

Caring Critique

Exploring Pedagogical Spheres Between Critical and Post-Critical Approaches¹

Iris Laner (University of Music and Dramatic Arts Mozarteum Salzburg)

Abstract:

Preservation, positive affection, hope and experience are some of the core concerns of post-critical pedagogy. In order to highlight them, post-critical approaches regard it as necessary to refuse critical action on the one hand and separate the pedagogical from the political sphere on the other. In my paper I will suggest that there is a possibility to stress post-critical ideas and the need to rethink what pedagogical thinking and action is about without abandoning the critical attitude and the orientation towards the political. This possibility is bound to an inverse perspective on critique and politics. In this inverse view, which I develop engaging with recent debates in critical theory, critique can be framed as a situated engagement that faces the other within a lively present experience. Politics can be understood as variable forms of living together with humans and non-humans on the basis of shared times and spaces. Bringing in this perspective, makes it possible to go beyond the critique-post-critique-struggle and introduce an approach that is sympathetic with both critical and post-critical concerns.

Keywords:

critical theory; Hannah Arendt; Jacques Rancière; post-critical pedagogy

Critique is a concept that has been strongly shaped by the Enlightenment, but has notably altered its scope since then. While in the 18th century the act of criticizing primarily means analyzing a matter of interest in either an epistemological, an ethical or an aesthetic respect,² in the 20th century, however, the term to criticize has become more and more associated with taking an engaged, even an explicitly political stance. As such, critique is not anymore restricted to a theoretical method of studying facts and conditions; rather, critique becomes a way of accounting for contexts, relations and implications with the aim of undermining, deferring or changing them.

Accordingly, critical theory and, founded hereupon, critical pedagogy do not merely *analyze* their issue of investigation as related to the respective historical, cultural, social, and political setting. Yet, by means of analysis, they ultimately aim at *discussing* challenges and problems and at *provoking a transformation* of the status quo.³ Thus, they focus on a (political) efficacy of the critical work. In light of this development, criticizing cannot only be understood as a method of exploration and analysis. Rather, it is incorporated as an attitude that calls for demonstrating problems and changing the world for a better future. Taking over a critical attitude has not only scientific, but also pedagogical implications. Therefore, critical pedagogy refers to critique on different levels: here, critique is regarded as a means of research as well as an important operator in educational processes.

The recent uprising of post-critical pedagogy can be framed as a response to this development of critical concerns that has been shaping many educational discussions since the second half of the 20th century. For Naomi Hodgson, Joris Vlieghe and Piotr Zamojski the time has come “to protect and to care” (Hodgson et al., 2017, p. 17). By this, the authors of the *Manifesto for a Post-Critical Pedagogy* claim that pedagogy should engage with the here and now in a positive, affirmative way instead of remaining stuck in an orientation towards a there and then, i.e. a possible future. This new way, which highlights the primacy of experience, affection and hope for pedagogical action, is distinguished from a negative style of thinking about and doing pedagogy. Post-critical pedagogues stress that there is an urgent necessity to construct an educational space that facilitates *studying* for the sake of it. Only in the course of a focused engagement can students develop a deep love for the matter of interest and recognize that there is a need to preserve it. As a consequence, education should be freed from the pressure of the future, from the need of transformation, and from political issues.

Generally, critical pedagogies take education as a necessary means to thematize and overcome the problems of the present state while post-critical pedagogy underlines the need of education to concentrate on the preservable aspects of the status quo. Hereby, post-critical thinkers claim that there are not only clear limitations to critical work in the pedagogical field, but that pedagogical action

also has to be freed from any other concerns such as political ones.

In my paper I will address the question of whether the orientation on preservation, positive affection, hope and experience, which can be listed as some of the core concerns of post-critical pedagogy, necessarily runs parallel with a refusal of critical action on the one hand and a separation of pedagogical and political spheres on the other. I will suggest that there is a possibility to stress post-critical ideas and the need to rethink what pedagogical thinking and action is about without abandoning the critical attitude and the orientation towards the political. This possibility is bound to an inverse perspective on critique and politics. In this inverse view, critique is not restricted to a superior operation that disregards the present and is driven by hate. It is framed, however, as a situated engagement that faces the other within a lively experience. Politics is regarded as not restricted to institutionalized, congealed forms of social interaction; it is understood as variable forms of living together with humans and non-humans (Bennett, 2010) on the basis of shared times and spaces. Accordingly, pedagogy is not framed as a separated sphere that could or could not be linked with the political sphere. In pedagogical settings one acts alongside and together with others and the question of how to live together with others is a central target of educational work; therefore an exclusion of political concerns would even reduce the scope of education radically.

Before I develop this perspective on critique and political concerns that I regard as reconcilable with post-critical ideas, I will elaborate on the current understanding of critique and post-critique in pedagogical theories as well as on the role politics plays in these discussions. I will refer to one of the central figures in critical theory, Theodor W. Adorno, and briefly introduce the tradition of critical pedagogy. Then, I will outline the positions of Hannah Arendt and Jacques Rancière that are important points of reference for post-critical pedagogy. Hinting at recent ideas uttered in critical debates, I will finally develop my argument on how a critical and a post-critical view on pedagogy can be reconciled.

1. Critique and Post-Critique in Pedagogy

One of the most urgent calls for critical work in the pedagogical field is made by Theodor W. Adorno. His well-known text *Education after Auschwitz* is a reflection about human behavior. It comes down to the plea that the formation of those attitudes that rendered the Holocaust possible has to be prevented. In discussing strategies of arriving at such a prevention, Adorno focuses on the tasks of pedagogy. One of these tasks is the education towards “critical self-reflection” (Adorno, 1963/1998, p. 193). For Adorno, critique has to be a part of education. Students, no matter whether they are children or already adults, need to learn to relate to their environment in an autonomous and

reflected way. If pedagogical action focuses on the strengthening of criticality, people will more likely take full responsibility for their actions and not only evaluate them against the backdrop of their self-interest; they will start to consider shared human concerns (Adorno & Becker, 1999).

With this emphasis, Adorno contemplates 18th century thoughts on enlightenment. He calls for “rational enlightenment” (Adorno, 1963/1998, p. 203) meant to enable people to critically engage with the world. Different from Immanuel Kant, who focuses on the intellectual and formal conditions of becoming responsible, Adorno is convinced that critical work can only be done properly on the basis of an awareness of social reality and the relations of power which shape it. To become critical, thus, not only means to be attentive and analytic, it also means to become aware of the actual life-world, including its past, presence and future.

The importance of critical work with regard to education is underlined by many thinkers inspired by critical theory. Henry Giroux (2011) stresses that pedagogical action should support students in developing a different, non-conformist, namely a *critical* worldview. Critique is framed as a mode of analysis that makes way for a consideration of domination and the enactment of power in the socio-political field. Since a democratic way of living is in need of critical education, for Giroux “pedagogy is central to politics” (Giroux, 2011, p. 10). Critical pedagogues generally underline the social and the political responsibility of educators as well as students. The need of raising criticality therefore affects all agents involved in pedagogical work. Klaus Mollenhauer makes use of the term emancipation in order to stress the importance of critique in educational processes. He explicitly questions those pedagogical movements that postulate an autonomous sphere for education, as emancipation concerns individuals shaped by and shaping social relations (Mollenhauer, 1973).

The post-critical perspective reacts to the ideals highlighted by critical pedagogy. It problematizes the lack of building positive relationships towards the subject of learning and towards the pedagogical situation as such. In the post-critical viewpoint, pedagogy, first and foremost, has to be concerned with the task of “initiating the new generation into a common world” (Hodgson et al., 2017, p. 18). This process of initiation “requires a love for the world” (Hodgson et al., 2017, p. 18). The pedagogical space has to provide the possibility to become acquainted with the life-world. It should not focus on a negative view of how things are, but allow for a loving and caring attitude. The formation of a critical attitude, which critical pedagogy emphasizes strongly, is not regarded as a pedagogical task; it is considered a potential follow up to educational work: “When we truly love the world, our world, we must be willing to pass it on to the new generation, on the

assumption that they – the newcomers – can take it on, on their terms”. (Hodgson et al., 2017, p. 18)

In order to understand why post-critical pedagogues disregard critical forms of engagement, it is essential to look at their conception of the pedagogical relation. The pedagogical relation is framed as an encounter of equals; teachers meeting on a par with students. Teachers should avoid a position of superiority, in terms of an attribution of superior knowledge as well as in terms of a formally authoritarian position. Taking the position of the critic is regarded as an enactment of superiority, since those who criticize speak from an external point of view and tend to indoctrinate those who listen to their critique (Hodgson et al., 2017, p. 18). Critical pedagogues are, therefore, not able to develop a pedagogical relation based on the principle of equality.

When emphasizing equality, the idea of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (Rancière, 1987/1991) is an important source of inspiration for post-critical pedagogy. Here, Jacques Rancière refers to the French pedagogue Joseph Jacotot, who taught in Belgium without speaking Flemish while some of his students did not speak French. Based on his experiences he developed the idea of universal teaching. Namely, the situation of teachers and students both lacking knowledge and starting to study simultaneously by relating to a “thing in common” (Rancière, 1987/1991, p. 2) is paradigmatic for a pedagogical relation that highlights equality. Here, pedagogical action is not about explicating, but about motivating. Students are not instructed by a teacher; rather, they are motivated to engage with materials by making use of their intelligence. Interestingly, like many critical theorists and pedagogues, Rancière uses the term *emancipation*; however, he regards it as counterproductive for educational work to focus on those conditions that make emancipation necessary, i.e., the actual social situation of inequality. An “intellectual emancipation” (Rancière, 1987/1991, p. 102) has to be restricted to the business of merely studying, to the operation of the individual mind, since this individual mind is equal to all other minds. In the moment the area of merely studying has been left and the political sphere that is shaped by the distribution of the sensible, which necessarily produces inequalities, has been entered, equality cannot be enacted. Therefore, a basic idea that post-critical pedagogues develop based on Rancière’s conception of the ignorant schoolmaster is that all pedagogical acts, which imply or produce inequality, have to be bracketed out of the sphere of education. Critique is regarded as one of them. Another one is that the pedagogical relation should focus on maintaining the equality between teacher and student. Hereby, the sealing off the pedagogical sphere from the political sphere plays a central role.

2. Pedagogical and Political Spheres

Besides Jacques Rancière, Hannah Arendt stands as another important source of inspiration. For Arendt, pedagogy deals with the possibilities of introducing newcomers to the existing world (Arendt, 1993). In a pedagogical relation, someone who is experienced (the adult or teacher) interacts with someone who is inexperienced (the newcomer, child or student). Other than Rancière, Arendt regards the interaction between teacher and student as built upon a given inequality and not an ideal equality. As a consequence she does not think of “authority” (Arendt, 1993, p. 189) as a negative concept; rather, she believes that all pedagogical action is based upon the fact that the newcomer “needs special protection and care” (Arendt, 1993, p. 186) and that the educator is, thus, responsible for the educated. Moreover, the adult, who is experienced, has to take responsibility for the world as well and protect it against a potentially destructive invasion of newcomers. Education then, for Arendt, comes down to a double-edged business: it has to secure the growth, development, and fruition of children within a private (and this means: non-political) sphere and, at the same time, it has to maintain “the world as it is” (Arendt, 1993, p. 189), preserving the status quo. Authority is regarded as necessary, because it expresses the willingness of the educator to take responsibility for pedagogical action with regards to the educated and to the world. For Arendt it implies a conservative attitude in the positive sense of wanting to “cherish and protect something” (Arendt, 1993, p. 192). A conservative attitude, though, is only desirable within the pedagogical sphere; with regard to politics, it is highly problematic. It is intriguing to understand that the reason why Arendt speaks for conservatism in the field of education as long as it is not intertwined with the political is that she highlights the ground of inequality shaping the pedagogical relation. The political sphere, in contrast, is understood as a realm “where we act among and with adults and equals” (Arendt, 1993, p. 192).

Although Rancière and Arendt take complementary stances towards the conception of the pedagogical and political sphere with regard to equality both claim that the two spheres have to be separated. In post-critical pedagogy the arguments brought forward by Rancière and Arendt co-exist: the pedagogical relation is understood as a coming together of equals and, at the same time, pedagogical action is about caring, preserving and taking responsibility for the world ‘as it is’. The possibility of studying freely is bound to the constitution of an autonomous pedagogical sphere.

3. Preservation, Care, Hope and Critical Work in Pedagogical Action?

If pedagogical work is located in an autonomous, non-political sphere, focusing on the act of studying for the sake of it, how can students *learn* to take responsibility, not only for the matter of study, but also for others? How can they

not gradually become acquainted and habitualized in the course of living together with others in the political sphere, and how can they arrive at dealing with the “distribution of the sensible” (Rancière, 2000/2004) that not only shapes the way of how we speak about things, but also how and what we are able to think, perceive, and imagine?

While critical pedagogy risks to subordinate studying to mere political ends, by eliminating the differences between the pedagogical and the political sphere, post-critical pedagogy entirely cuts off pedagogical concerns from political ones (Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2019). Herein, they gamble away the chance of cultivating political intercourse in actu. Moreover, with restricting the approach towards materials to loving and affirmative ones, post-critical pedagogy fails to give a positive account of how students can arrive at relating to them in different ways. How can they not only incorporate the perspective presented by the material, but how can they diversify their own attitude towards the material? Critical approaches, however, lack strategies of affirming the significance and the value of non-conflicting views on phenomena.

In my understanding, the radical positioning of post-critical pedagogy with respect to critique and to the political sphere has to do with a limited conception of critique and the political. The main business of critique is regarded as a negative movement that focuses on unfolding what is not worth to be preserved. Criticizing is taken to be an operation that is driven by “hate” (Hodgson et al., 2017, p. 18) and aims at a better future that has yet to come. As a consequence, those who have incorporated a critical attitude do not relate to the presence in an affirmative, a loving and hopeful way. Instead they are guided by suspicion and mistrust (Sedgwick, 2003). In order to enter a serious engagement with and develop a love for the world, from the perspective of post-critical pedagogy it is necessary to reject a critical attitude entirely. Politics is regarded as a fixed space restricted by ideology, laws and norms. Although political action is oriented towards the future, it is seen as stuck within current struggles of inequality that hinder the coming together of equals in the course of pedagogical action.

Critique, however, is not at all only a negative way of examining, one that disrespects the present state and presupposes a superior position.⁴ Authors such as Antonio Gramsci (2011), Chantal Mouffe (2013), Gayatri Spivak (2012), Judith Butler (2009), or Rosi Braidotti (2019) offer a different conception of critique. Criticizing can be understood as a situated, emotionally laden, inspired and bodily practice. Butler (2009), for instance, underlines that critique happens in the moment when one becomes aware of the limitation of one’s own perspective. Herein, it is not primarily oriented towards the future. For her, criticizing is

not merely concerned with the privilege of collecting knowledge about the actual oppressive normative framework that shapes our perception, thinking, and imagination; rather, in a much more concrete and down-to-earth sense, criticizing occurs when somebody recognizes that something (or somebody) might have slipped their attention or, to put it more bluntly, is not even potentially on their radar. Interestingly, Rancière (1995/1999) introduces a similar argument when he speaks about the indeed critical role of disagreement in political intercourse.

Criticizing, in this sense, is not acted out from a superior, hating position; to the contrary, it can occur only in the state of being affected, in the moment of being involved and emotionally exposed to a situation that matters. In a similar sense, also politics – if it is not understood as institutionalized forms of answering to ideologies and norms in either an affirmative or denying manner – can be framed as a way of communal living and further developing forms of living together. Since in the pedagogical sphere a) spaces and times are normally shared by several people and b) questions about relating and living together with others are a central subject of studying, it seems to problematically cut down the pedagogical work if politics is excluded. Reconciling critique and post-critique and rethinking the separation of the pedagogical and the political sphere could be possible if it is allowed that a) criticizing does not necessarily imply to turn one’s back to the plethora of phenomena, to deny the strength of experience and to cut off all positive emotions towards the present state and that b) politics does not only refer to an institutionalized setting of arranged and limited forms of living together.

A post-critical view underlines the importance of the love for the world, of caring, preserving, and hoping. Critical concerns stress that this love, caring, preserving and hoping is not unlimited. It is recognized that others might love, care, preserve, and hope for something else, something that we are possibly not even able to perceive. What can ultimately be argued against the co-existence of these two positions? If the – possibly ideological – gulf between critical and post-critical attitude is bridged, it should become plausible to think about studying and learning in places that might be dedicated to study and learn, but that are not held down with the weight of a total separation from the political sphere, in terms of lovingly relating to materials, acting out, developing and appreciating one’s own way of relating, but at the same time searching for experiences that show the limitedness of one’s own perspective. Such experiences can be made in confrontation with artistic works (Laner, 2016). But they might also be made in simply joining others and co-experiencing, co-imagining, co-thinking matters of interest.

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About the Author

Iris Laner is full professor of arts education at the University of Music and Dramatic Arts Mozarteum Salzburg. Currently she is conducting the research project *Aesthetic Practice and the Critical Faculty*, which was funded by the Austrian Science Fund. In her research she focuses on questions of aesthetic education, critique and criticality within the aesthetic and the pedagogical sphere, collaboration and communality.

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² In the tradition of British Empiricism, for instance, critique does not mean rational operations, but refers to acts of moral or aesthetic judgment. It has to do with the formation of taste and is, thus, related to both thinking and sensing (Hume, 1975, 1985). In the German Idealist tradition, however, critique is understood as a primarily intellectual endeavor aimed at analyzing a matter of interest from a distanced perspective (Kant, 1998).

³ Certainly not all discussion broadly associated with critical theory aim at a transformation; many stop at discussing problematic dynamics, relations of power or hierarchies. Sonderegger (2019), therefore, differentiates between those critical theories which focus on a demonstration of problematic structures and those which concentrate on (the possibility of) strategies on resistance within generally oppressive structures.

⁴ An interesting argument for reconciling post-critical and critical approaches is brought forward by Wortmann (2019). He focuses on the way of speaking and the vocabularies used by post-critical and critical thinkers. I would like to thank Kai Wortmann also for his (post-)critical comments on this piece that helped me to further clarify my position.