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2017

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/1701>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version
Sammelbandbeitrag / collection article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Sehgal, Melanie: Process. In: Mercedes Bunz, Birgit Mara Kaiser, Kathrin Thiele (Hg.): *Symptoms of the planetary condition. A critical vocabulary*. Lüneburg: meson press 2017, S. 115–120. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/1701>.

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Process

Melanie Sehgal

Critique strives for change, which classically has been thought of in terms of radical disruption. Today, hope for a revolution, for changing everything at once, seems in blatant mismatch with a world of tightly interlocked processes that traverse the political and natural, the individual and collective. One could say that critique in its modern face presupposed a particular spatiotemporal constellation that no longer seems to hold: a static world in which it was possible to practice critique in the sense of *krinein* – to separate and select, to discern between good and bad, to dispute, to judge (see **Symptomatology**). Critique in this sense implies a position that is distinct from, outside of the situation it is looking at. Only from this position is it possible to effect, in an all-encompassing move, radical change. Rethinking critique beyond modern parameters implies rethinking this spatiotemporal constellation – it implies a metaphysics of process instead of a metaphysics of static and simple location. It is thus necessary to reconsider the notion of process itself.

To conceptualize process was always a difficult task for philosophy from antiquity onwards. Within modern habits of thought an implicit generalization of Newtonian physics reinforced a privilege of the static over process. Matter, following Newton, is self-identical and simply located, it is in one place at one moment. The most fundamental and concrete aspect of

116 nature is considered to be devoid of process. Such a metaphysics of simple location and its spatio-temporal coordinates inform modern strategies of critique: experience – which implies movement – is separated from reality itself, and this reality can then only be disclosed by knowledge. The movement of critique in this sense disqualifies experiential knowledge in favor of what conditions it and what, from this perspective, is “really real.”

The turn of the twentieth century, however, saw radical challenges to the Newtonian framework, most notably by quantum physics. In consequence, new philosophical attempts at thinking process have been made, for example, by Henri Bergson and Georges Canguilhem, by the German *Lebensphilosophien*, and the American Pragmatists. At the core of these attempts lies the problem whether and how conceptual knowledge of processes is actually possible. Do concepts necessarily fail to capture the time-bound, fleeting nature of processes, fixating what is in flux and hence missing the essential feature they wish to represent? It seems that thinking about processes automatically implies an anti-intellectualist stance. The mind is, following Bergson’s famous metaphor, like a cinematograph that takes stills of the flow of reality, but – in its attempt to piece them together after the fact – is bound to fail. It is due to this nature of the mind, that we need to “invert our accustomed habits of thought” in order to adequately represent reality as it is: in process. Bergson does not question two central presuppositions, however, that are implicit to his argument: The assumption that reality is something that needs to be *represented* as well as that it is simply given, rather than something that within a theoretical construction needs to be *posited*.

Can we conceive of process without falling into such a constitutional anti-intellectualism? Can we think of it not as “radical change” or “disruption,” but in terms that are more adequate to the interlocked processes we experience today, and in terms that also give us tools to make use of these processes – in order to actively shape them and give them the directions we desire?

When rethinking critique as a situated practice, we need to think about different ways of conceptualizing process as well as to reconsider the status and function of conceptual knowledge, its procedures and givens. In other words, the question of “process” implies an ontological and a methodological dimension. Alfred North Whitehead, as a reader of Bergson and in contrast to him, develops a **speculative** notion of process that also opens up a possibility of a non-modern practice of critique. According to Whitehead “there is a becoming of continuity, but no continuity of becoming” (1985, 35). Process in the sense of continuity, in a speculative vein, is not a given. It cannot be taken for granted as in the Bergsonian *durée*. Process is *made*, it *has* to be made, bit by bit. And not all processes are equal – some create continuity, some disruption. If there is continuity, from the perspective of the one that desired it, it is an achievement. In order to conceptualize process in this way, Whitehead invents a concept: the actual entity. Actual entities are “the final real things the world is made up of” (18). They designate the concrete, just as the Newtonian concept of matter did. In contrast to it, however, actual entities are not devoid of temporality. Actual entities *become* – but their temporality is not a continuous but an “atomic” one. It is only through their concatenations that processes with a duration and a common pattern are formed. It is in this sense that the concept of the actual entity is speculative: actual entities are not experienced as such, but designate what is *presupposed* by experience, the experience of processes and interlocked societies. Processes are formed through the intertwining “intra-actions” (to borrow a concept from Karen Barad) on the micro-level of actual entities. Processes are not given, they have to be made, on the level of actual entities, that is: bit by bit.

Such a speculative concept of process is crucial for situated practices of critique, because it shows how change firstly happens on the micro-level of the actual entity; the actual entity constitutes the real and on its level “decisions” – a Whiteheadian term which doesn’t imply consciousness – are being made.

118 Through the way in which actual entities “prehend” one another, continuity and commonality is constructed. Change can never be abrupt, or happen in a stroke. Change on the experiential macro-level needs to build up, as many actual entities need to “decide” to change their way of becoming.

Speaking of the speculative nature of the concept of actual entities then leads to the second, but not less crucial methodological dimension of the attempt to rethink process. Here it becomes apparent that to speak of macro- and micro-levels of processes could be misleading. “Actual entities” are speculative, precisely because we cannot experience them. They are not part of experience, not even on an imagined micro-level, but *conceptually required* in order to conceive of a becoming of continuity. This is how they avoid an anti-intellectualist stance. Introducing this speculative dimension implies a pragmatic image of thought that does not attempt to *represent* reality but rather invites process and speculation into its very construction. It means taking the situated aspect of critical thinking into account: theory itself is part of the construction of changing realities.

In Whitehead’s metaphysics novelty (and thus real change and process) depends on what he terms “conceptual feeling” – the prehension of eternal objects, the realm of pure potentiality – as well as on “propositions,” the realm of an “impure potentiality” that is already entangled with a specific historical actuality. Were actual entities only toprehend one another – that is past and present experiences – this would entail a **world** of processes which simply reproduce the same in different combinations but cannot foster any real change. By means of selecting from these potentials, the actual entity decides *how* it inherits its past. Here, propositions should not merely be considered in the usual linguistic sense of the term and in respect to the possibility of being *judged*. For Whitehead, they are a category of existences whose primary function is *entertainment*. Propositions, like all entities, need to manifest themselves in experience; they need to be embodied. This is why “in the real world it is more

important that a proposition be interesting than that it be true" (Whitehead 1985, 259). Hence the importance of false and "non-conformal" propositions. Despite the strong "pull," however, a proposition might exert, being a "lure for feeling," even it cannot *determine, decide* the way it is taken up. The truthfulness of a proposition is not immanent; it rather depends on the determinate actual entities from which it is an incomplete abstraction. Depending on them toprehend them, a proposition "is a datum for feeling, awaiting a subject to feel it" (259). It is *as* such a datum that a proposition has "relevance to the actual world" (259). The efficacy of propositions is thus a suggestive one: They elicit interest, divert attention and propose a way something is taken into account and what is likewise eliminated. In this way, they account for difference and divergence in the various processes of intra-action and thus are crucial for a speculative notion of critique. Different subjects – in the metaphysical, non-humanist sense of the actual entity – will feel and respond to a proposition differently. Thus, it is the social environment, the historical and experiential world, which decides on its *relevance*. Propositions have an empiricist bias. Always told after the fact, propositions take up the past of certain actual entities and divert their trajectory. As "the tales that *perhaps might* be told about particular actualities" (256, emphasis added), they are one possible way of making sense of a situation, and at the same time they lure it into a new becoming. Propositions entail a speculative notion of critique because they divert accustomed processes, all the while taking their inheritance into account, and introduce difference and change. Operating on the speculative level of the actual entity, they eventually affect experiential processes. By means of the lures of propositions, processes might change their conformal continuity into a different kind of becoming.

References

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