



REVIEW ESSAY

## Critique in Truth: Bernard Harcourt's *Critique & Praxis*

Bernard Harcourt, *Critique & Praxis*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2020. Pp. 696. ISBN: 9780231195720 (hardback).

Bernard Harcourt's recent book is hefty. Its width catches the eye when shelved alongside the thin volumes that have become too customary in contemporary academic publishing (some of them a mere 125 pages). *Critique & Praxis* measures in at nearly 540 pages of text plus an additional 100 pages of back matter. But its heftiness is more a matter of the philosophical density and majesty that Harcourt brings to his subject: the possibilities for the practice of critical theory today.

This is a book that, by its intellectual intensity, if not also by its length, resists the summary style typical of the genre of a review. Rather than attempting to tie together all of the many threads of the book, I shall instead here attempt to articulate the frame within which the book's core arguments are placed.

In the book's introductory sections (consisting of two brief essays comprising about 50 pages) Harcourt establishes a pair of distinctions. These distinctions organize everything that follows.

The first distinction is between philosophy as contemplative thought and philosophy as a form of active engagement. Harcourt does not draw this distinction in exactly those terms (nor, for instance, in the terms offered by Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition* with her reference to the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa*).<sup>1</sup> He offers a series of contrasts—between *theoria* and *praxis* (8), contemplation and practice (8), a “refuge in epistemology” and “chang[ing] the world” (9), and so on. All of these refer back to a basic distinction between a contemplative style in philosophy and active philosophical engagement. The canonical lodestone for this distinction is also the first quotation in the book—Karl Marx's famous quip about philosophers who “only” interpret the world but fail to engage in changing it (1). Placing himself in agreement with Marx (though not quite in

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<sup>1</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (1958).

line with all the derision that Marx's "only" implies), Harcourt argues in favor of, to quote the book's first sentence, an "ambition" for a critical philosophy that would "transform human existence" (1).

Harcourt's second central distinction is also noted in the book's first sentence, where he ties his transformative ambition specifically to what he calls "critical philosophy" (1). The contrast here, as laid out in the book's second sentence, is to the philosophies of Hobbes, Locke, and Smith. The central contrast for critical philosophy is liberal political theory. But the liberal alternative to truly critical philosophy is not merely dismissed. Harcourt registers the active thrust of liberalism as expressed by the "vocal resistance of liberal critics and organizations" such as the ACLU or Human Rights Watch (11). Liberalism makes use of "the courts and liberal institutions" (12) to advance its agenda items of liberty, property, and (only-rough) equality. By contrast to this agenda, the critical philosophy that Harcourt identifies with Marx, Rousseau, Horkheimer, Foucault, Spivak, and others is one that tactically advances the core values of "emancipation" and "liberation" (1). (I note only in passing that it is ironic to read of these particular values as connected to Foucault. There is deep suspicion in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* toward the idea that our liberation is always what we can simply assume to be hanging in the balance.<sup>2</sup> Yet Harcourt here reproduces this assumption, which is so widespread in contemporary critical theory today that hardly anyone even bothers to defend it. Yet what of Foucault's central argument that liberation is hardly adequate as tactical resistance to, say, disciplinary strategies which we inculcate in ourselves?)

Harcourt's two distinctions, if put into schematic combination, allow four possible positions. The first is contemplative liberalism (which could be exemplified for Harcourt's purposes by John Rawls's own self-described "ideal theory," or even better by Rawlsiana, that is, the thousands of scholarly articles about Rawls). The second option is contemplative critical theory (exemplified for Harcourt by Axel Honneth's 2017 *The Idea of Socialism*). The third option is activist liberalism, which Harcourt identifies primarily with liberal organizations (such as ACLU, though Harcourt might also have referred to the work of some liberal political theorists, such as those in the vein of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum). The fourth option would be an activist, or praxis-centered, critical philosophy. Set in this schema, the basic argumentative intervention of the book is clear. Harcourt barely considers the first option as a serious contender; his central concern is with the unresolvable contest between the assertedly-failed positions of the second and third options; and he argues for a fulsome form of the fourth option.

Does critical philosophy today actually militate for the achievement of its political goals in the world? Harcourt worries that it does not; at least not often enough: "The critical Left, as opposed to the liberal Left, appears disarmed" (11). Critical philosophy has taken refuge in epistemology, speculation, and contemplation. By contrast, Harcourt argues in

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<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Will to Know (The History of Sexuality Volume 1)* [1976] (1978), 159.

favor of a philosophy that is both critical in content and at the same time takes the form of praxis. Hence his titular ambition: *Critique & Praxis*.

There are three reactions I suspect a reader might have to this basic framing. One reaction would be to worry about the overly-rigid contrasts presumed by the book. Why such distance between theory and practice? Why such a stark contrast between liberal political theory and the ambitions of a critical philosophy that aims to “infuse the world with the values of compassion, equality, solidarity, autonomy, and social justice” (1)? Is critical philosophy really so steadfastly opposed to core liberal values for balancing equality and autonomy or core liberal strategies like rights? Consider, for instance, how Foucault felt free to make use of liberal rights as means for advancing viable political resistance.<sup>3</sup>

A second reaction would be to worry about how Harcourt has framed the book in a way that raises a dogging question of priorities. Consider that Harcourt argues on behalf of a philosophy of both active political militancy and radical theoretical critique. But which of these values is higher for Harcourt where they come into conflict? It is a contemplative luxury to not have to answer that question. But in the exigencies of actual political reality, which Harcourt himself knows as an extremely-active lawyer (cf. 466-468), this is a question that cannot always be deferred. If Harcourt’s deepest priorities truly lie with activist philosophy, then why all the fretting over liberalism, given the enormous amount of good that can be done by making use of liberal strategies and institutions? Everyone knows that liberalism is strikingly imperfect, but in contexts like that in the U.S. today where basic liberal goods like voting rights are being dismantled, there is obviously enormous good to be done by the liberal activist who achieves a fairer franchise without sacrificing said gains to a fully perfect justice.<sup>4</sup> What this suggests is that Harcourt’s deepest priorities lie with critical philosophy. Indeed this has to be true, at least with respect to this book (which is published by a university press, written in academic prose, and assumes a reader who can sail through casual references to a bibliography of thinkers who will be familiar only to the graduate students and professoriate in the theoretical humanities and social sciences). Harcourt’s primary argumentative foil is therefore not really the liberal activist (who is actually Harcourt himself in other work beyond the confines of this book) but rather the unengaged critical theorist (cf. 535) who long ago lost themselves in their “epistemological detour” (4, 157, 221, 318).

I have posed the first two reactions to Harcourt’s framing as worries. The third reaction begins by not being overly-worried about such matters. A reader can grant that Harcourt’s organizing distinctions need not be stark dichotomies but can be wielded as modest heuristic organizers. A reader can also accept that Harcourt’s implicit prioritization of philosophical critique over political praxis need not be taken as harboring some secret inner ambition which undoes the whole project. Such a reader can thereby learn from this book everything it has to offer (and there is much). For such a reader is in a good position to follow the thread of Harcourt’s argument concerning how critical philosophy has in

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<sup>3</sup> The fullest discussion of Foucault and rights is Ben Golder, *Foucault and the Politics of Rights* (2015).

<sup>4</sup> For an impressive contemporary example of activist liberalism about voting rights see Stacey Abrams, *Our Time is Now* (2020).

recent decades become mired in a contemplative style such that what it really needs today is to refocus its energies on a praxis that could be the tactical equal to liberalism's activism.

What, then, of Harcourt's interventions on behalf of a praxis of critique? How successful is the book's argument in its own central terms? Here especially the book resists the style of summary that a review demands. I shall here offer an only-partial preview of some of the most important interventions that *Critique & Praxis* develops.

Of greatest importance, because the stakes here are highest, is Harcourt's discussion of the problem of truth in contemporary critical theory's challenge of navigating between the Scylla of foundationalism and the Charybdis of denormativization (177ff., 221ff.). I myself regard this as *the* central challenge facing political theory today. By framing this challenge in terms of truth, Harcourt offers a novel bid. It comes in two steps. First is his argument that critical theory must avoid "the imposition of a foundation" (184) that is already internal to any act of "claiming truth" (184). Second is Harcourt's proposal to replace reliance on truth with a "juridical model" of judgment that involves a "temporary assessment of the evidence and arguments" available to those involved (187). Think of critique less on the model of the intellectual who simply assumes a universal audience (which they never have anyway), and more on a workmanship model expressed by the litigator who in specific contexts, with great effort and preparation, wins their arguments.

Harcourt's juridical model resonates with an image he offers later in the book when he discusses the relationship between theory and praxis exhibited in Foucault's work in the early 1970s. This is when Foucault was shuttling between his manuscript for *Surveiller et punir* and his involvement with the *Groupe d'Information sur les prisons* (439-445). The model Harcourt detects here is one of theory and praxis in "confrontation" and "collision" (439). This image is more forceful than that famous metaphor upon which many of us have relied, namely Deleuze's reference to theory as a "toolbox" in his 1972 dialogue with Foucault.<sup>5</sup> The workmanlike advocate who deploys Harcourt's juridical model is not (or at least not only) using theory as a toolkit but is confronting the praxis of their concrete situation with the praxis of a concretizing theory.

The crucial question facing this proposal to resolve the crucial challenge is this: does Harcourt's proposed bid of a juridical model resolve the impasse between foundationalist pretense and normative abstinence? My own hunch is that Harcourt concedes too much to the relativist (he himself worries about this [188, 569n71]). Yet the perspective itself is promising. It could be amplified if given greater specificity via, for example, a genealogy of truth that would not reject claims to truth so much as situate them in their practices.

Such an approach could build on Harcourt's own rereading of Foucault as a genealogist of truth-telling. In an early chapter, Harcourt rereads the arc of Foucault's work from 1970 to 1984 through the lens of the category, prominent in his 1981 Louvain lectures, of truth-telling. Foucault's work offers "a history of truth itself" (110). This lens is deployed

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<sup>5</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault, "Intellectuals and Power" in *Desert Islands*, ed. Gilles Deleuze [1972] (2004), 208.

for a delicate revisioning of Foucault's lectures and books across these years (111-121). The interpretive insight here is, as any reader of Harcourt's prior scholarship on Foucault will expect, masterful. The value of such genealogies, especially as we are able to extend them deeper into our own present today, is in how they enable us to confront, or "counter" in Harcourt's felicitous phrase (191-202), the truths of our present.<sup>6</sup>

A different option for fleshing out contemporary genealogies of truth-telling is worth mentioning if only because it does not appear as such within Harcourt's book and yet is in fact not far from its orbit. This would be to build out the work of another genealogist. In *Truth & Truthfulness*, Bernard Williams fleshes out a minimalist disquotational theory of truth through a genealogy of sincerity and accuracy as contingent virtues of truthfulness.<sup>7</sup> Such an approach enables us to grasp how truth, as internal to practices of truthfulness, is sometimes that which we all need in order to be able to rely on one another.

We should readily admit that both Foucault's and Williams's genealogies of truth-telling remain incompletely developed in their work. But if further built out by today's (and tomorrow's) critical philosophers, they could help resituate truth-claiming outside of the impasse between foundationalism and relativism. One crucial clue to any such genealogy of truth formations, and one which Harcourt himself already endorses in outline (261-266), would be the kind of contextualism advocated by Amy Allen's critical-theoretical uptake of metaethical contextualism.<sup>8</sup> Allen's argument holds that one can reject second-order metaethical universalism and foundationalism without abandoning first-order normative commitment. This argument helps us glimpse the potential gains of both genealogically investigating the contexts of emergence for what is true and at the same time affirming that, within a context, truth is truth. This is precisely where critical theory can reap the greatest insights from its contemporary tendencies toward contextualism (or, better yet, pragmatism, for that is what is really at stake here).<sup>9</sup> This is the endpoint toward

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<sup>6</sup> I register in passing a methodological misfit between Harcourt's desideratum of counter critique and his claim that genealogy is primarily funded by a theory of knowledge-power according to which knowledge is "inextricably" (95) tied to power. Harcourt claims that since "that theory is what fuels his method" Foucault's genealogy is really "knowledge-power genealogy" (92), rather than, at least primarily, "problematizing" or "possibilizing" genealogy (92, 555n81). But I more clearly see how problematizing genealogy sets us up to "counter" the truths of the present than does knowledge-power genealogy, unless it is simply assumed that the imbrication of knowledge and power is always a bad thing and never to be vindicated. Such an assumption is (and for Foucauldian reasons) unwarranted.

<sup>7</sup> Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness* (2002).

<sup>8</sup> Amy Allen, *The End of Progress* (2016), 204-219.

<sup>9</sup> Pragmatism (and such of its key commitments as contextualism) is already implicit across a wide swath of contemporary critical theory, and yet is unfortunately underdiscussed in anglophone critical theory. The current theorist who most fully acknowledges pragmatism's importance is Rahel Jaeggi, *Critique of Forms of Life* [2014] (2018). Jaeggi, however, ultimately distances her view from pragmatism in subsuming Dewey's concept of "problems" (Ch.4) under Hegel's concept of "contradiction" (Ch. 9). Jaeggi is aware of this distancing, but I would argue that it is far greater than she takes it to be. For a focused critique of the impoverished notion of contradiction (as featured in Hegel) vis-à-vis the critically-potent concept of problems (as it resonates from Foucault and Deleuze across to Dewey and James) see my discussion in Colin Koopman, "Critical Problematization in Foucault and Deleuze: The Force of Critique without Judgment" in *Between Deleuze and Foucault*, ed. Nicolae Morar, Thomas Nail and Daniel Smith (2016), esp. 94-99.

which Harcourt is headed, though the way there gets lost in talk of turning away from truth altogether.

To return to the central question of the book, then, what genealogies of truth formation can clarify are the fields of practice upon which critique may be enacted as praxis. To get a sense of how this already looks through Harcourt's vision, consider lastly the final section of *Critique & Praxis*.

The end of *Critique & Praxis* proposes to reframe the normative question of "What is to be done?" in terms of the more personal question of "What more am I to do?" (448). Any reader impressed by Foucault's skepticism toward the great modern technique of the confessional may balk at aspects of Harcourt's discussion here. There can be no denying that the end of the book is all caught up in the memoir style in which our contemporary culture is suffused. But is our memoir moment not only simultaneous with the decay of democracy but also part of the same contemporary configuration? If critical theory expresses itself through an account of personal action, does it risk forfeiting its political claims precisely by being located in a personal space where it feels inappropriate to demand public justifications? Is an interrogation of one's unique experience the endgame that is due the critical theorist who readily quits claiming truth?

Such questions admit of no easy answer. We all know by now that the personal can be, and indeed sometimes must be countenanced as, political. But we can also know the difference between an account of one's personal activity in public matters and a conversation with oneself that is private in the sense that it is not offered as a justification to anybody other than oneself. The final part of Harcourt's book moves back and forth between these two quite different modes. This sort of ambivalent shuffling may seem the fate of any attempt to excavate the political from the personal. But it is not. There are some, though admittedly only a very important few, writers who manage to convey the politics in personal experience without it somehow retreating toward the private. James Baldwin comes to mind as one shining example—in his essay "Nothing Personal" he is intensely personal and yet there is not once even the slightest suggestion of it all being somehow, quite incredibly, private.<sup>10</sup> A more contemporary writer in whom we find something quite similar is Jesmyn Ward—her heartbreaking memoir *Men We Reaped* is fully situated within the uniqueness of her particular life in such a way as to make it plain to see the politics of all the dying she has been living against.<sup>11</sup> It would not be fair to expect Harcourt's prose to live up to the breathtaking beauty and arresting tragedy of a Baldwin or a Ward, and yet at the same time it is of course eminently appropriate to compare Harcourt's more personal approach to political questions with those who define for us today the very necessity of such public letters.

The many interventions made by *Critique & Praxis*, and I have here merely glossed only a few of them, all possess two striking qualities. First, they are interventions into crucial

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<sup>10</sup> James Baldwin, "Nothing Personal," *Contributions in Black Studies* 6:1 [1964] (2008), online publication.

<sup>11</sup> Jesmyn Ward, *Men We Reaped: A Memoir* (2013).

arguments for contemporary critical theory. Second, Harcourt intervenes into these crucial matters in a way that is capacious and compelling. Not all readers will agree with all of Harcourt's interventions. I have made it clear that I do not myself unambiguously accept all of them. But Harcourt is clearly worth disagreeing with over matters where the stakes could hardly be greater. And worthy disagreement is what one must always ask from philosophy (this is one way in which political philosophy and politics are two distinct activities). Registered thus, *Critique & Praxis* is one of the most provoking contributions to critical theory of the twenty-first century.

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