



The public, its problems, and post-critique

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We're looking for allies. We need allies. And we think these allies are already out there, that they've gone ahead without us, that there are lots of people who've had enough and are thinking, feeling, and working in similar directions (Deleuze, 1995: 22).

There's no such thing as post-critique or post-criticality. Despite the books and the essays titled thus, post-critique stands as what Stengers (2008, 97) calls a "lure" that aims to "vectorize concrete experience" about the state of critique in contemporary society. This linkage (critique *and* society) is central: post-critique asks how critique might (or might not) need to change to be of continued social relevance. In this, and the fact that it is fundamentally a *critique of critique* (i.e. it *is* critique), post-critique is simply a desire to prevent the collapse of critique and—therein—represents a desire to negate the very need for this label. To explain this paradoxical logic, this text plays with Conway (2021) and others' (Lorenzini & Tazzioli, 2020) critique of my use of post-critique (yes, this can go on endlessly). In doing so, I bracket what Conway terms "reactionary" post-critique. That reactionary mode would be better categorized as anti-critical, where the goal is the erasure of critique/criticality. Part of the issue here is an ambiguity with the term "post-critique" itself, which can be read in one of two ways:

1. As indicating a moment in which we are post- i.e. after the need for critical methods, approaches, politics, etc. (for any reason). Here, critique is to be negated;
2. As indicating what must come post- i.e. after *the deployment of critical methods, approaches, politics, etc. but which cannot exist without the prior deployment of critique/criticality itself.*

The former understanding is indeed reactionary. But it is a form of anti-critique, not post-critique in the understanding that literary studies, science and technology studies, and queer theory originally articulated.¹ With that aside, my principal goal here is to reorient the understanding of "post-criticality" or "post-critique"

¹ It is notable that there is a longstanding tradition of thinking in these terms, which is only rarely fully engaged with in IR. When I use the terms post-critical or post-critique in what follows, I am referring to

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away from a scholastic focus on either our own intellectual identities or the specific semantics and intellectual history of the terms critique or criticality and towards a far broader focus on the “public” (or not) nature of social science. In this, my call is for the necessity of a sociological understanding of how critique produces socio-political change (or not). Simply: I will suggest that it is a lack of engagement with the sociology of how critique does or does not interact *within* the world that underlies many of the concerns that Conway and others express about post-critique. To achieve this, I make three moves. First, I focus on why post-critique places such a degree of attention on style (or aesthetics), which is something that—despite its prominence within core post-critical texts—is largely glossed-over by sceptics. I connect that focus on the stylistic to a concern with how critical interventions do, or do not, “resonate” with global publics in ways with the potential to formulate new subjectivities. Second, I turn attention to the “dirty” or “impure” political ethos at the heart of post-critique, exploring why this is so strongly resisted by Conway and others, before defending its potential for tactical subversion and—again—the public politicization of critique. Third, I conclude by reflecting on how post-critique is ultimately invested in defending against the devaluing of criticality but does so by “going on the offensive” rather than engaging in a dogmatic defence of critique that may itself be reactionary. In this, post-critique is about making critique public (again) and doing so by recruiting possible allies wherever they may be found across the world, however different they may seem.

Style and substance

In the book *Postcritique*, Laurent de Sutter (2019: 7) writes that “we live in the age of the triumph of critique”, which takes many forms—epistemological (critical theory), pedagogical (critical thinking), institutional (critical studies), professional (literary, cinematic, culinary critique), etc. Uniting this diversity—however—is the same “relationship to thought”:

This relationship to thought is one of force: thought must be able to prevail over that which it thinks (De Sutter, 2019: 7 all translations my own).

This suggestion echoes the more usual understanding of post-critique as seeking to overcome the dominance of a “hermeneutics of suspicion” within critical inquiry (Felski, 2012, 2015). But it articulates it more evocatively: critique is not simply suspicious (as the scientific method in general) but actively seeks to prevail over, triumph, defeat, and destroy its object of study. In this, one gains a taste—perhaps—of how critique-as-enlightenment-methodology and criticality-as-political-commitment come to merge. Particularly in cases where critique is deployed within political contexts of injustice and suffering, a desire to intellectually “triumph” over an object

Footnote 1 (continued)

the approaches articulated therein. See inter alia (De Sutter, 2019; Sedgwick, 2003; Jensen, 2014; Bloch, 1996; Latour, 2004; Felski, 2015, 2012).



of thought is coupled with the necessity of doing so to save lives, liberate minds, etc. The question I wish to pose at the outset here, however, is simple: is this being achieved?

The spread of anti-critical sentiment, described at length by Conway himself, suggests not. Indeed, the growth of critique as its own cottage industry does not appear to have radically transformed the world. It is this fact that—indeed—sits at the core of the rise of post-criticality and its focus on the necessity of understanding the “reception” of critique beyond the boundaries of the academy. This is perhaps why myself and my colleagues titled one article the Doing and *Mediating* of Critique (Austin et al., 2019). Core to the post-critical ethos is that this task of mediating critical ideas to the uninitiated, to those who hold entirely opposing views, or even threaten to impose violence, is not always entirely well-served by an aesthetic of “prevailing” over certain objects of thought (Austin, 2019a, 2020a, 2020b). As Massumi (in Zournazi, 2002: 15) summarizes the point: “judgmental reason is an extremely weak form of thought, precisely because it is so sure of itself”.

Crucially, the word Massumi uses is *judgemental*. The problem with the hermeneutics of suspicion is not that it makes (normative or otherwise) judgements about the world but that it so frequently expresses them in a judgemental manner that individualizes responsibility in a way that is—indeed—often contrary to prevalent conceptual precepts within critical theory. For example, it is often accepted that the difference between critical reasoning and conspiracy theorizing ultimately lies in the structural-systemic² diagnosis of the ills of the world at the heart of critique as compared to the image of all-controlling and intentionality-filled elites manipulating our lives.³ This has only become stronger over time, as critical theorizing has integrated variants of affect theory, new materialism, feminist theory, and so on. Each foregrounds that what “is truly terrifying” about the violence of world politics is “the generally asubjective nature of the system” and structures that produces these violences (Srnicek & Williams, 2015: 41). There is no *Bastille* to storm nor a clear route to transformation. As such, the judgemental and accusatory style of critique often alienates.

For instance, I do not believe that accusing people of having “the most generic sense of moral purpose in mind” as they engage in work on violence prevention, saving migrants at sea, or introducing ethical debate into security programmes does much to encourage sympathy with “critique” or the broader systemic goals it may have in mind (Conway, 2021: 21).⁴ In the worst case, such rhetoric simply distances academia from the public sphere. More, and as discussed below, it is almost always

² This need not be ‘structuralist’ in any way, as Huysmans and Nogueira (2021) make clear. It refers simply to the presence of some kind of ‘ordering’ system (i.e. assemblage theory also specifies a kind of structural understanding of life).

³ Myself and Conway agreed (in my interpretation) on this definition during a conversation prior to the writing of this article. For discussions on the relationship between critique and conspiracy see (Aistrophe & Bleiker, 2018; Austin, 2019a; Austrin & Farnsworth, 2005).

⁴ I refer here to the critiques Conway has made of my work on torture prevention (Austin, 2019b; Austin & Bocco, 2016) and that of my colleagues working on EU security (technologies) (Lees et al., 2019), as well as the critiques that Lorenzini and Tazzioli (2020) make of ‘evidence-based’ approaches to preventing migrant deaths, viz the work of Forensic Architecture in this area.



based on the assumption that those who carry out such work are unconcerned with systemic change and seek only to “smooth” the operations of power and its institutions. But how would one know such a thing? Usually, it is a simple assumption.

Why is this so problematical? In another critique of post-critique, Lorenzini and Tazzioli (2020: 28) suggest that it is increasingly crucial to build “transversal alliances” between European citizens and migrants in order to “problematise the production of a given category of subjects as the ‘others’ of critique” and open up the possibility of creating “new collective subjects” or ‘we’s’ that could transform politics. I agree that this is the truly important political task of the day: critique needs allies. But the wager at the heart of most post-critical approaches is that such a transversal alliance formation is unlikely to emerge through a kind of rational-reflexive engagement of critical reasoning, spread by the university or any other institution. Here, the latent modernism of critique lingers: enlightenment will be achieved through critique, which will then liberate us collectively (for a discussion see Cannon, 2008). More, this is often imagined as an individualized affair: a subject might “produce his or her own desubjugation” (i.e. escape from the effects of power and particular regimes of truth) via such an application of critique (Lorenzini & Tazzioli, 2020: 34).

Post-critique is suspicious (yes) of such an understanding. It is thus that it advocates for a far more “open” and “affirmative” form of critical engagement that avoids an individualized judgemental attitude that risks alienating those with whom we seek to build alliances. Note that within this logic *the goal of critique can remain identical*. One can make judgements about what is wrong/right with the world and seek systemic change. What shifts is the aesthetic practice(s) of critique used to achieve that end. In Gregory Bateson’s (1979) understanding, aesthetics can be encapsulated as a “pattern that connects” different forms of life, being, and sociality. An object’s capacity to gain a kind of evocative resonance (bluntly: to be attractive) that brings together many differentiated groups is largely dependent on how successfully it can achieve this aesthetic effect of transversal connection. The accusative tone of critique can only go so far towards that goal and the reliance of critical IR—in particular—on its style seems to me to represent a lack of focus on the sociological conditions under which critique can/cannot become a successful source of transformatory (or not) change.

All of this requires, as I will discuss further below, a highly attuned sociological understanding for how affective responses are formed to particular objects (Easterling, 2021). While forms of power-invested “conquering”, “prevailing”, or “triumphing” certainly play a role in that process, there are many other ways in which this can be achieved. Recognizing those possibilities requires—however—that we accept this central role of the affective and aesthetic to our vocation. There is great resistance to exploring the aesthetic component of political life and in retaining the view that the scholarly sits above it. This was central to Critical Theory proper, of course, but more generally it seems to have limited our imaginations of what critique might be (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1979). In short, while we like to think of style as the opposite of substance, I would suggest that seen sociologically, the aesthetics of any social practice are what carry its potential to actually become a substantive social entity. To summarize, then, post-critique is concerned with creating allies but



not on prefiguring the terms of such alliances. It seeks to “make-public” critique and criticality by aesthetically and affectively considering how critique does/does not resonate with the world.

Complicity, comradeship and Château Bruno Latour

In the typical activist script, one declares principles and determines sides. *Whose side are you on?* The sense is that one must lock arms. Speak truth to power. Walk in concert. Be right. Historically, it has taken enormous courage to enact those forms of resistance... I am only worried that some of our activist endgames constrain the very change we wish to instigate (Lucas, 2009: 12).

In general, the centrality of aesthetics to post-critique has not received much attention from those who otherwise lament its emergence. To see why, it is perhaps worth teasing out what Conway (2021: 4) argues post-critique lacks, formulated as a set of “traditional epistemological and political commitments” to (1) “Systemic analysis”, (2) “Revolutionary social change” (or “liberatory change”), and (3) “Suspicious judgements”. I would venture that the lack of interest in the aesthetics of critique stems from the view that if there is no desire for systemic-structural analysis leading to some form of radical change based on a diagnosis/judgement of the state of the world then aesthetics becomes either (1) A plaything of reflexivity or (2) A form of ideological gloss that continues the status quo. In the first case, encapsulated by Conway’s description of “reflexivist post-critique”, aesthetics is apolitical or politically ineffective. In the second case, aesthetics hides the conservative “reformist” political stance of those deploying it, something reflected in Lorenzini and Tazzioli’s (2020: 33) claim that critique involves “constantly questioning the acceptability of current regimes of truth and engaging in transformative—and not solution-based—practices”.

It is on these fronts that most ire is directed at post-critique—where the judgement kicks back-in most forcefully. Not infrequently when I have presented my own work on torture prevention to critical academic audiences, for instance, the reaction is raised eyebrows, manifest disapproval, and a hushed *What the fuck? We are against surveillance, so why are you creating surveillance devices? We are against the very institution of the armed forces or the police, why on earth would you “engage” them at all? This all seems very amoral.* In his own discussion, for a direct example, Conway (2021: 20) describes the work that I have engaged in as involving “gainful complicity over more radical, comradely solidarity”. Now, I have always been puzzled by such sentiment because—in my own mind, and as discussed further below—there is no reason that systemic/structural critique and a desire for “liberatory change” cannot exist within the precepts of post-critique and criticality. Nonetheless, it is clear that what underlies this disquiet is that basic suspicion of political conservatism. A suspicion that one is being “complicit” (i.e. engaging-with) the powerful of the world because one—in the end—supports the continuation of the system they represent or—worse—that one usually gains direct benefits from it.



Naturally enough, the figures most associated with growing interest in post-criticality don't help this impression. No "revolutionary social change" will emerge from Château Bruno Latour, most assume.⁵ But things are more complicated than this. Consider Michel Foucault, at the core of European and North American critical IR, whose legacy is—indeed—often used to attack the very idea of post-critique (Lorenzini & Tazzioli, 2020). If so central to that school of thought, why—then—has he also been called a "postcritic" who was ahead of his time (Jensen, 2014)? Why does Conway (2021: 6) himself acknowledge that possibility? The straightforward answer is that the non-normative definition of critique that Foucault proffered seems to fit with the post-critical ethos of being non-judgemental about the state of the world.⁶ The classical critical scholar claims—however—that such a co-option of Foucault misses his focus on "desubjugation" in a transformatory sense, as mentioned earlier. In short: the post-critics simply have Foucault all wrong.

But do they? Lorenzini and Tazzioli (2020) argue that Foucault's political work on prisons demonstrate what critics should be doing to put critique into *transformatory* practice. They foreground Foucault's work with *l'Groupe d'information sur les prisons* (GIP), which disseminated the testimony of prisoners to the public, as representing a "movement of refusal" that sought not a reformist engagement with authorities but total abolition. However, the reality of Foucault's practical activities was rather different, and often at profound odds with his conceptual claims. For instance, in one interview, Foucault (in Jouet, 2021: 11) would say that "I think we need a full reform of the [penal] code, a profound reform. We need a new Beccaria". As Jouet (2021) has documented, Foucault proposed numerous legal remedies be introduced to improve prison conditions, praised Swedish and Japanese prisons, and supported elements of human rights discourse vis-à-vis refugees. All this involved proposing incremental reform and engaging with the powerful quite directly. Aware of this contradiction, Foucault (in Jouet, 2021: 11) would say:

I would like that no link be made between my theoretical work and my work for the [GIP]. I mean it. *But there is probably a link.*

So, was Foucault also "gainfully complicit" with the "national security state" (Conway, 2021: 12)? Clearly not. But seeing why, beyond an affective (and scholastically aesthetic) association of the name Foucault with radicalism, requires we turn back to the sociological. Reflecting on Foucault's work, Bourdieu (1996: 13–14) would write the following:

On rappelle toujours que Marx disait : « je ne suis pas marxiste ». Je crois que Foucault aurait dit volontiers : « Je ne suis pas foucauldien. » Il l'a même sans doute dit (ce qui ne veut pas dire qu'il ne souhaitait pas qu'il y ait des focal-

⁵ Bruno Latour has been accused of political conservatism consistently and his conceptual frameworks for encouraging such a conservatism analytically. Notably, not infrequently mention is made here of his social positionality and his family background in wine-making (Maison Louis Latour—but Château Latour sounds nicer here). The goal seems to be to ground the point personally.

⁶ Though I do not have the space to engage it here, there is a distinction between making a judgement and being judgemental.



diens). Il a fait des choses qui montrent qu'il voulait qu'il y eût des foucauldians. De sorte qu'on doit toujours soumettre les citations à la critique, en examiner le statut, la fonction, la véracité, la validité. On peut opposer une citation de Foucault à une autre non seulement parce que Foucault s'est contredit comme tout le monde, parce qu'il n'a pas dit la même chose au même moment, parce qu'il n'a pas dit la même chose aux mêmes personnes, selon les circonstances (ce qui ne veut pas dire qu'il ait menti ici ou là). Je rappelle souvent ce mot de Scholem : « Je ne dis pas la même chose aux juifs de New York, de Paris, de Berlin ou de Jérusalem et pourtant je ne mens j'amaï ». C'est important pour comprendre ce que c'est que de répondre à une interview, de gérer une œuvre, d'interpréter rétrospectivement ses propres écrits.

In this sociological reading of Foucault's apparent contradictions, it is clear that they derive simply from the multiplicity of his social being and the necessity of aesthetically, affectively, and pragmatically adjusting his words to particular audiences *in order precisely to advance his goals most fully*. To you—the reader of this journal—I might say one particular truth: “I wish for the abolition of the prison, as that is the only way in which torture will stop”. To the torturer, I might say: “I wish that this war would end and that you would work in better conditions, so all this could be different”. And to a delegate of the UN, I might say “here is a technological device that will help stop torture in certain circumstances, it's cheap, and is compatible with the pragmatic political needs of militaries”. Do these statements contradict each other? Or are they truths that connect, that gesture at a possible path towards the first statement, tactically rather than dogmatically?

Critique without such a sociological grounding is scholastic. It is not that we don't need *Discipline and Punish* and its radicalism but that we need *more* than it. It is here that one should make an admission. While I have insisted thus far on the aesthetic sensibilities of post-critique—its desire for allies built through resonance—it is clear that the term itself was an error. To turn back to the beginning, the assumption that many have made is that the *post-* in this term refers to a negation of critique, to a devaluing of its purpose, and a rejection of its necessity. This is a stylistic failure on the part of those advocating we consider aesthetics more carefully, myself included. But I wish to affirm that the post-critical understanding I embrace sees the necessity of critique as lying—indeed—in its capacity to allow us to judge the state of the world and “desubjugate” ourselves from impressions of its non-contingency. The only thing I question is what else might be needed once that has occurred in order to build those transversal allegiances and invoke change.

Let me try to sum this up in response to a question Conway (2021: 20) poses:

If designing torture-deterrence devices is “critically problem-solving” (Austin, 2019a: 998) then what is non-critical problem-solving?

A “critically problem-solving” approach requires a thread connecting judgement about the state of the world and critique into the conditions of possibility underlying that state directly to some form of problem-solving in the world. It is a pattern that connects critique, action, and transformation. It is reason and resonance, rationality and aesthetics, theory and practice. A non-critical problem-solving approach



neglects (usually) the first half of each of these three couplets. Translated, all of this can mean many things. But one is indeed a “pragmatic engagement with power” (Conway, 2021: 19). When grounded sociologically, it becomes self-evident that critique is not a form of magic. It requires we speak differently in different spaces, practice a kind of participant subversion, and not imagine that there is no need for tactics nor compromise, nor adjusting to circumstance. This necessarily includes speaking-to and working-with those who hold power. The controversy surrounding this reveals though, I think, a still lingering desire for political purity within critique. The instinctive disquiet to working within centres of power, even where a critical goal is declared, seems to me to be related not simply to the obvious risk of being “co-opted” by that activity but because any form of engagement is frequently seen as irredeemably polluting critical political ends. But politics *is* dirty. Always. And the allies we need are not only those we feel comfortable speaking and working with but those who hold power. “Comradely solidarity” is all well and good but why not make try to attract a few new comrades along the way? Those who might be able to do more than we could alone? Achieving this requires a change in mindset, a move away from the accusatory, and an embrace of profound discomfort.

But such a dirty political engagement poses one final difficulty: *can you trust me?* After all, “as regards a ‘fellow-traveller,’ the question always comes up—how far will he go” (Trotsky, 1924)? At its base, all of the above relies on this question: the reactions I have received for talking to torturers and working with technologists and other centres of power reveal a lack of faith in the possibility that I might be doing this for—yes—“critical” ends (i.e. some form of systemic change). What if I am just doing this with “gainful complicity” in mind? What if I have no “moral purpose”? There is no way of resolving that dilemma. It’s simply unknowable. But so too are the intentions of the more classical critical scholars of IR. A knowledge economy built around critique can be mined for plenty of gain. At the centre of post-criticality is thus also an injunction to inject our intellectual practice with greater trust, hope, and faithfulness. This doesn’t mean blind trust. One can always go looking for clues, hints at what’s really going on. After all, somebody was paying Marx’s bills, Dr. Frantz Omar Fanon of Blida Psychiatric Hospital in Algeria was not all he seemed to R- and his colleagues, and quite a few of Burgundy’s domaines fought actively with the French resistance.

Going on the offensive

We live in a time of anti-critique and anti-intellectualism. This is an extremely dangerous moment, as current events make self-evident, and Conway spells out. But what is our response to be? My fear is that we risk ourselves becoming reactionaries, defending a too-traditional understanding of critique, and what I would suggest is indeed an attempt to “police boundaries” (Conway, 2021: 19). It is clear indeed that the terms critique and critical have lost specificity, become rather free-floating. But why has that occurred? One reason is certainly the rise of knowledge economies that fetishize the terms, but—again—let us focus on the sociological status quo. Critique is in flux because world politics is in flux. As such, to return to an older form



of critique is to risk being left behind by politics. The goal of post-critique is to redesign critique to meet the demands of the day and—thereafter—for the term to disappear. For the moment, however, it represents many heterodox voices grappling with a need for change but possessing few specific answers.

Having said that, it seems to me that the movements Conway outlines—the reflexivist, the reformist, and the restitutive—are linked together by the logic I have outlined in this essay. The “reflexivists” engage the question of style and aesthetics most fully, offering different ways of attracting critical allies. The “reformists” engage with the dirty and pragmatic task of tactically shifting the boundaries of politics. They do so from within, seeking to both practically and analytically “fracture entrenched processes and structures” by foregrounding “the enchantments, creativity, and resonating fragments of transformation” that exist across social life but too many of which critique has often glossed-over (Huysmans in Salter et al., 2019: 15–16). Finally, the restitutive represents the final goal of desubjugation achieved through an unavoidable (post-critical) dialectic between affirmation and negation. As Conway notes, those latter figures have led the way here, while others (myself included) have arrived late, and circuitously. But is it a bad thing that others have now finally arrived? That an alliance across these approaches is possible? That the pattern might connect?

For all its talk of a non-judgemental aesthetics and political pragmatism, post-critique (for me) represents a desire to “go on the offensive” vis-à-vis the catastrophic times we inhabit. In this, it looks—for example—at *why* far-right reactionaries have yet again become so adept at gaining political power, including through direct engagement with critical theory (e.g. Drolet & Williams, 2021). But it does so not simply to lament that status quo or to defend the virtues of critique from their attacks, but to move towards the arduous task of injecting critique/criticality (of all kinds) with greater public-political resonance. In this view, the task is not a reasoned debunking of all the flaws in arguments of the reactionaries, showing precisely how they are “wrong” or are “lying” in one way or another, but contemplating why critical theorizing has become so poor at affectively attracting greater public engagement with its precepts.⁷ In this, there can be no defence of a particular understanding of critique but only a profound reckoning with the sociological status quo and an attempt to creatively re-order our praxis to meet its needs. Simply: critique must be made public again.

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⁷ As an aside, it would seem likely that this issue has been underexplored precisely because of the success of critique/criticality within *some* intellectual social spheres. But the success of critical theory in (some, far from all, of course) universities and intellectual disciplines, or particular social settings (Twitter vs. Facebook), does not translate – as Conway himself notes – into any kind of real socio-political power. The fact that academics in Copenhagen, Sussex, Aberystwyth, etc. have nurtured generations of good critical minds should not mislead us into thinking this is a more general fact of life. The challenge is to engage the public *tout court*.



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