is to change it, is foundational for critical theory, the issue of transformative practice has receded in recent years. Responding to this context, *Critique & praxis* proposes to go back to and actualize the thesis. According to Bernard Harcourt, critical theory in the Frankfurt School tradition 'took an epistemological detour and moved away from praxis' (p. 4). In the face of massive and imminent threats such as ecological disaster and right-wing populism, he argues that critical theory must shift the focus toward the question 'what is to be done?' (p. 14). There is a need for an intervention driven by an 'action imperative': 'It is time – I argue, past time – to imagine a new critical praxis theory for the twenty-first century' (p. 15).

Is the book successful in developing a new critical praxis theory? In my view, it is not. Its value lies elsewhere – above all, in the critique of the disengaged character of recent debates within the Frankfurt School around the foundations of social critique (Part I), and in the call to activists to engage with critical theory to reflect upon their practice (Part IV). The extensive overviews of alternative approaches to critical theory in Part II, and of contemporary theories of political action in Part III, are helpful and informative. However, given the urgency of the 'action imperative' that is presented as the main motivation of the book, the patience and extension of these overviews, and even the polite tone with which Harcourt discusses the texts he examines, may strike the reader as anticlimactic. Most of the study reads as a map of critical theory perspectives, rather than as a theory of practice. Only in Part IV, after 446 pages, does the author develop his own response to the question 'what is to be done?' The response is hardly conducive to collective, political practice, for it remains at the individual level: 'I do not ask anything of you, nor am I suggesting what you or other critical theorists should do. This is, in the end, a reflexive act intended to place the onus on myself alone' (p. 447).

The critique of the epistemological detour of the Frankfurt School and the reactivation of the question of praxis are timely and worth considering, but the book does little to shake things up at the level of practice itself. One would expect that an intervention aiming at a new critical theory practice would interrogate the structures that have contributed to detach the practice of critique from the practice of transformational politics. Yet nothing is said of the hierarchical and exclusionary institutions in which most scholars produce critical theory today, or of the possibility that these structures may be contributing to deprive it of transformative value. Harcourt's dismissal of Marx, Horkheimer, and Adorno because of the elements of foundationalism and teleology in their work (he describes them as 'scientistic tendencies') prevents him from recuperating their skepticism toward theory, their concern with the social structures in which it is produced, and the polemical style characteristic of their writings. What these authors problematized was critique as a social practice embedded in power dynamics. Most scholars in the Frankfurt School tradition today conveniently ignore this issue, and *Critique & practice* does little to disrupt their academic comfort zone.

Unlike the authors in the Frankfurt School that he politely argues with, Harcourt is an activist with personal concerns about the practical implications of philosophy. This is why he wants to widen critical theory to include theories of political action (populism, assemblies, hacking, judicial lawmaking, among others), many of which are reconstructed in Part III. He prefers situated theories that respond to context: 'every critical practice has to be precisely designed for the specific time and space, with humility and care,' and as a consequence 'we need to resist foundations and universalization' (p. 434). Reading this, one has the impression that the book has moved so far away from the kind of critical theory characteristic of the Frankfurt School that there really was no need to consider it at all. Hardly anyone working in this tradition would easily agree that 'this is the essence of critical thought. It is not universalizing or generalizable' (p. 435). Yet Harcourt himself is not fully consistent, for just a few lines down he claims (without giving context) that 'people should be careful, respectful, humble, and deliberate, and minimize and devalue the violence, not value it – and certainly not inflate it' (p. 435). This tension runs through the book: on the one hand, the distance from critical theory in the Frankfurt School tradition in favor of localized theories of political practice, and on the other, an attachment to universal normative values (Harcourt calls them 'critical values') that are universalizing at least in their aspiration.

It is in Part IV that it becomes clear why, despite his preference for localized theories of political action, Harcourt wants to preserve at least some of the spirit of the Frankfurt School. It is because of its reflexivity. In very personal terms, the author explains different instances of his activist practice that led him to critical theory. He describes moments of contradiction due to awareness that his actions against oppression may be complicit in larger structures that produce the oppression against which he was fighting. An important moment takes place

during his legal activism against the death penalty: ‘my litigation, legal representation, and organizing – no less than critical theory itself – forged a double-edged sword. It could easily serve to legitimize, rather than undermine, the capital punishment system’ (p. 470). On the basis of this realization, Harcourt emphasizes again and again the reflexivity of critical practices, or the ‘turning the question on oneself’ (p. 452). Critical theory should problematize the strategy and tactics of critical practice, and practice should problematize the categories of critical theory. Ultimately, critical theory can contribute to make practice reflexive, while critical practice can prevent theory from losing its reflexivity by falling into cognitive and moral absolutes.

Unfortunately, this insight only plays a passing role in the analysis. Reflexivity is important for Harcourt, and it explains why he begins the book with the Frankfurt School. However, because of his dismissal of ‘scientific tendencies’ inherited from Marx, he does not examine the thorny questions involved in the possibility of emancipatory political action that concerned authors like Horkheimer and Adorno. One would want to know more about whether there is a way to overcome the contradiction between legal activism and complicity in the discourse of law, whether the articulation between theory and practice that Harcourt proposes has provided an orientation in this regard. This kind of reflexivity would lead beyond the question ‘what more am I to do?’, to a perhaps more destabilizing question like ‘can I do anything?’, or even: ‘shall I do anything?’ (perhaps not, since I cannot but be complicit). The kind of radical reflexivity proposed by Horkheimer, and especially by Adorno, promised no easy articulation between theory and practice, not even in their tension, but it conveyed a sense of urgency (even desperation) and self-doubt that destabilized both theoretical production and political activism. It is this structure of complicity in that against which one is fighting that we do not find in the many contemporary theories of political action that Harcourt surveys throughout the book.

There is a similar oversight in the reading of Foucault, which functions as Harcourt’s main reference point for developing a new critical praxis theory. It is an oversight that permeates many contemporary readings of Foucault that focus on the denaturalization of historical processes by exposing their contingency, and on a politics based on strategic, local responses (Harcourt calls them ‘counter-moves’) that destabilize established institutions. While this is certainly an important aspect of Foucault’s work, a deeper problem which runs through it, and which intersects with Adorno’s perspective, is that subjectivity is constituted in such a way that it is always complicit in what it is resisting, to the point that resistance and complicity are intertwined. Can legal activism escape, or at least destabilize, its own complicity in legal structures? Can a book published by a professor of law at Columbia University escape or destabilize its complicity in the academic practices it claims to be challenging? The kind of radical reflexivity running through Foucault’s work would call for questions like these – questions that expose the deep

complicity of institutions and practices of knowledge in the reproduction of power structures, even when they appear to be fighting them.

Although the book does not arrive at a full-fledged critical praxis theory, it represents a commendable attempt to put the task on the agenda from the perspective of someone who has engaged in both theory and practice. We may hope that future studies pick up this task and carry it into new directions.

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