# CRITIQUE BETWEEN KANT AND FOUCAULT

Zdravko Kobe
University of Ljubljana
zdravko.kobe@ff.uni-lj.si

Abstract: *With its widespread use, the concept of critique has become increasingly vague. Moreover, its eventual self-reflexivity has significantly raised the complexity of the relationship between critique and the system. To bring some strategic clarity to the concept of critique, the article first examines the uses of critique in Kant, who is largely responsible for the current fate of the term, especially in philosophy. Exploring the fact that in his later years Foucault paid some unexpected compliments to Kant and saw his own philosophical project in solidarity with Kant's, it then assesses Foucault's use of the term. This comparison, it is hoped, will reveal the methodological and institutional constraints of critique and illustrate the dangers of uncritical reference to critique.*

Keywords: *critique, system, complexity, self-reflexivity, reason, Enlightenment*

Critical thinking claims undivided support in contemporary discourse (often under the guise of lamenting its absence), to the point where it has begun to figure as the virtue in general.[1] With its widespread use, however, the notion of critique has also become increasingly vague. It is difficult to spell out what exactly it should consist in, what its internal and external conditions of possibility are, or why, in its radical version, it can make critique impossible. Moreover, by becoming self-reflexive, by taking itself as its object, critique confounds the relationship between critique and the system, and significantly increases the degree of its complexity. To shed some light on these issues, and to provide some strategic orientation in actual critical practice, I will first examine the concept of critique in Kant, who is largely responsible for the current fate of the term, especially in philosophy. Exploring the fact that the late Foucault paid some unexpected compliments to Kant and saw his own philosophical project in solidarity with Kant's, I will then examine Foucault's use of the term. This comparison will, I hope, reveal the methodological and institutional constraints of critique and illustrate the dangers of uncritical reference to critique.

## I

Kant is the author of the Three Critiques. His philosophy, officially known as transcendental idealism, is therefore also called "critical philosophy" or "criticism." But if we want to determine the exact meaning of this term in Kant, the task is, quite surprisingly, anything but simple. On a general level, Kant obviously understands his critique as an integral part of the Enlightenment project. In the footnote to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, he famously declares:

> Our age is the genuine age of *criticism* [der *Kritik*], to which everything must submit. *Religion* through its *holiness* and *legislation* through its majesty commonly seek to exempt themselves from it. But in this way they excite a just suspicion against themselves, and cannot lay claim to that unfeigned respect that reason grants only to that which has been able to withstand its free and public examination. (KrV, A xi)[2]

If in the past it was sufficient to invoke tradition or divine origin, if the existing power did not even feel the need to explain its authority, the Enlightenment brought about an irrevocable change. Since then, only that which can be justified by universally valid reasons can expect our recognition. In this sense, critique or criticism is simply a name for the emblematic

1 This contribution is a result of the research work conducted within the research projects "Hegel's Political Metaphysics" (J6-2590) and "The Common between Substance and Subject" (J6-50209) and the research program "Philosophical Investigations" (P6-0252), all funded by ARIS, the Slovenian Research Agency.

2 All references to the *Critique of Pure Reason* [KrV] are to the A and B pagination of the first and second editions. All other references to Kant are to the volume and page of *Kant's Gesammelte Schriften*, 29 vols., ed. Königlich-Preußische Akademie der Wissenschaften [AA] (Berlin: de Gruyter,1900ff.). English translations generally follow those of the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992-2012).

"enlightened" procedure of assessing the well-groundedness of any possible claim before the "tribunal of reason." And while this kind of trial usually deals with an external object, Kant's peculiarity is that, in his case, it is reason itself that finally submits itself to such rational critique.

According to Kant, this extension is natural. If we look at the "peculiar fate" that human reason has in one species of its cognition, that is, in metaphysics, we can observe that, in a striking contrast to the natural sciences, reason has not made any progress for centuries, but remains entangled in insoluble controversies. Such a situation then naturally leads to indifferentism, "the mother of chaos and night in the sciences," but fortunately it can also be an incentive. The crisis can serve as a *call to reason* that it

> should take on anew the most difficult of all its tasks, namely, that of self-knowledge, and to institute the court of justice, by which reason may secure its rightful claims while dismissing all its groundless pretensions, and this not by mere decrees but according to its own eternal and unchangeable laws; and this is none other than the *critique of pure reason* itself. (KrV, A xi-xii)

In this sense, Kant's critique is simply a radicalization of that characteristic Enlightenment gesture in which reason finally subjects to critical evaluation its own procedures and aspirations. Such a self-reflexive project must understandably respond to some highly complex methodological challenges. If reason is to submit *itself* to critique, the question arises as to where the instruments and criteria of such critical evaluation should be taken from, since rational criteria are supposed to be the object of critique and cannot be assumed beforehand. This gave rise to the so-called *meta-critical objection* to Kant's critical procedure,[3] and partly also triggered the first step beyond Kant's own presentation of his philosophy. Indeed, it can be convincingly argued that Kant did not pay enough attention to this problem and that, especially in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, he often uncritically assumed the validity of the distinctions made by reason. But if we set this consideration aside, we obtain a paradigmatic Kantian division of philosophy into dogmatism and criticism. In its self-confidence, traditional dogmatic philosophy starts to cognize without much ado and is consequently, with well-known implications, bound to overstep the limits of possible cognition. Kant's critical philosophy, on the other hand, first cautiously examines the conditions of possibility of cognition itself. This does not mean that it must remain forever enclosed in this middle space, which would make critical philosophy merely an antechamber of the science and not the science itself. According to Kant, critique is only the first, preparatory step on the path of cognition, which then naturally leads to the establishment of a "dogmatic" system of pure reason (and Kant observes that, after this preparatory critical phase, that is, in the

---

3 The first to formulate these objections seems to have been Hamann; see Beiser (1987).

construction of the system of metaphysics, "we will have to follow the strict method of the famous Wolff, the greatest among all dogmatic philosophers" [KrV, B xxxvi]). Indeed, it is precisely critique that, by examining the conditions of possibility, enables metaphysics to become "dogmatic," that is, to "enter upon the secure course of a science" (KrV, B viii).

Such would be the basic idea of Kant's critique and critical philosophy as presented in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. The problem is that after the publication of the first Critique, this idea began to lose its edge. In fact, everything suggests that the other two Critiques were not part of Kant's original project and are hardly critical in the same sense. In the first Critique, for example, Kant argued strongly for the inability of pure speculative reason to attain true cognition; in the second Critique, however, he "dogmatically" asserts that pure reason *is* capable of producing a moral deed, that it proves its reality by a deed, and that, consequently, "it has no need to criticize the *pure faculty itself* in order to see whether reason is merely making a claim in which it presumptuously *oversteps* itself" (AA 5: 3). This self-confidence is actually strange in itself, since reason has often been questioned in its ability to provide a sufficient foundation for moral obligations, and since it has been generally accepted that precisely in the realm of action there are genuine dilemmas that cannot be resolved univocally, at least not by reason alone. Thus, while in the first Critique Kant famously implanted "a natural and unavoidable illusion" (KrV, A 298/B 354) in the very heart of reason, in the second Critique he proceeds as if, in the sphere of practical reason, there was no natural dialectic, and no genuine moral conflict was possible. To make the situation even more perplexing, Kant also admits that one cannot affirm with absolute certainty that there has been a single deed in the entire history of mankind that was moral. Similarly, in the third Critique Kant does not present, for instance, a preliminary investigation of the possibility of aesthetic judgement, but rather attempts to show how, as in the case of the faculties of cognition and desire, the power of judgment also has its "constitutive principles a priori" (AA 5: 168).

It is thus apparent that both the scope and the execution of critique evolved significantly from the first to the third Critique. Moreover, it also seems that Kant gradually departed from his early conception of critique as opposed to doctrine. According to Kant's initial account, the task of the critical enterprise was to lay firm foundations for the system of metaphysics that was supposed to follow. The *First Principles of the Philosophy of Nature* can be seen as a part of this original project. However, as the number of Critiques increased and the promised system grew more distant, Kant tended to present his three Critiques as something that *already constituted the system* of critical philosophy. The most explicit statement to this effect can be found in his late public declaration against Fichte, where he basically affirms that his critical works are by no means "only a *propaedeutic* to transcendental philosophy" but constitute "the actual system of this philosophy" (AA 12: 370-371). If "critique" and "system" were once mutually exclusive terms, Kant now explicitly

speaks of "das System der Critik" (AA 12: 371).[4] For this reason, some have accused Kant of "usurping the concept of critique" (see Röttgers, 1975, p. 59).

The fluctuations and hesitations indicated above strongly suggest that Kant did not use a unified concept of critique; rather, this concept was composed of various layers coming from quite different sources. A prominent place among them was undoubtedly occupied by the general current of Enlightenment, which conceived of critique as a tribunal of reason that judges the well-foundedness of any claim. Understood in this sense, critique is a project whose origins can be traced back at least to the late medieval treatises on logic, which later found wider acceptance with Pierre Bayle and his *Dictionnaire historique et critique*.[5] But while this logico-political line of thought clearly constitutes the general framework of Kant's entire philosophy, his concept of critique cannot be reduced to it. To better understand its inner composition it is necessary, as is often the case with Kant, to consider the specific conceptual and historical circumstances in which it was formed. In this perspective, two additional currents emerge, one related to the so-called *Schulmetaphysik* and the other to aesthetic considerations.

School metaphysics may seem an unlikely influence, since Kant developed his critical project precisely against the dogmatism exemplified by Leibniz-Wolffian metaphysics. It must be remembered, however, that throughout his academic career Kant used Baumgarten's manuals for his lectures, and when he reached a conceptual impasse, he typically sought a way out by quoting Baumgarten's definitions. To this extent, one can hardly overestimate the presence of dogmatic motifs in Kant's critical philosophy. For our purposes, it is of particular importance that school metaphysics considered the predicates of being according to the possibility of being, that is, in relation to itself, with respect to its essence. Metaphysics did not deal with the existence of things—this was the task of the empirical sciences—but considered them primarily in their possibility.

---

4 In her book *Kant's Reform of Metaphysics*, De Boer meticulously argues that, while "Kant never carried out his plan" to publish a comprehensive metaphysical system, he also never abandoned it (De Boer 2020: 4). As for the Declaration against Fichte, De Boer proposes a deflationary reading of the key passage that would be consistent with maintaining the original project. In my view, however, her alternative interpretation, ingenious as it is, remains inconclusive. First, Kant's wording effectively speaks against the proposed reading, since he cites a non-existent claim from the first Critique, which only reinforces the suspicion that he has confused the Critique with the system. Second, in the very declaration, Kant uses the phrase "system of critique" to refer to the metaphysical system, implying that it had already been achieved. Third, and most importantly, in his challenge that provoked Kant's response, Schlettwein explicitly referred to Kant's presented system, not a projected one: "*Kant* is the first *teacher* of the transcendental philosophy and Reinhold the most accurate popularizer of the critical teaching; but the first *transcendental philosopher* as such is undoubtedly *Fichte*. *Fichte* has realized the plan presented in the Critique and systematically executed the *transcendental idealism* indicated by *Kant*" (AA 13: 542-543). Since Kant insists that it was he, not Fichte, who first delivered the system of transcendental philosophy, this can only mean that he considers the three Critiques to be the system itself.

5 For an overview of the uses of this concept prior to Kant, see Röttgers (1975) and Tonelli (1978).

This structural *priority of possibility over actuality* in my view deeply marked Kant's habits of thought. It is exemplified, for instance, in his pre-critical work on *The Only Possible Argument in Support of a Demonstration of the Existence of God*, in which he attempts to prove God's necessary existence from the conditions that make any possibility possible. Kant begins his novel argument by acknowledging that it is possible that nothing is actual; the mere non-existence of the world would not have implied any contradiction. What is impossible, though, is that nothing is possible. However, this necessary possibility has its own conditions of possibility, Kant further observes. On the one hand, there is the *formal* or *logical* element of possibility, according to which what is thought must not be in contradiction. But we must also consider that for this formal possibility to be possible something must be *given* in order to be thinkable in the first place. This then constitutes the *material* or *real* element of possibility, *das Reale der Möglichkeit*, which in turn implies something actual. "As a consequence," Kant argues, "it is absolutely impossible that nothing at all should exists" (AA 2: 78), which ultimately leads to the existence of something we call God. Since its non-existence would cancel the material conditions of possibility, and nothing at all would be possible, it is necessary that God exists.

A similar argument, deriving from the necessary conditions of the possibility of an accepted fact, appears later in Kant's dissertation *On the Form and Principles of the Sensible and Intelligible World*. In this work, which traditionally serves as the demarcation line between the precritical and critical periods, Kant presents his new theory of space and time, but also tries to answer the vexing metaphysical question of *how substances can interact*, that is, how a predicate of one substance can ground a predicate in another substance.[6] The problem arises from the fact that substance is inherently something independent, which requires nothing else for its existence. It is self-contained and self-sufficient; therein lies its conceptual function. As such, it essentially constitutes a world of its own. As there is nothing in it that would bring different substances into contact or serve as a means of continuity, it seems rather that there *can be no community* among substances. In any event, the possibility of such interaction is not given by the mere existence of substances, Kant argues, "but something else is required in addition, by means of which their reciprocal relation may be understood" (AA 2: 407). For this reason, Kant also decisively rejects the theory of physical influx, according to which one substance causally influences the state of another:

> And it is in this, indeed, that the πρωτον ψευδος of the theory of physical influence, in the vulgar sense of this term, consists. It rashly assumes, namely, that there is an interaction of substances and transeunt forces, which can be cognised by their existence alone. Accordingly, it is not so much a system as indifference to all philosophical system. (AA 2: 407)

6 For an excellent account of the extremely rich debate on the metaphysics of substance in the eighteenth century, and Kant's place in it, see Watkins (2005), especially Part I.

Kant does not dispute the claim that one substance physically, through mechanical causality, affects the state of another substance. This may well be empirically true. But it is not an explanation. The real question is rather how something like that is possible at all. In Kant's view, this preliminary question is imperative not only because it is the proper task of philosophy to seek a rational explanation; it is also necessary because by satisfying ourselves with a mere description, we may overlook something the presence of which is not explicit in the fact itself, yet necessarily belongs to it and can therefore affect the validity and the scope of the conclusions drawn on its basis.[7] At the same time, Kant obviously expects that such a preliminary examination of the principles of possibility of a given fact can yield a *non-trivial surplus* over the fact itself. His wager is that by asking how a given fact is possible in the first place, we can find out that the fact in question is not given alone, but that something else is always given with it—something that is not immediately obvious, yet nonetheless must be included in its comprehensive explanation to make it possible. In the case of finite intelligible substances, Kant argues, what makes their community possible can only come from their common origin, that is, from the fact that they are all produced by the same infinite substance. In the case of sensible substances, on the other hand, their ability to interact with one another should come from their being located in the same space (which in turn must be related to a common ground in the subject of cognition). In both cases, the question of the conditions of possibility of a certain fact unravels a specific determination, more precisely, a specific form, which concerns not merely the fact itself, but the entire world in which it is situated. In this way, Kant claimed to obtain a genuine, universally valid knowledge of sensible and intelligible worlds.[8]

Another layer of Kant's conception of critique concerns the argumentative field of the *judgment of beauty*.[9] The term "critique of reason" actually appears for the first time in this context, in the *Announcement of his Lectures for the Winter Semester 1765–1766*. There Kant states that

---

7 A similar argument can be found in Kant's treatment of error, which he claimed must also have its conditions of possibility. "This does not mean to philosophize, if one solely seeks to establish that something is a delusion, a deception of the understanding, but rather one must also learn to have insight into how such a deception would be possible" (R 3706, 1760-64?; AA 17: 242). The problem of error can be traced back to the very beginning of Kant's philosophical career. In his first published work on the *True Estimation of the Living Forces*, he praised "the method of Mr. Mairan" and blamed the lack of this method for the fact that so many "evident errors had remained hidden for so long" (AA 1: 95). In each case of reasoning, Kant argues, Mr. Mairan's method allows one to decide "whether the nature of the premises really contains everything that the doctrines that are drawn as conclusions require. This happens when one precisely notes the determinations adhering to the nature of the conclusions and carefully examines whether, in constructing a proof, one has selected only those principles that are restricted to the specific determinations contained in the conclusion. If one does not find this to be so, then one can safely believe only that the arguments, which are thus flawed, prove nothing, even if one has not yet been able to discover where the mistake is actually located" (AA 1: 93).

8 In essence, Kant maintains that a fact is not a simple category, but implies a broader, materially relevant framework of conditions that must be taken into account in order to explain it. A singular fact has non-trivial universal implications. This would be Kant's critique of the *Myth of the Given*.

9 On the role of the aesthetic topics in the genesis of Kant's critical philosophy, see Tonelli (1955), Domouchel (1999), and Rodrígez (2010).

> the very close relationship of the materials under consideration leads us at the same time, in the *critique of reason*, to pay some attention to the *critique of taste*, that is to say, *aesthetics*. (AA 2: 311)

The use of the term "critique" in connection with the evaluation of beauty was quite common in this period. Of particular importance, at least for Kant, seems to be in this respect Home, whose *Elements of Criticism* had recently been translated into German.[10] It is quite another matter, however, how Kant can speak of a "very close relationship" between the critique of reason and the critique of taste, and how "the rules of the one at all times serve to elucidate the rules of the other" (AA 2: 311). In order to understand this comparison, it is necessary to bear in mind that in this period Kant basically distinguished two types of human knowledge, depending on whether the cognition of rules makes their correct use possible or whether, vice versa, it is the use of rules that makes their cognition possible. The former is the case, for instance, with logic or morality, the rules of which are therefore objectively valid, while the latter applies to "grammar" and especially to aesthetics, the laws of which are accordingly only of subjective validity. The disciplines of the first field of knowledge can be dogmatic, Kant explains, while in the other field only *critique* is possible. And since Kant at that time defended a pragmatic theory of truth, according to which the fundamental metaphysical concepts have only subjective validity (they are "neither true nor false," as they do not refer to objects at all [see R 3977, 1769; AA 17: 373]), *metaphysics* was equally relegated by Kant to this other sphere of knowledge:

> Metaphysics is the critique of human reason, logic is the general doctrine thereof; the former is subjective and problematic, the latter entirely objective and dogmatic. (R 3970, 1769; AA 17: 370)

In 1769, in short, in the year that gave him "a great light," Kant conceived of metaphysics as a science that deals with the subjective "laws of pure human reason" (R 3952, 1769; AA 17: 362) according to which "it actually proceeds" (R 3939, 1769; AA 17: 356), so that from this investigation "only a science of the subject can arise" (R 3948, 1769; AA 17: 361). As in the case of aesthetics, this by no means implies that the basic metaphysical concepts and rules are arbitrary. After all, both Home and Kant wanted to make the doctrine of beauty into a serious science. It does mean, however, that in order to identify the rules of aesthetics—and the same is true of metaphysics—one must carefully examine human nature, observe the laws according to which men actually act, evaluate the cases in which they declare some-

10 Home's main concern in this book is that "the fine arts, like morals, become a rational science" (Home, 1785, p. 7). To achieve this goal, he plans "to ascend gradually to principles, form facts and experiments; instead of beginning with the former, handled abstractly, and descending to the latter". His project can thus be described as "to exhibit the general principles" of the fine arts, "drawn from human nature, the true source of criticism" (Home, 1785, p. 13).

thing to be beautiful or form a judgment of experience. It is only by examining particular cases and actual applications of the notions in question that the "universal" laws of aesthetics and metaphysics can be formulated. It is in this sense that Kant declared at the time that metaphysics is possible only as a critique of human reason.

In general, we can say that Kant developed his notion of critique within the general Enlightenment project of subjecting authoritative claims to the judgment of reason. What was particular to Kant was, on the one hand, his attachment to the school metaphysical tradition, which insisted on the conditions of possibility, and, on the other, his receptivity to a novel line of inquiry, which sought to extract laws of reason from the study of human nature and its factual rules. These elements are admittedly quite heterogeneous and their mixture unstable. In Kant's actual practice of critique, we can thus observe various temporary conjunctions taking shape.[11] In the end, however, he remained a philosopher of the Enlightenment and stopped short of questioning the *validity* of reason as such.

## II

Following Kant, critique established itself as a major attitude of thought. Even philosophers who were in many respects antipodal to Kant felt obliged to claim the legacy of critique. For instance, the philosophical journal jointly edited by Schelling and Hegel in Jena bore the title *Critical Journal of Philosophy*. In a similar vein, the Hegelian method can be understood as an attempt to solve the meta-critical problem that Kant was unable to address properly, and to carry out the critical project without having to presuppose any pregiven criteria as exempt from critique.[12] Indeed, given that, according to Hegel, every philosophical position generates its own objections against itself, and that in this way the presentation of the system coincides with its *immanent critique*, Hegel's entire philosophy can be described as a system of critique—as a critical stance that has grown into a system. From this point of view, it is only logical that Marx, a Hegelian philosopher if there ever was one, called one of his key projects A *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. The critical theory of society is merely an extension of this fundamental stance, both Hegelian and Marxist, to subject everything, including one's own position of enunciation, to immanent critique.

But if this critical lineage from Kant to Marx, from Hegel to Horkheimer, seems quite natural, it must come as a surprise that the late Foucault, too, paid some unexpected compliments to Kant and saw his own philosophical project in solidarity with Kant's. (*Kant et*

---

11 In his political writings, for instance, Kant insists on the inherent publicity of reason and the extended mode of thinking, which seems to imply a combination of the first and third currents in the notion of critique. In the first Critique, a different coalition is formed, especially in its positive part, since there Kant raises the question of the possibility of experience and attempts to justify its synthetic judgments a priori with the necessary laws that govern the operations of the human faculty of cognition. But in contrast to the evaluation of beauty in the third Critique, here Kant treats reason as something independent, and its rules as self-evident.

12 For a more detailed presentation of the argument, see Hindrichs (2009).

*Foucault – le même combat?*) It is true that in his early years Foucault studied Kant's anthropology (along with Soviet psychology). But for the most part of his philosophical career, he regarded Kant—along with Hegel, Marx and Sartre—as one of his favorite enemies. In *The Order of Things* (1966), he described Kant as the founding father of the modern episteme, which placed the human subject, a "strange empirico-transcendnetal doublet," at the center of all knowledge (see Foucault, 2002, p. 347). While this may have made perfect sense in its time, Foucault argued, in the twentieth century it was superseded by a new, structuralist paradigm, which no longer requires the figure of the subject. In this sense, Kant, and philosophy in general, is a thing of the past, which needs no confrontation; it is enough to look at the calendar. Thus, when Foucault celebrated the death of man at the end of the book, he also buried Kant.

Similarly, some ten years later, in October 1977, after Foucault had overcome his structuralist phase, he gave a remarkable interview in which he declared the revolution over and said that "everything that this socialist tradition has produced in history is to be condemned" (Foucault, 2001b, p. 398). Admittedly, Kant can hardly be accused of being a socialist thinker. It may therefore seem that this time Foucault's condemnation of socialism spares Kant. In Foucault's view, however, socialism is a natural manifestation of the authoritarian discourse that is intrinsically linked to modern knowledge. And since modern knowledge is ultimately grounded in reason, behind the attack on socialism there is a clear denunciation of the repressive violence of reason. The title of the above-mentioned interview given to a German magazine is consequently apt: *Folter, das ist die Vernunft*. Reason is torture, and torture is what reason is! Given that Kant is commonly associated with reason, even pure reason, and that he tried, for example, to ground unconditional moral duties in reason alone, it seems that by accusing reason of being inherently repressive, Foucault had to condemn Kant as well. If reason is torture, then pure reason is pure torture.

So how could Foucault just one year later declare himself a critical philosopher in the tradition of Kant? The answer, of course, is that for Foucault there are two different lines of thought in Kant. When he praises Kant, he is characteristically not referring to the mainstream Kant of the three Critiques, but to the "marginal" texts, often related to immediate political conjectures. In this respect, it was especially Kant's definition of the Enlightenment as "*the human being's emergence from his self-incurred minority*" (AA 8: 35), together with the corresponding call to find the "courage to make use of your *own* understanding," that resonated with Foucault. He later stressed that Kant was the first to define philosophy in relation to the actual, considered not in teleological terms, as a point of transition to some final goal, but rather in its openness, contingency, incompleteness. Kant described the task of philosophy as a diagnosis of what is, as an intervention in the present. Perhaps, observes Foucault, we can say that "modern philosophy is the philosophy that is attempting to answer the question raised so imprudently two centuries ago: *Was ist Aufklärung?*" (Foucault, 1997, p. 102) In Foucault's view, Kant's definition further has the merit of emphasizing that eman-

cipation, but also the very act of thinking, requires personal engagement. Thinking is not something instrumental, which takes place outside the subject and leaves her intact. Rather, it involves her personally and is bound to affect, even transform her.

Foucault was particularly attracted to this anti-authoritarian, first-person, risky, transformative aspect of the concept of thinking, which he believed to have found in Kant. For this reason, he used the Kantian term of critique not to refer to his three Critiques, but to *this* Enlightenment attitude of thinking,[13] which he called a *virtue in general* and proposed the following definition: critique is "the art of not being governed quite so much" (Foucault, 1997, p. 37). It is the stance of not to be governed—at least not in *this way*, according to *these principles*, and at *this* cost. Critique is the art of "voluntary inservitude," of "reflected indocility." According to Foucault, this was also the fundamental attitude and the ultimate origin of Kant's own critical project. For we must remember, he argues, that Kant thought in an age marked by the emergence of science as a new instrument of social regulation. Consequently, his critical attitude, as the art of not being governed in this way, was bound to turn first against this conceited reason, to question it, to restrain it, to place it within certain boundaries.[14] Kant's critique was essentially a revolt against the domination of reason, and the fact that this revolt took the form of a critique of reason *by reason* was a mere historical accident.[15] So, indeed, Foucault seems to be saying: *Kant y Foucault – la misma lucha!*

There is a problem, though. It is not that Kant did not recognize the intimate connection between knowledge and power—we will see the opposite to be the case. The problem is rather that for Kant emancipation can only take place in the space of reason, whereas for Foucault reason and revolt are not intrinsically linked, and if anything, are rather opposed to each other. This emerged clearly in the above-mentioned lecture on critique at the French Philosophical Society in May 1978. In the discussion that followed, Jean-Louis Bruch, a Kantian, drew Foucault's attention to a certain ambiguity in his formulations and asked how this attitude of not wanting to be governed was to be understood: As something "absolute" or "relative," and if the latter was the case, by what criteria should we justify it as virtuous? It is very significant, I think, that Foucault evaded the question, claiming that he did not consider this will as an "originary aspiration," and that he was not referring to "something that would be a fundamental anarchism." But he also conceded that this might be his position after all. "I did not say it, but this does not mean that I absolutely exclude it" (Foucault, 1997,

---

13 "What Kant was describing as the *Aufklärung* is very much what I was trying before to describe as critique" (Foucault, 1997, p. 34).

14 "I think it would be easy to show that for Kant himself, this true courage to know which was put forward by the *Aufklärung*, this same courage to know involved recognizing the limits of knowledge" (Foucault, 1977, p. 35–36).

15 For historical reasons related to the attachment of universities to the *Wissenschaft* and state structures, "this suspicion that something in rationalization and maybe even in reason itself is responsible for excesses of power" (Foucault, 1997, p. 38), was particularly well developed in Germany, Foucault maintained.

p. 73).[16] And to cut a long story short, I think that this was indeed his position! We must remember that one of the leading slogans of the Maoists reads: *On a toujours raison de se révolter!*[17] It is always right to revolt, there is always a reason to do so. However, by presenting revolt as a fundamental ontological fact, this affirmation, instead of bringing revolt and thought together, ends up dissociating them. For if revolt is always right and justified, there is no need to look for reasons, revolt alone is enough. I revolt, therefore I am right! Indeed, the very effort to look for reasons can be taken as a sign that the revolt is not radical enough, that it is still under the oppressive spell of reason.[18] So if there is a relationship between the two, it is revolt that grounds reason, not the other way around.

Such a conception, however, reveals itself as voluntarism and ultimately leads to a dead end.[19] For once revolt is separated from reason, we are no longer allowed to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate, between right and wrong revolts. Even the revolt of Trump supporters against the 2020 presidential election results was then right, as indeed they did revolt. If we are unwilling or unable, at least in principle, to justify our struggle as just, that is, as a particular instance of universal justice, then it becomes a mere relation of force and is bound to be waged in isolation, since apart from purely tactical considerations, there is no common ground on which to build a common cause. How to create solidarity if not by inscribing the particular struggle into the space of the universal? In his *Radical*

16 Butler is one of the few to notice Foucault's evasiveness: "'I did not say it,' he remarks, after coming quite close to saying it, after showing us how he almost said it" (Butler, 2004, p. 317). However, instead of pressing him on this point, Butler ends up by praising Foucault precisely for his insistence on such an unfounded position: "Foucault's gesture is oddly brave, I would suggest, for it knows that it cannot ground the claim of original freedom. ... He braves it anyway, and so his mention, his insistence, becomes an allegory for a certain risk-taking that happens at the limit of the epistemological field" (Butler, 2004, p.318).

17 Such was also the title of a series of conversations between Philippe Gavi, Pierre Victor, and Jean-Paul Sartre (see Gavi, Sartre & Victor, 1974). Foucault did not participate in this conversation. However, in his debate on popular justice, he went even further than Victor, the leading figure of French Maoism. It is therefore safe to assume that he subscribed to the motto.

18 As noted above, Foucault could at times prove even more radical than the French Maoists. In a 1972 debate, he fervently rejected the idea of a people's court, claiming that it would continue to reproduce the bourgeois model of truth, weighing reasons pro and contra; as an example of popular justice, he instead proposed the massacres of September 1972. See "Sur la justice populaire: Débat avec les maos" (Foucault, 2001a, pp. 1208-1237).

19 Butler and Lemke, to name two prominent Foucault scholars, both acknowledge the danger of voluntarism, or irrationality, in Foucault's conception of critique (see Butler, 2004, p. 312; Lemke, 2019, p. 281). Both also emphasize that he did not reject reason as such, but only a certain conception of reason, understood as a source of universal pre-given laws, which are then applied outwardly to singular instances. Contrary to such a conception, they argue, Foucault wanted to conduct his critical practice proceeding from of a concrete situation, without imposing any binding rules on others. "In order to recognize that discriminating against minorities or exploring workers is 'wrong' or 'unjust', no theory is required" (Lemke, 2019, p. 283). Lemke admits, however, that Foucault's understanding of the relationship between theory and critique "contains points of difficulty and weakness": "If we simply accept the norms that are implied in certain struggles, what guarantees that these norms are 'more just' or 'better' than those they combat? How do the conflicting norms admit comparison?" In the end, Lemke concludes, "these problems undoubtedly remain unresolved in Foucault's work" (Lemke, 2019, p. 285).

*Enlightenment*, Omri Boehm describes Martin Luther King's reaction when his close allies advised him not to support the Vietnam peace movement, because it might harm their struggle for black liberation.[20] To this, Martin Luther King replied, bitterly: Can't you see that we are fighting for our rights on the same ground as we are fighting against the war in Vietnam? If we withdraw our support for the peace movement, we show that our struggle has nothing to do with justice but is fought only to promote our particular interests. And in that we would be like our oppressors, King concluded. Emancipation is only possible in the space of the universal, the space of reason.

Kant knew this. For him, critique is first and foremost a critique of reason, in the sense that it is conducted on rational grounds. But precisely because reason has a universal scope, it can also turn its critical stance against itself and become a critique of reason. This is not to say that Kant was unaware of the oppressive effects that can be associated with rational thought. Since he was personally acquainted with some of the early critics of reason, such as Hamann, who emphasized the inability of reason to grasp the individual in her uniqueness, we can safely assume that he was aware of the structural connection between reason and power. Moreover, he knew that there are certain institutional conditions that make free public use of reason possible in the first place. This is why, I think, he quoted Frederick II: "*Argue* as much as you will and about whatever you will *but obey*!" (AA 8: 37). The point is that free public use of reason and a willing submission to state power structures, including the army, by no means contradict each other, but the latter makes the former possible. So, yes, Kant does acknowledge that reason is related to power and can well have oppressive effects. But it would be a mistake for this reason to reject reason, because reason also constitutes the only place that makes emancipation possible. Instead of rejecting it, we should rather use it to the end, and in our case this means turning it against itself. This is the Kantian idea of critique. And I think Kant was right, not Foucault.

## III

Our engagement with Foucault's conception of critique has exposed the danger of its arbitrariness and the strategic impasse it leads to. The danger in question, we might add, is perfectly illustrated by Foucault's own theoretical practice, and by the reception it still tends to enjoy in the allegedly progressive academic community. A brief examination of Foucault's professional career would show that he supported *tout et le contraire* on virtually anything: He was a structuralist and a Maoist; a follower of Marx and an anti-Marxist; an anti-humanist and a promoter of the *Nouveaux Philosophes*; a member of the commission that drafted the university reforms that led to the events of May '68 and an active member of the student protests after May '68; a professor at the most prestigious academic institution in France at the age of 44, with excellent connections to the elites in power, and an intellectual

20 For a closer examination, see Boehm (2022, p. 69ff.).

with a strong flair for subversion; etc. But for our present purposes, let us take a convenient example from the same period as the above lecture on critique.

In a course given at the *Collège de France* in January 1979, Foucault came to discuss the Marxist theory of the state and the eventual socialist governmentality. With regard to the former, he stated that he did not want to get involved in the question of whether there was a Marxist theory of the state or not, since he was not a Marxist. But as for the latter, he thought that, alas, there is no "autonomous socialist governmentality": "There is no governmental rationality of socialism" (Foucault, 2008, p. 92)—the existing socialist systems being either a version of the police state, as in the Soviet Union, or a modification of capitalism, as in the welfare states. This statement, however, is strange. Not only does Foucault use a general formulation that he otherwise criticizes, but he is also positively wrong. Foucault happened to overlook the Yugoslav "system of workers self-management," which, in its mixture of one-party and non-party political systems with strong elements of economic democracy, was clearly not reducible to either a police state or a welfare state. Given that only a few years ago an original attempt to build socialism had ended in bloodshed, it is all the more striking that Foucault also ignored the "Chilean road to socialism." This was, after all, one of the most resounding political events of the time, especially on the left. And yet, as far as I know, Foucault never mentioned Allende or the Chilean socialist project in his entire published work!

Upon closer examination, Foucault's silence takes on an even more startling outlook. The Chilean road was unique in that the Allende government chose to build socialism by relying on the existing institutions and democratic procedures, that is, without a violent revolution. In a world first, it also designed an extremely ambitious data processing system called Cybersyn, which would allow for real-time control of the economy without direct interference in economic decisions made at the lower levels.[21] Foucault, who was particularly interested in the micro-physics of power, should have been fascinated by this prospect of a digitally managed planned socialism. He was not. The statement that there is no autonomous socialist governmentality no longer looks like an accidental omission when one takes into account that the real subject of Foucault's lectures that year was a rather interesting new social model called neoliberalism.[22] Commentators tend to praise Foucault's perspicacity for having noticed it before it became reality. In doing so, however, they overlook the fact that at the time neoliberalism was already a terrible reality in Chile. For after Pinochet seized power, he invited the "Chicago boys" to carry out the first neoliberal experiment in the world. In discussing neoliberalism, Chile should therefore have been a perfect reference point.

How come, then, that Foucault does not mention Chile? Was it too distant from his immediate theoretical and practical concerns? Was it beyond the horizon of a professor at

21 See Cockshott & Cottrell (1993) for a detailed presentation of this fascinating project.

22 For a more detailed discussion of Foucault's engagement with neoliberalism, see Kobe (2019).

the *Collège de France*? In fact, the opposite was the case! After the coup d'état of September 11, 1973, *Le Figaro*, a conservative French newspaper, published an editorial expressing the hope that Mitterand would now be able to see for himself where such experiments were leading. To understand how *Le Figaro* could draw an explicit comparison between the political situations in Chile and France, we have to remember that in Chile Allende came to power with a left-wing electoral coalition called *Unidad Popular,* formed by the Socialist and Communist parties. At about the same time, a similar development took place in France. In 1972, after a long history of bickering and infighting typical of the left, the *Socialist Party* under Mitterand and the *French Communist Party* under Marchais signed the so-called *Programme commun*, which served as a basis for the electoral coalition *Union de la gauche*. There was therefore a clear prospect that in France, as in Chile, left-wing parties could win the elections and form a government. Yet, in what is now difficult to understand, not only the conservative right but also the intellectual left, especially the progressive, post-May '68, anti-authoritarian left, including Foucault, tended to *oppose* the Union of the Left![23]

We can therefore safely assume that Chile was very much on Foucault's mind, and that the omission of the Chilean socialist experiment in his lectures on neoliberalism was no accident; it was deliberate theoretical sabotage.[24]

The story may illustrate the inherent dangers of a voluntaristic conception of critique, such as the one in Foucault. It can also help us understand where the present ideological, political, and theoretical confusion on the left comes from, and why, especially in academia, so many allegedly progressive intellectuals can wake up one fine day and find themselves supporting the party of order.

---

23 The whole story is meticulously presented and documented in Christofferson (2004). In the case of Foucault, one must also take into account his deep-seated anti-communism. "After he quit the Communist Party [1953?], and especially since he lived in Poland [1958–1959], Foucault developed a ferocious hatred of everything that evokes communism, directly or indirectly" (Eribon, 1989, p.162).

24 There is no direct reference to the Chilean socialist experiment in Foucault's writings. However, there is at least one indirect report. In 1975, Antonio García Sánchez, a Chilean sociologist and syndicate activist exiled in Germany, paid a visit to Foucault in the hope of winning him for the cause of Chilean people. Foucault allegedly replied: "No culpe a Pinochet, que no ha hecho más que cumplir con su deber y hacer lo que le correspondía. Culpe a los comunistas, a sus compañeros del MIR, a los socialistas chilenos y a usted mismo, que empujaron a sus compatriotas al peor de los abismos: el abismo del castrocomunismo. Los culpables por esta tragedia no son los militares ni la derecha: son ustedes, los marxistas chilenos" (https://es.panampost.com/antonio-sanchez/2020/03/14/pinochet-chile/). A somewhat less compromising version of the conversation can be found in Sánchez (2003, p. 234ff.).

**References**

Beiser, Frederick C. (1987). *The Fate of Reason. German Philosophy form Kant to Fichte.* Cambridge (Mass.) & London: Harvard UP.

Boehm, Omri (2022). *Radikaler Universalismus. Jenseits von Identität.* Berlin: Propyläen.

Butler, Judith (2004). "What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault's Virtue". In: *The Judith Butler Reader.* London, Blackwell, 302-322.

Cockshott, W. P., Cottrell, A. F. (1993). *Towards a New Socialism.* Nottingham: Spokesman.

Christofferson, Micheal Scott (2004). *French Intellectuals Against the Left. The Antitotalitarian Moment of the 1970s.* New York & Oxford: Berghahn Books.

De Boer, Karin (2020). *Kant's Reform of Metaphysics. The Critique of Pure Reason Reconsidered*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

Domouchel, Daniel (1999). *Kant et la genèse de la subjectivité esthétique. Esthétique et philosophie avant la critique de la faculté de juger.* Paris: Vrin.

Eribon, Didier (1989). *Michel Foucault (1926–1984)*. Paris: Flammarion.

Foucault, Michel (1997). *The Politics of Truth.* New York: Semiotext(e).

––––––––. (2001a). *Dits et écrits I. 1945-1975.* Paris: Gallimard.

––––––––. (2001b). *Dits et écrits II. 1976-1988.* Paris: Gallimard.

––––––––. (2002). *The Order of Things.* London & New York: Routledge.

Gavi, Ph., Sartre, J.-P., Victor, P. (1974). *On a raison de se révolter*. Paris: Gallimard.

Hindrichs, Gunnar (2009). "Die aufgeklärte Aufklärung". In: Heiner F. Klemme (ed.), *Kant und die Zukunft der europäischen Aufklärung.* Berlin & New York: de Gruyter, 43-67.

Home, Henry (1785). *Elements of Criticism*. Edinburgh.

Rodrígez, Manuel Sánchez (2010). *Sentimiento y reflexión en la filosofía de Kant. Estudio histórico sobre el problema estético.* Hildesheim: Olms.

Röttgers, Kurt (1975). *Kritik und Praxis. Zur Geschichte des Kritikbegriffs von Kant bis Marx*. Berlin & New York: de Gruyter.

Sánchez, Antonio García (2003). *Dictadura o demoracia. Venezuela en la encrucijada.* Caracas: Altazor.

Tonelli, Giorgio (1955). *Kant, dall'estetica metafisica all'estetica psicoempirica*. Torino.

––––––––. (1978). "‚Critique' and Related Terms Prior to Kant. A Historical Survey". *Kant-Studien*, 69, 119-148.

Watkins, Eric (2005). *Kant and the Metaphysics of Causality*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.