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Introduction

2017

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/1982>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version
Sammelbandbeitrag / collection article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Bunz, Mercedes; Kaiser, Birgit Mara; Thiele, Kathrin: Introduction. In: Mercedes Bunz, Birgit Mara Kaiser, Kathrin Thiele (Hg.): *Symptoms of the planetary condition. A critical vocabulary*. Lüneburg: meson press 2017, S. 7–17. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/1982>.

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Introduction

Symptoms of the Planetary Condition

Rather than going for the new object of study, the new product to consume, one should work on new ways of seeing, of being, or of living the world. Perhaps it is time to look at the nature of our own understanding of what you just called “productive resistance” and to assess how – in our very “resistance” – we may have been working in complicity with what we set out to criticize.

– Trinh T. Minh-ha, *D-Passage*, 122

In 2015, the *Los Angeles Review of Books* launched a series entitled “No Crisis” to examine the state of critique in the humanities understood as both a university institution and a theoretical field. In view of what was at the same time acknowledged and refuted as a crisis of the humanities, the series wanted to show how criticism is “actually written in the present,” a decade and a half into the 21st century. In her contribution, Johanna Drucker notes that an important move for contemporary criticism would be to leave behind the principle of “‘critique’ and negation, a stance of moral superiority and outsider position” (Drucker 2015). Instead of maintaining negation, opposition (and judgment, we might add) as the traditional attributes of critique, a crucial step would be to recognize the complicity of oneself, of one’s criticism, of any critical practice, with-in the conditions or phenomena that

8 are under critical consideration. These are not exactly Drucker's words. The way she puts it is:

Oppositional tactics are always reactive. We have to realize that negative notions, like the bankrupt ideas of critique, don't offer a way forward. They keep us at a superior distance from reality. We need to formulate a modernism of engagement founded in a recognition of complicity – ours and its – with the machinations and values according to which we live. (Drucker 2015)¹

The project of this vocabulary starts from a similar hunch: namely that negativity and judgment, the modes in which critique and critical analyses were practiced and thought since Kant, have run their course. Seeking to maintain an outsider's stance vis-à-vis the phenomena or situations that are critically examined, reaching for an Olympian objectivity, disinterest: these, the instruments of Enlightened critique, are exhausted. They have, as Drucker suggests, not only run their course because they are in a Nietzschean sense "reactive" – that is, because they are unable to bring forth real **transformation** and newness. They have also run their course because this 21st century is slowly realizing a transition in daily experiences (technological, biomedical, ecological) from a Newtonian to a quantum universe. Due to this transition, **entanglements** at a fundamental level must be taken into account or, in other words, the complicity and co-emergence of any knowledge or assessment with what is known and with whoever knows, its always **perspectival**, situated and implicated nature. Complicity and entanglement at such a fundamental level preclude the neat distinctions between subject and object, knower and known that practices of critique traditionally rely on. Rather, these distinctions themselves emerge in relational fields of **power**, and in that sense are deeply entangled and complicit.

1 Drucker is revisiting T. J. Clark's *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (1999), as each contributor was asked to engage with a favorite critic.

Unlike Drucker, however, we do not want to conclude from this description of matters today that critique is bankrupt. While the compilation of terms in this book starts from the assumption that negativity, judgment and opposition as *modes* of critique have indeed “run out of steam” (Latour 2004), we insist that critique as an attitude and a manner of enquiry has not. It remains a crucial aspect of the work done in the humanities and the arts, inside and outside academic institutions, and it is worth striving to keep critique as such a crucial attitude, an important angle from which to pose questions and contest political quietism. Furthermore, different from the “No Crisis” project, but also in difference to recent re-turns to critique such as Rita Felski’s *The Limits of Critique* (2015), this project understands critique as a much broader practice than merely a textual one. Even though critique is resolutely affirmed here as a practice of reading, such reading is not undertaken mainly or exclusively in the realms of literary, textual or even cultural criticism. Situations, constellations, power relations and technological connectedness also have to be read. Nor are we interested primarily in a new, however radical or “post-critical” (Felski) hermeneutics or criticism. If we speak of critique, we do not mean primarily the activity of professional critics, although that activity may be part of it. Rather, our project affirms critique as a praxis of intellectual and **worldly** intervention, as an attitude that not only comes to bear on the writing (and critical reading) of texts, but also affects the material, habitual, everyday and minute dimensions of living. For the process of outlining such an embodied mode of critique, which has immediate implications for political, ethical as well as media-material thought-practice, the humanities are of crucial relevance. The strength of the humanities lies precisely in the methodological, onto-epistemological questioning of how to proceed, in view of what and in the interest of whom – therefore moving critique not only from matters of fact to matters of concern (Latour 2004), but taking it a step further to interested and situated matters of care (Puig de la Bellacasa 2011). Accordingly,

- 10 the humanities are understood and exercised here as worldly practices themselves.

The overall aim of this vocabulary is to begin reexamining critical practice under the conditions of the 21st century, which means first of all to assert critique as a crucial tool of intellectual and practical intervention. At the same time, it also means to acknowledge that contemporary realities are **immanent, terran** and co-dependent in multiple ways; ways that even the enumeration of the attributes of these co-dependences – economic, ecological, symbolic, socio-political, intra-species, historical, **technological, affective**, to name but a few – do not exhaust.

To begin with, it means to acknowledge that there is no outside from which to gauge things, which has two implications for critical practice. On the one hand, as poststructuralism and deconstruction have brought to the fore for quite a while already, and science and technology studies, quantum theory and their recent humanities receptions demonstrate today, there is no categorical separability in critical endeavors. Rather, as Karen Barad argues in *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007) with recourse to Niels Bohr's analysis of "measurement interactions," any measurement has an effect on what is being measured. The insistence on indeterminacy or "the indeterminable discontinuity" which quantum theory shows "undermines the classical belief in an inherent subject-object distinction" (Barad 2007, 127). Barad explains this as follows:

Making the ontological nature of this indeterminacy explicit entails a rejection of the *classical metaphysical assumption that there are determinate objects with determinate properties and corresponding determinate concepts with determinate meanings independent of the necessary conditions needed to resolve the inherent indeterminacies.* (127)

With this in mind, an outside stance from which to assess and judge things becomes an illusion – and with it the "superior distance" which Drucker rightly rejects. The calm distancing

that enables judgment, achieved by way of setting apart, dissecting and reflecting is no longer tenable (Haraway 1997). Such an approach presumes molar units (Deleuze/Guattari 2000), which – after Bohr, but also after Simondon’s idea of individuation (Simondon 2007) or Margulis’s concept of symbiogenesis (Margulis 1998) (and we could name others, too) – we are coming to understand as molecular processes. The traditional practice of critique ignores this **processual** entanglement of what is known with the one who does the knowing, so that “reflection” as its central image is best to be traded for new images of critical practice. The entries that make up this volume hope to work towards such new images.

On the other hand, in terms of political imaginaries, to acknowledge that there is no outside from which to gauge things means that any *terra incognita* was only ever a powerful (in both senses of “effective” and “dominant”) narrative to imagine “progress” or “redemption.” Yet, specifically today, it is evident that there is no untouched corner of the planet that could entice us to believe in better versions of ourselves, to be achieved in a New World. The **spectre** of a *terra incognita*, haunting the phantasmatic machineries of escape, adventure, social experimentation and political progress, has always been in denial of the fact that it was only *incognita* to those who recently arrived at its shores in pursuit of power, money or a better life for themselves. The geographical, political and industrial exhaustion of the earth – of its spatial expansion, as well as its natural resources – has also slowly exhausted the political purchase of the phantasm of an *incognita* or a new start (Glissant 1997, Wynter 1995). The classical understanding of critique as laying bare the presumed boundaries of a status-quo in order to establish a “better” political project, an “elsewhere” in linear spacetime, is thus also no longer plausible. The past centuries have witnessed the downsides or downfalls of earlier “better” projects that promised social emancipation (from humanism, real existing socialism to bourgeois nationalism/colonialism), but did

12 so only for certain groups. Social and philosophical critique was, however, often articulated in the name of these projects. Given these histories of our co-dependent, entangled world(ing)s, social and philosophical critique done “in the name of” this or that “better” political project or social experiment has lost traction. The power of utopias as achievable solutions is dwindling, as historical **experience** has shown that they tend to rely on sameness and exclusion at the expense of difference. And yet, **utopia** as a name for the possibility of difference *and* deferral, as a horizon of social justice, remains a powerful force for critical thinking and practice. Thus, the question that our project also aims to address is how to practice critique with no concrete “better” and “final” solution in view.

The contributors to this book hold that giving up on critique as intervention – that is, on questions motivated by the ambition of furthering social and ecological justice – is not an option. The world today has indeed become (or has always been, but today comes to be more and more understood as) a *terra critica*: a planet in critical economic, ecological, symbolic, socio-political, intra-species condition, demanding an un/relearning of dominant habits and practices (Guattari 2008, Stengers 2015) *and/as* a **reversion** of the modi and methods of critical intervention. In respect to what Spivak calls planetary conditions (Spivak 2003), established knowledge-regimes need to be unworked so that we can learn to know, feel and live otherwise. Thus, it is time for an earthly form of critique. Yet again, precisely with that goal in mind, the question remains: What would critique under such conditions be like? What are the symptoms of our planetary condition, which are starting to become visible, but are not yet fully readable? And how are we to intervene in effective ways in conditions commonly indicated with descriptors such as finance capitalism, the anthropocene and neoliberalism?

The present book will, of course, not deliver definitive answers to those questions. How could it? Un/relearning social, affective and corporeal habits as well as daily practices cannot simply be

done by means of a book. It requires more than that. Still, we hope for this project to be a starting point. It stays with the above mentioned questions – weighs them, turns them over, **translates** them into a set of terms which are tentatively explored here as one way of figuring critical practice otherwise. Evidently, the terms in this vocabulary are not new; many of them have a long philosophical, critical tradition and are in frequent use. Their assemblage does not strive for a complete or exhaustive survey of relevant terms. Others could be added, for sure. Neither do the individual entries aim to provide encyclopedic, neutral definitions of each term. The ambition here is not to offer a dictionary, or to arrive at a new, neat definition of critique. Instead, the book sees itself as a rhizomatic and **speculative** toolbox that offers multiple entries and routes into the question of critique. Its aim is to inspire potential additions to the assemblage of terms offered here and different practices of critique and critical intervention for future use.

The present assemblage of terms emerged out of the past four years of work done by *Terra Critica*, an interdisciplinary network for the critical humanities (www.terracritica.net). The network was founded in 2012, and the terms that appear in this vocabulary surfaced as crucial tools-to-think-with. Each contributor to the vocabulary participated in one or more of the network's workshops, and the entries have grown out of the pool of perspectives, reference points and terminologies that appeared and reappeared in these meetings. Each entry offers a personal take on the term. This means that collectively, these terms have been significant in *Terra Critica's* work, yet individually, each of them carries the mark of its author. Had a term been explored by someone else, its presentation would have been somewhat different, perhaps distinctly different. It is precisely this open and in/determinate toolbox characteristic that we **affirm** as a most fruitful presentation of critical **work**.

In that sense, this book does not represent the network *Terra Critica*. Rather, it is a **stutter**: every entry makes a new attempt

14 to articulate what might be the sense of critique today, without arriving at a clear silhouette or conclusive statement. The book can be used as a rhizomatic map, to be entered at any point, where each entry gives evidence of its author's distinct style of writing and conceptual registers. Composed as an open assemblage, the terms can nevertheless call forth various constellations. They can be read with and through each other and as such, like a watermark, hope to bring forth the sets of problems that we are concerned with: How to practice a kind of critique that helps to dis/entangle our contemporary planetary conditions? How to read the symptoms of those conditions, and which symptoms to begin with? And how to develop the conceptual and terminological tools needed in order to approach them in meaningful ways? This book is a step to develop those tools, offering various potential itineraries, some of which we suggest in the diagrams at the end of the book. The diagrams propose constellations of terms that speak to each other in prominent ways and that – taken as a interference pattern (a *diffraction*) – highlight, according to our reading, particularly relevant aspects of the question of critique today. And we invite readings to be added.

We have stressed the necessity to re-evaluate critical practice *today*, in the early decades of the 21st century, partly from a sense of acute crisis (which has been tied to critique and the humanities at least since Husserl (1936) and Kosellek (1959)) to which we feel we must respond. Yet, our concern comes also from the insight that any “today” requires re-evaluation and work: in the spirit of here and now “think we must,” as Virginia Woolf (1966, 62) stresses in *Three Guineas*, written on the verge of World War II. And, as Jacques Derrida demonstrates in *The Other Heading* (1990), *today* is always anew “this time that is ours” (79) – the “now” that urges us to **regard** what “*is taking place now*” (30). Such a task, then, falls upon every era, on every “today,” as Walter Benjamin also notes in “On the Concept of History”: “In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition

away from a conformism that is about to overpower it.” (Benjamin 2006, 391) At the same time, every era needs to find its own, specific responses – it is *our* today for which critique needs to be sharpened. There is a tradition to draw on, but no models to follow. At present, critique is perhaps in particular need of being reconsidered as an attitude, in view of the neoliberal-capitalist machineries that ingest all critique and celebrate difference as lifestyle. This underlines the continuing validity of Derrida’s question: “Is it not necessary to have the courage and lucidity for a *new* critique of the *new* effects of **capital** (within unprecedented techno-social structures)?” (Derrida 1992, 57).

In their engagements with the legacies of critique and the demands made on it in the present, i.e. “today,” the contributions to this vocabulary therefore affirm two things at once: critical practice is vital for any pursuit of social and ecological justice, yet it also needs to be wrested from its tradition as judgment, which threatens to stifle it and is no longer pertinent to the planetary conditions we live in today. In view of these conditions, our conceptions of critique need to be adjusted, revised, reexamined. Only then does critique become a critical ontology of ourselves *today*, in Foucault’s terms:

The critical ontology of ourselves must be considered not, certainly, as a theory, a doctrine, nor even as a permanent body of knowledge that is accumulating; it must be conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them (Foucault 1997, 319)

We hope that this book will be used – critically, that is affirmatively and **creatively** – as such an experiment. That it will help wrest terms away from their present (socio-ethico-political) overdeterminations to put them to new uses, so that we can start to invent new ways of speaking and new ways of living with-in

- 16 always (re-)productive power relations. That it will remind us that critique means to dare to take **risks** and to exploit the leeway for negotiations that power permits: to push power a little.

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