

ARTICLE

Reflections on *Critical Resistance*

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I am very grateful to Professors Seán Patrick Eudaily and C. Neal Keye for their careful, close readings of Critical Resistance. The following remarks are intended to supplement their assessments with an account of the situation surrounding the composition of the book.

The relation of life to literature is such that in the lives and the writings of both Foucault and Nietzsche, philosophy is a form of autobiography. In turn, Rousseau's *Confessions* shows that autobiography can be a form of philosophy. The reason why philosophy may be autobiography is that philosophers must always test their hypotheses and claims with themselves individually, as well as with others, and therefore what they propose in their writing will always be a report of what they feel they believe. Therefore, it should not be surprising if I were to say that my book retraces at some level the steps of my own intellectual development. The texts that I work through in the opening chapter on Nietzsche, followed by the central chapter on Foucault, helped to form my understanding of what is important in philosophy. But then, why should anyone other than me care about this story? The response is that an individual's intellectual life can be representative of that person's generation. Hence, the texts that I work through could be typical of anyone who started to do philosophy in the 1960s, and for whom the events of 1968 in Europe, plus the civil rights and the anti-war movements in the 1960s in the United States were formative. During those years resistance was an unavoidable feature of social and political life.

The wars from Vietnam to Iraq heightened the atmosphere of resistance. The lead-lined black capes of the police in Paris cannot be compared with the body armor of either our soldiers in Iraq or our football players in the Yale Bowl, but they exemplify the way the body protects itself even in its more aggressive posturing. The body becomes more central in philosophy late in the twentieth century, even if no one knows exactly what the body is. Body is simply whatever lies underneath the conscious mind. But if the notion of the

mind drops away as a result of looking more to the body, then the idea of body loses its contrast term and falls away as well.

Nietzsche understood the irony of this philosophical tension of body and mind, and that is one reason that he was reappropriated after having been out of the limelight in the earlier parts of the century. And yes, Nietzsche rather than Heidegger. Professor Eudaily believes that “overplaying the influence of Nietzsche and underplaying that of Heidegger as the background interlocutors of poststructuralism” is a mistake. I believe his worry is that by dethroning Heidegger, I become unable to answer my own question, in the name of what is resistance justified? That is a hard question, and Professor Eudaily would have to provide more detail to convince me that Heidegger has a better answer than the poststructuralists. Of course, philosophers such as Foucault, Derrida, Bourdieu, and Levinas are inconceivable without Heidegger’s influence. But they all worked hard to put some distance between themselves and, not so much Heidegger himself, but the French Heideggerians of that time. As I argued in the case of the conflicting interpretations of Nietzsche by the Heideggerian Jean Granier and the Derridean Sarah Kofman, the battle was centered on how to read Nietzsche. He could be seen as the last of the great metaphysicians (as Heideggerians read him) or the first truly anti-Hegelian, non-metaphysician (as Deleuze read him). As Gary Gutting sees the situation, Deleuze’s agenda was to highlight philosophers who were not particularly fashionable in France at the time, and “he seems scarcely concerned with the dominant Germans, Husserl and Heidegger.”¹ I would not deny that Derrida and Foucault took Heidegger more seriously than Deleuze did. In the case of Foucault, for instance, Hubert Dreyfus has shown that Foucault’s early reading of Heidegger inspired many of Foucault’s major ideas, and Foucault agreed that Dreyfus was correct.² I do believe, however, that the poststructuralists gave Nietzsche pride of place, and that they read Heidegger through Nietzsche rather than the other way around.

I offer this account of the composition of *Critical Resistance* just at the moment when the book is coming out in paperback. However, I have long been a critic of the idea of the author’s intention determining the meaning of the text. So my own intentions should be irrelevant to how the more coded passages of the book are read. I am pleased that both reviewers took the time to study the book so carefully. Professor Keye sees correctly that the cultural politics of critical resistance (both the book and the phenomenon), and what Butler identifies as “disobedience to the principles by which one is formed,” is

1 Gary Gutting, *French Philosophy in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 333.

2 Hubert L. Dreyfus, “On the Ordering of Things: Being and Power in Heidegger and Foucault,” in T. J. Armstrong (ed.), *Michel Foucault: Philosopher* (London: Routledge, 1991), 80-95.

aimed against, in Keye's terms, "the cultural conservatism pressing in on all sides today."

For readers of this journal the most important chapter will be the one on Foucault. Originally I sketched my ideas for this chapter as well as the Bourdieu chapter in a talk that I first gave at an NEH Summer Institute on Embodiment in 1994 (and which was published in a collection of papers from that institute).³ I think that there are two moments in the Foucault chapter that Foucault scholars might find noteworthy. One is the discussion of material that was not yet translated into English, and only recently published in France. This material involved his lectures in 1975-76 under the title, "*Society must be Defended*" (translated and published in 2003 by Picador Press), in which he went into greater detail on bio-power than he did in any of his published writings, including the introductory volume to the *History of Sexuality*. Despite Deleuze's claim that genealogy is not dialectical, I found some unexpected similarities between Hegel's treatment of life and death in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and Foucault's account of the change in the relation of life and death as bio-power emerged alongside disciplinary power. Both bio-power and disciplinary power usurp the alleged power of sovereignty.

The second moment was for me a major discovery. Working through Judith Butler's work on Foucault brought me around to a greater appreciation of Foucault's strategy of *désassujettissement* ("desubjugation" or "desubjectification"). In other words, for Foucault resistance consists not in our finding our true subjectivity behind ideological masks, but in *de*-subjectifying ourselves, of purging the selves produced by the forces of conformism, in order to become different from the way we normally are.

For me the other aspects of the book that I hope readers will notice are the following. First, the book's discussion of Bourdieu takes his latest and last writings into account in his efforts to deal with the problem of how he can exempt his own sociological theory, which he believes to be scientific and objective, from his critique of objectivistic sociological theories. I discuss his notion of the intellectual, which he is himself, and why, despite his efforts to escape from that label, he cannot stop being an intellectual. His criticisms of the intellectual "field" of academic philosophy can be developed into a challenging account of the relation of the discipline of continental philosophy to racism.

Another feature of the book that both of these perceptive reviewers notice was the explanation of the political and ethical potential in Derrida's recent notion of "deconstructive genealogy." This idea pulls together his

3 David Couzens Hoy, "Critical Resistance: Foucault and Bourdieu," in *Perspectives on Embodiment: The Intersections of Nature and Culture*, ed. Honi Haber and Gail D. Weiss (London: Routledge, 1999), 1-19.

analyses of justice and law, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, his adaptation of Levinas's ethical theory. Derrida's death should not stop the effort of working out these ideas in detail. That is why I added at the end of each chapter a discussion of a post-critical philosopher, that is, a later philosopher who was influenced by these recently deceased leaders of the field. Hence, the book engages Judith Butler, Slavoj Žižek, and Ernesto Laclau, in interpretive dialogue.

Professor Eudaily believes that the end product (the book) is not identical with the author's vision. That might depend on what sort of book one thinks this is. What, then, is the genre of this book? For the author to identify the genre and highlight the arguments may appear to be an act of hubris. Nevertheless, I will take that risk in order to point out some of the book's main arguments. Some might think that it is an exercise in philosophical anthropology, but I prefer to think of it as a work of social philosophy. With the restrictions imposed in the book on the word "ontology," the book could be an attempt to work out what Professor Eudaily identifies as "social ontology." No matter which of those labels is preferred, Professor Keye notes insightfully that this book operates more at the level of practice than at the level of theory. However, he has some worries about the level of abstraction of the prose. This problem is one that philosophers run into all the time. I believe Kant said that examples were to be avoided because they frequently misled the readers. I see my own strategy as being like Bourdieu's in that I am trying to spell out a theory of practice, as opposed to a theory of theory.

In this sense, the book is in the tradition of Critical Theory. I have said jokingly that it is the *prequel* to my previous book, entitled *Critical Theory* and published by Blackwell in 1994, in which I debate the past, present, and future viability of Critical Theory with the noted Habermas interpreter and social theorist, Thomas McCarthy. I realize that this remark about the prequel stands in tension with my projection of the label, post-critique, for philosophy after poststructuralism. Post-critique means, of course, post-critical theory. In the Blackwell book I work out an approach that shows Critical Theory moving more in the direction of Gadamer and Foucault than in the direction of Adorno and Habermas. Now I see Critical Theory more as an amalgam of Benjamin and Foucault, with perhaps some Levinas as well.

Why Benjamin? The answer can be readily seen in a passage from "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1936), which, coincidentally, Professor Keye cites on his web site:

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it "the way it really was" (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment

of danger. The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it.⁴

Benjamin's idea of a history of the victims brushes history against the grain and changes our understanding of the past. He gives us the unforgettable image of modern temporality as an angel who is being blown by a storm into the future, but backward, so that all that the angel can see are the disasters of the past. Furthermore, although the emphasis on tradition might seem to be conservative, in fact, tradition can also be radicalized. Tradition is not synonymous with conformity. Historical memory can show us where the tradition was misinterpreted and where the general self-understanding of the people went awry. Even if the past cannot be changed, traditions can be rediscovered so that overlooked possibilities can be redeployed today.

In a related way, in a passage also cited by Professor Eudaily, Foucault distinguishes between practices of freedom and practices of liberation. As I read the passage, Foucault is suspicious of Reich's idea of liberation, which he thinks is derived from a dubious reading of Freud. "Liberation" in this specific sense seems to imply that there is something already there, one's true self or one's innate sexuality, for instance, that has been repressed by power and that just needs to be released. He also thinks that Reich's notion of liberation rests on the assumption that power is only ever domination. In contrast, practices of freedom do not entail this theory of power as domination, even if they do involve resisting micro-powers that try to make us conform. However, Foucault is not necessarily opposed to all senses of liberation, so if it is possible to use the term without invoking Reich's assumptions, I do not think that there would be any strong objection.

Critical resistance may contribute to a desubjectification that is not merely of individual subject identities, but of collective, communal, or *social* subject identities. It would thus radicalize the traditions that form our identities. If *Critical Resistance* (both the book and the phenomenon) can promote this kind of social *désassujettissement*, then it could well open the door to social change. If critical resistance must be in the name of something that justifies resistance, let it be in the name of liberation and freedom. After all, Foucault himself says that there are cases and situations where "liberation and the struggle for liberation are indispensable for the practice of freedom."⁵ The desubjectification will not be followed by anarchy, but by the formation of an ethics of how to live. For ethics is "the reflected [*réfléchie*] practice of

4 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (Schocken, 1969), 255.

5 Michel Foucault, "The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth, Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984, Volume One*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1994), 284.

freedom,” and “freedom is the ontological condition of ethics.”⁶ When freedom is informed by reflection, that is ethics. However, Foucault is celebrating an ethics of freedom, not an ethics of duty. In that respect, he looks into a future that is very different from the future faced by Kant. Foucault’s future need not involve looking back into the past, as Benjamin’s angel must. Instead, Foucault’s vision is focused more on the present and the inevitable need for action right now, that is, for critical resistance in the name of freedom.

6 Michel Foucault, “The Ethics”, 284.