

## REVIEW

**Tom Boland.** *The Spectacle of Critique: from Philosophy to Cacophony* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 163 pp. ISBN: 978-1-138-56429-9 (hbk) ISBN: 978-1-315-12234-2 (ebk)

Tom Boland's recent book *The Spectacle of Critique: From Philosophy to Cacophony* (2018) sets for itself an ambitious, almost impossible, task: "to understand critique as part of our cultural history, a tradition which constitutes us as thinkers"<sup>1</sup> and, as reiterated in the conclusion, "to eschew critique" without falling into "critiquing critique" (150). The daunting nature of such a task is acknowledged early on: "Understanding critique in its manifold variations, or understanding 'critiques' is challenging, and then generalising about 'critiques' theoretically, without falling into the circular 'critique of critique' presents another, perhaps insolubly problematic endeavour" (13-14). Yet, the main topic, *critique*, or rather "critique as a distinctive cultural tradition and subjective experience," (148) remains immense and overwhelming, making the book itself hard to categorize, in terms of discipline or scope, audience targeted or type of critique or intellectual tradition concerned. It may be easier, and helpful as well, to start with what the book is not. Most importantly, as Boland himself clarifies early on, it is neither a treatise in Critical Theory (in the narrower sense) nor an exercise in broad critical theory (small *c*). Boland's concern lays rather with everyday ordinary critique, "critique as a cultural phenomenon" (viii) — an eclectic ensemble of attitudes and expressions found in various social contexts: self-help books and parenting advice, media and official public discourses, education, social media and left- and right-wing socio-political activism. This form of critique often takes the form of overly negative, widespread criticism, constant 'debunking' or 'unmasking' and shallow critical thinking.

The book can be divided in two halves; the first more theoretically oriented, and the second more empirical. The introductory chapter, "The Tragedy of Critique," challenges the positive connotations usually associated with critique and lists five key characteristics of "what 'Critique' means for Critics:" it is meant as unmasking (power or oppression), it often claims a special (truth) status against other (false) accounts of the world, it stems from a specific (preferred almost) subject-position such as that of the subaltern, while it is also an intervention in the public sphere against power and the powerful, and finally, it is oriented towards social transformation (2-3). Chapter 2 follows up and proposes to consider critique as "one discourse among many, despite its claims to be a master discourse

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Boland, *The Spectacle of Critique: From Philosophy to Cacophony* (2018), 1.

and arbitrator of truth”(8). It also introduces several theoretical frameworks, among others: Mannheim’s sociology of knowledge, Boltanski’s pragmatic sociology, and Foucault’s discourse analysis. The third chapter utilizes anthropological works on liminality to analyze critique as a deeply-entrenched cultural phenomenon—functioning like a ritual almost, while the fourth chapter provides original forays in relatively forgotten ‘ancestors’ of critique. In this genealogy of critique, interesting kinships are explored, notably links with ancient Zoroastrian cults, cynicism, and the figure of the prophet in Judaism and early Christianity.

Chapters 5 to 7 are the most observation-driven. The studies are grounded in textual analysis and a great variety of material is covered: literary, philosophical, journalistic, religious, educational, etc. Chapter 5 tackles the omnipresence of critical thinking (CT) in post-secondary education, highlighting the way CT often fails to apply critique to itself, and ends up simplifying and instrumentalizing abstract logic for the sake of correcting ‘faulty’ thinking. Chapter 6 moves on to the political scene, exploring recent political events from the angle of critique, ‘Trumpism,’ the public reactions to the Charlottesville incidents (the violence which erupted around the removal of a General Lee statue in August 2017) and the journalistic coverage and public debate around the 2016 commemoration of the 1916 Irish rebellion. Chapter 7 focusses on the spectacle of critique in social media, in particular on Facebook groups and discussion boards linked to feminism and anti-feminism. In his concluding chapter, Boland hopes through his diagnostic to open the way for a quieter and sobering alternative to this critical intoxication: a form of “acritical thinking” he describes as “a mode of theorising using concepts which are not critical, or at least are not exclusively critical; that is they have an explanatory or interpretative value without describing society in terms of ideology and domination, without revealing a ‘hidden’ truth, distinguishing appearance and reality” (144-145).

Tom Boland’s *Spectacle of Critique* raises interesting questions and conundrums, and the research informing the last chapters is very relevant and current. It points out an odd obsession with critical thinking and the proliferation of critiques (whether labeled as such or not) in all areas of life. It also forces the reader to face her own partiality and quick willingness to acquiesce and abide by forms of theory and commentary striking by their self-assurance, negativity, and disagreeableness. It leads us to rethink our own conceptions of critique as well as the loss of meaning of this now-overused term. It is almost as if critique had become the intellectual drug of our times and it is now urgent to consider the social and political (potentially devastating) impact of this ‘overdose’.

However, after reading the theoretical chapters, the category of ‘critique’ still does not quite operate convincingly and significantly, and uncertainty remains around what qualifies as critique or what does not. This is especially disconcerting for an academic reader, as it is not always clear which intellectual tradition is mobilized or targeted. Boland’s use of Foucault’s methods and conceptual toolbox is telling in this regard: Foucault’s notion of discourse, archeology, and genealogy, notably, are put to good use. Using Foucault to highlight the critical nature of liberalism and neoliberalism is very convincing, and an important reminder that the Left does not have a monopoly on critique. Yet, Foucault’s

own work on critique is bypassed: his positions on critique are dismissed rather quickly as inconsistent, 'What is critique?' is mentioned, but only in contrast to Boland's own position: "...my argument contradicts Foucault's well-known lecture 'What is critique?'" (14, 20) and the critical ethos of modernity as discussed in 'What is Enlightenment?' is not addressed.

Furthermore, most of what is associated with critical philosophy or theory in the humanities and social sciences seems to have been evacuated from this "spectacle of critique." Indeed, the book is least successful when discussing the philosophical underpinnings of critique and often flaunts a casual dismissal of expert discussions, leading to an oversimplification of key concepts. For instance, the meaning of ideology (within critiques) is summed up as follows: "Without getting mired in academic discussions, this term 'ideology' or its equivalents basically means a sort of narrative or set of beliefs propounded by others, either as a deliberate obfuscation in the pursuit of an agenda or a shared form of delusion" (17). Reducing critical conceptions of ideology to 'what others have' or variations around false belief may be fair game with easy critiques circulating in classrooms and social media, but within academic scholarship, this risks setting up a straw man. Marxists and post-Marxists, Critical Theorists, post-structuralists or critical theorists (small *c*) either carefully avoid using 'ideology' in their own works, or when deliberately choosing the lexicon of 'ideology,' can hardly be faulted for a lack of attention to its epistemological subtleties, nor for a simplistic, purely denunciatory, use of the category. This deliberate move away from traditional academic discussion is overall consistent with the intent of the book but also leads to awkwardness and redundancy, especially when the author seems to engage in an odd cat and mouse game with critique – insisting on the critical potential of his own analyses while distancing himself from critique and *critiquing* critique.

By contrast, these self-corrective moves are fewer and better managed in the empirical chapters, in which the author observes and 'diagnoses' a specific deployment of critique – at a specific time in a specific context. Chapter 6, on 'critical thinking', is harsh but convincing: it suggests a healthy distance towards pedagogical trends in post-secondary education and against the overzealous promotion and commercialization of critical skills and strategies. Similarly, the chapter on "Populist radicals and hegemonic dissent" (101-122)<sup>2</sup> provides original and interesting considerations to explain the success of Trump's campaign and of alt-right movements. In chapter 7, Boland shares the finding of weekly "digital ethnographies" of feminist and anti-feminists online groups, blogs and websites (126). This participant observation experiment highlighted the mechanics of critical rhetoric and irony, providing at the same time an interesting lexicon of social media 'critical lingo' with terms such as 'calling-out' or 'snowflakes'. The analyses and arguments are also most cogent when following up Foucault's own lines of investigation, whether it is drawing our attention to forgotten genealogical lines or emphasizing that neoliberalism as well should be recognized as a critique rather than as an ideology (18). The sections on the welfare state are particularly convincing, showing how traditional welfare policies in

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<sup>2</sup> Chapter 6, "The cacophony of critique: Populist radicals and hegemonic dissent," 101-122.

Europe seem quite unable to face and respond to both the critiques of the Left and of neoliberalism. What results is a receding of democratic politics replaced by bureaucratic policies of (purported) financial efficiency and expediency. This also serves as a reminder that although Critical Theory is usually associated with the 'Left,' right-wing movements, self-avowed 'alt-right' or even less politically savvy Trump sympathizers also partake in this incessant "cacophony of critique." When given in spectacle, critique is indeed intolerably loud and suffocating, competing for 'woke' or 'red-pilled' minds, leaving everyone either more assured of their own enlightenment or 'dazed and confused' — feeding then "a general attitude of skepticism, cynicism and suspicion" (28). Neither meaning nor sympathy for fellow human beings is gained in the process.

In the end, as the book reviewer, having thus the role and responsibility of (providing) a *critique (sic)*, I cannot but stress how problematic and confusing remains the core concept and category under study, *critique*, weakened by shifting definitions and characterizations. This conceptual confusion is not the author's own: it is one too often encountered in our classrooms, newspapers and magazines, print and social media. As such, it is part of the problem towards which Boland directs our attention. Yet, I wish the author would have built his plea for an *acritical* theory on a clearer diagnostic and shaper distinction between the modern culture of critique on one hand and critique and critical theory as serious philosophical endeavors on the other. In a world where critique is overused and overwrought — dished out in every shape and form, where do serious critique and critical theory stand? as the source of the problem? as its cure or medicine? By suggesting avenues towards *acritical* theory, Boland suggests the former but the conundrum is not that easily solved.

In conclusion, *The Spectacle of Critique* is interesting but hard to grasp. Its style is light and casual enough to reach a wider audience and seeks to avoid what the author considers the pitfalls of typical critical academic literature: high level of specialization, lengthy quotations, complex vocabulary and long treatises, closed internal debates, a form of professional esoterism... Readers with a keen interest for critique in continental philosophy will simply have trouble relating to the form of ordinary critique the author discusses and bemoans. Inversely, promoters and practitioners of ordinary critique may not recognize themselves — especially in the first chapters — or may see Tom Boland's contribution as an invitation into the vicious circle of "critique of critiques"(13)<sup>3</sup> rather than a way out. Yet, for students and curious observers, there is much potential in the idea that "diagnosing critique" can help us understand contemporary phenomena and discourses as diverse as Trumpian politics, neo-liberal attacks on the welfare state, CT in education, scientific 'debunking' of religion, alt-right movements, heightened emotions around political correctness, or feminist and anti-feminist internet memes.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 13. Chapter 2, "The sound and the fury: the insights and limits of the critique of critique," 8-30.

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