

Reply: Against Latour – On the Questionable Foundations of Post-Critical Pedagogy

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Abstract:

Critique has run out of steam – this diagnosis by Bruno Latour is crucial for the “Manifesto for a Post-Critical Pedagogy” as well as for the on_education issue “The Fatigue of Critique?”. With this essay, we contradict Latour's diagnosis. Latour's polemic against critique is based firstly on a questionable diagnosis of our time and secondly on a general and programmatic critique of sociology. Against that, we bring out two main points. The first insight highlights that change is initially dependent on variations that can only arise from a negation of the existing. The second insight comes from the sociology of critique, which paradoxically sees success in the failure of critique.

Keywords:

critique; diagnosis of our time; pedagogy; post-critique; sociology

*When I met you in the laundromat
You said, ‘be cool’
I said, ‘I can't do that
No, no, no’*

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Critical theory is about the paradox of reason within an unreasonable, brutish and random history. Methodologically, critical theory operates as an instrument to find the traces of reason and truth within a reality that as a whole is unreasonable and ‘untrue’ (Adorno). Because reason exists within this reality at best as a ‘Real Possibility’ (Hegel), critical theory has an unavoidably utopian dimension.

Hauke Brunkhorst – Critical Theory of Legal Revolutions

The “Manifesto for a Post-Critical Pedagogy” is the keystone of the on_education issue “The Fatigue of Critique?”. In his opening essay, Kai Wortmann (2020, p. 1) writes that “the authors ‘made manifest’ the feeling shared by many working in education that ‘the work of critical pedagogy ... is largely done’ (Hodgson et al., 2018, p. 18)”. Post-critical pedagogy is understood as a programmatic label that points beyond this end of critical pedagogy. Both, the manifesto and the contributions to “The Fatigue of Critique?”, are deeply based on Bruno Latour's argument from “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?” as we will point out in the next part of this reply.

The ‘post’ in ‘post-critique’ and ‘post-critical pedagogy’ is justified precisely by the miserable game of critique diagnosed by Latour.

This rough overview already evokes a general impression: In the debate on post-critique, the relation between diagnosis of our time and post-critical program is at best vague. For example, the reference (Hodgson et al., 2017, p. 17) to Jacques Rancière, who speaks of post-critique (Rancière, 2015; see also Bröckling, 2013) in a diagnostic sense – left-wing melancholy and the feeling of powerlessness on the one hand, right-wing fury on the other – is in conflict with the programmatic orientation of post-critical pedagogy. Robert Niemann (2020) also uses post-critique diagnostically, as a façade of critique that has lost its substance. In Thomas Edlinger's (2015) short history of post-critique, on the other hand, diagnosis and programme coincide: Post-critique is the diagnosed German annoyance with preaching reason and enlightenment apostles following the critical theory of the Frankfurt School and the hour for a new wild thinking from France (Edlinger, 2015) in the 1970s and 1980s (see also Felsch, 2016). In this diagnosis, however, there lies also a programme, because it is precisely the annoyance with the excess of the critical dividing processes that can tip over into a constructive and positive view of the world (Edlinger, 2015).

The relationship between diagnosis and programme is the central issue of our reply, which is questioning the foundations of the manifesto and the contributions to “The Fatigue of Critique?”. For this we limit ourselves to differentiating the relationship between diagnosis and

programme with regard to the Latour references. Has critique run out of steam? In the manifesto and the contributions that follow, the answer is always “yes”. This debate emphasizes that it is no longer sufficient to speak of critique. Critique is seen as primarily negative and associated with “fear, shame, humiliation, anger and rage” (Editorial Team, 2020) as the editorial to “The Fatigue of Critique?” summarizes. What is needed now, according to post-critical thinkers, is post-critique that builds on the “marginalised positive affects like excitement, joy, and surprise” (Editorial Team, 2020) and adopts – as the manifesto states – an “affirmative attitude” (Hodgson et al., 2017, p. 15).

In the following, we will first briefly present references to Latour in the concept of post-critical pedagogy. Afterwards, a critique of Latour follows, which could inspire the representatives of post-critical pedagogy not to leave their basis in the history of ideas unquestioned. Latour’s polemic against critique is based firstly on a questionable diagnosis of our time and secondly on a general and programmatic critique of sociology in which he rejects the concept of society in particular. Against that, we will question this diagnosis of our time and point to basic sociological issues of post-critical pedagogy, that could be overlooked, when following Latour’s rejection of sociology. Our aim is not to reject the concept of post-critical pedagogy outright, but to raise questions that this new concept should be able to answer.

Latour in the Manifesto and in “The Fatigue of Critique?”

The point of the “Manifesto for a Post-Critical Pedagogy” (Hodgson et al., 2017) is that the instruments of an “inherent critique” (Hodgson et al., 2017, p. 17), an “utopian critique” (Hodgson et al., 2017, p. 17) or an “external point of view” (Hodgson et al., 2017, p. 18) are not (any longer) sufficient. Instead of exposing, the goal now – and this is where Latour comes in – must be to protect and care.

It is time to acknowledge and to affirm that there is good in the world that is worth preserving. It is time for debunking the world to be succeeded by some hopeful recognition of the world. It is time to put what is good in the world – that which is under threat and which we wish to preserve – at the centre of our attention and to make a conceptual space in which we can take up our responsibility for them in the face of, and in spite of, oppression and silent melancholy (Hodgson et al., 2017, p. 19).

In a dialogue between the authors of the manifesto, Piotr Zamojski explains Latour’s use in more detail: “since radical critique seems not to bring about any significant change in the order of things, maybe we should try something else” (Hodgson et al., 2017, p. 81). Latour’s diagnosis of the miserable game of critique becomes in its

use the turning point from a critical to a post-critical attitude.

Latour is also a central point of reference in the contributions gathered in “The Fatigue of Critique?” (Anker, 2020; Hodgson, 2020; Oliverio, 2020; Wortmann, 2020). Summarizing the ongoing debate, the editorial team (2020) asks right in the second line with Latour: “Has critique run out of steam?” The answer then echoes through the opening article and other contributions: Since the times and the objects of critique have changed, the inventory of critique is outdated or at least must be configured differently (Anker, 2020; Oliverio, 2020; Wortmann, 2020). Critique today is part of the status quo (Anker, 2020). Especially “debunking” (Wortmann, 2020, p. 2) reaches its limits when the phenomenon in question is reduced to its critical explanation. The critical claim of a “larger force (e.g. society), a deeper power (e.g. racism) or an invisible hand (e.g. habitus)” (Wortmann, 2020, p. 2) that determine social action, paralyses those involved in pedagogical contexts. In this context, Latour himself speaks of “society, discourse, knowledge-slash-power, fields of forces, empires, capitalism” (Latour, 2004) and thereby refers directly to Pierre Bourdieu. Wortmann follows up: “In this sense of ‘critique’ as debunking activity, post-critical pedagogy can be seen as a project that tries to take the next step after it has become clear that critical pedagogy has run out of steam” (Wortmann, 2020, p. 2).

These spotlights into the manifesto as well as into the contributions to “The Fatigue of Critique?” show: Latour’s (2004) “Why has critique run out of steam?” functions as a kind of hinge between critique and post-critique. However, we see *firstly* the problem that Latour’s diagnosis of a miserable game of critique and thus the programmatic uses of this diagnosis are not convincing. *Secondly*, Latour’s rejection of sociology dries up a source of knowledge that could help post-critical pedagogy to concretize its concept – even if it is in a post-critical affirmation of eclectically chosen elements of sociological thought.

Against Latour’s Diagnosis of the Present

Latour (2004) begins his diagnosis of the miserable game of critique with the observation that his own constructivist critical impetus towards “‘the lack of scientific certainty’ inherent in the construction of facts” (Latour, 2004, p. 226), now also belongs to the arsenal of the “bad guys” (Latour, 2004, p. 227). By this, he means in particular Republicans who point to the constructed nature of climate data in order to further subordinate environmental issues in the US-American debate. Latour’s focus is thus on post-factual claims in politics, and he anticipates the thesis that social theory and cultural studies are conditions for this phenomenon (D’Ancona, 2017; Hampe, 2016; Williams, 2017). With the distinction between “*fairy position*” and “*fact position*” (Latour, 2004, p. 237), which he traces back

to the work of Bourdieu (Latour, 2004, pp. 228–229), Latour diagnoses a relativism of critique. The critics jump back and forth between these positions – “naturalized facts when it suits them and social construction when it suits them” (Latour, 2004, p. 227). This leads Latour to turn away from the tools of critique and to affirmatively address *matters of concern* – and this is where post-critical pedagogy with its affirmative impetus comes in.

Against Latour – and thus also his uses in the context of post-critical pedagogy – we firstly put forward an argument that is also a diagnosis of our time. We think that Latour’s argument is superficial. It is actually not the case that the agility of critique leads to a relativism that dominates debates about key contemporary problems, such as climate change, digitalisation or de-democratisation. Rather, it is the case that society itself is diverse and contradictory and critique must remain in motion for precisely this reason. Already Theodor W. Adorno (2020, p. 548) states with regards to the social sciences:

Society is full of contradictions and yet determinable; rational and irrational in one, a system and yet fragmented; blind nature and yet mediated by consciousness. The sociological mode of procedure must bow to this. Otherwise, out of puristic zeal to avoid contradiction, it will fall into the most fatal contradiction of all, namely, that existing between its own structure and that of its object.¹

Now, at this point, it is diagnosis versus diagnosis, and it is easy to fall into the old yes-no-game (Haker, 2020). What helps here from a social science perspective are empirical observations.

The digitalisation and datafication of education (Hartong, 2020), but also the recent involvement of the social sciences in the discourse on the Corona pandemic (Lessenich, 2020) make it clear: on the one hand, we see objectifying *fact* positions that insist on evidence and are powerful, bringing with them threats in the form of post-democratic (Stalder, 2019) and depoliticising (Lessenich, 2020) tendencies. On the other hand, we see *fairly* positions shaped by semi-truths (Halbwahrheiten) (Gess, 2021) and formed in echo chambers (Jaster & Lanius, 2019) – with equally clear threats, such as those evident in the visibility and political success of authoritarian positions. It is important to note, however, that these threat scenarios do not arise from a back-and-forth jumping between critical positions but come from different directions – scientists and politicians with positivist dreams and technocratic tendencies on the one hand and right-wing, conspiracy-theoretical, esoteric micro-movements on the other. To be able to take a critical look at both threats requires an agile (Haker & Otterspeer, 2021) or two-way (Vogelmann, 2019) critique, which Latour rejects.

Against Latour’s Rejection of Sociology – Two Questions for the Programme of Post-Critical Pedagogy

One reason for Latour’s poor diagnosis of our time could be the lack of a concept of society. Due to sociology’s difficulty in approaching the *impossible object* (Marchart, 2013; see also Haker, 2020) of society, he concludes the practical impossibility of society’s existence and that the unfortunate concept of society must be dissolved (Latour, 2007; see also Gertenbach, 2015). This brings us to our second objection. Latour’s general rejection of sociology leads to a renunciation of basic social-scientific insights in the programme, which could, however, be good for sharpening the contours of post-critical pedagogy.

It is now difficult, if not redundant, to enter into a differentiated discussion of the sociological and philosophical concepts criticized by Latour. This is because what Latour actually criticizes is not, to take one example, Bourdieu’s sociology, but “a teachable version of social critique inspired by a too quick reading of, let’s say, a sociologist as eminent as Pierre Bourdieu” (Latour, 2004, pp. 228–229). Wortmann (2020, p. 2) argues in a very similar way:

Probably most of us who passionately teach Bourdieu (or other critical thinkers) to students have experienced a certain type of desperate reaction, along the lines of ‘whatever I will do, unknowingly I will reproduce the inequalities of society and therefore my actions will make no difference’. On the one hand, this of course is not Bourdieu’s position, but on the other hand, this feeling of being paralysed is not at all unreasonable ...

Similarly, Edlinger (2015, p. 295) does not pin the annoyance of critique on theory, for example Adorno’s, but locates this annoyance in the daily business of critique in sociology seminars, at art congresses and at the regulars’ table. On the one hand, the question arises, why we do not just do better sociology classes, or whether the authors simply attended bad seminars. On the other hand, under these circumstances it seems to make little sense – to go into what Bourdieu or Adorno or others might or might not really mean – what clearly distinguishes Bourdieu from conspiracy theories (Latour, 2004); what the activating, positive, border-crossing elements of Bourdieu’s sociology are (Sonderregger, 2010); where the thinking of the young French savages of the 1970s meets that of Adorno. In this second point, we also want to avoid the old yes-no-game and instead present two general sociological insights that we have chosen in the belief that post-critical pedagogy would benefit from taking a position on these insights. These two points, then, are merely spotlights that attempt to re-establish the conversation between sociology and post-critique in the hope that a fruitful dialogue can emerge.

The first insight is from social theory. Olga Ververi

(2017, p. 35) states in her “Sociologist’s Conversation with the ‘Manifesto for a Post-Critical Pedagogy’”: post-critical pedagogy, “which is about identifying positive aspects of education, could be associated with the educational paradigm of *functionalism*, positing that education has a positive role in maintaining stability in society.” Following this reply, it can be helpful to get back to evolutionary- and communication-theoretical aspects of system-theoretical functionalism, so that post-critical pedagogy can position itself in this regard. This has a certain charm because the following system-theoretical considerations are not suspicious of being very close to critical pedagogy. Quite the contrary, Luhmann (1991, 1993) himself diagnosed the end of critical theory with regards to her debunking activity in the early 90th.

Insofar as critique has something to do with change, evolutionary theoretical considerations refer to the evolutionary “power of the negative” (Brunkhorst, 2014, pp. 10ff.). In the sequence of variation, selection and stabilisation as the three elements of social evolution, change is initially dependent on variations that can only arise from a negation of the existing. “Only the exponential increase of *communicative negativity* (i.e., the increase of no-statements) *enables the take-off of social evolution*. It is dissent that explains the take-off of social evolution” (Brunkhorst, 2014, p. 15). Critique as a contradiction against current conditions, the ‘no’ to a ‘business as usual’ (Luhmann, 1998), dissent, by which the current order is destabilised and unsettled (Rancière, 2015), are the motors for social evolution. Thus, “it is clear that socio-cultural evolution must pass through the purgatory of critique”² (Brunkhorst, 2000, p. 9, translated by C.H. & L.O.). Diagnostically, it can be stated that with increasing complexity of society, on the one hand, the possibilities of contradiction also increase. Because more complexity initially means more possibilities. This is probably where the annoyance of critique sets in, whilst critique is becoming ubiquitous and perhaps arbitrary. On the other hand, in this complexity, every “yes” is accountable for more “nos” (Luhmann, 2012), because choosing one possibility from many means neglecting the many. So, from another perspective, the affirmation of what “is good in the world that is worth preserving” (Hodgson et al., 2017, p. 19) is a rejection and a declaration of war on other possibilities in the world. In this formal sense, even love is violent and evil (Spreeblich, 2008).

No-Statements are central in Wortmann’s (2019) paper on *combining affirmative and critical vocabulary*. Here he differentiates no-statements into a normative narrative – *something should not be like it is* – and a debunking narrative – *something is not like it seems to be*. To make our own position clear: We do not even see why, in a *bad world* (de Lagasnerie, 2018), a negative critique should have become obsolete, even if its effect is merely to produce variation. And also Wortmann (2019, p. 475) sees

“critical activity in the sense of ‘saying how something should not be’ as a necessary part of post-critical pedagogy.” For one thing, we see a misconception of constructivist sociology in the rejection of debunking critique, when the no-statement – *something is not like it seems to be* – is related to a “driving force behind” (Wortmann, 2019, p. 471), to “hidden realities behind the surface of educational phenomena” (Wortmann, 2020, p. 2) or to “causal explanations coming out of the deep dark below” (Latour, 2004, p. 229). Explanations like *society* or *field of forces* are not referring to an ontological entity. They are simply technical terms, post-essential scientific constructions or objectivations, that can answer the basic sociological question: How is social order possible and how can it persist? Then again, these debunking no-statements are a stimulating factor for social evolution in the public, in education or in politics – e.g., ‘The binary conception of gender (male/female) is not an order by nature.’ But Wortmann (2019, p. 471) says in line with the manifesto, “that a post-critical pedagogy should simply avoid critique” that is a debunking activity. And there are even more no-statements, that are ignored by Wortmann’s differentiation: No-statements are a core element of scientific evolution – e.g., ‘What you think is true, based on your research, is false based on my research’. And what about no-statements like – ‘I would prefer not to’ (Bartleby) or ‘No means No’ or ‘That is not my cup of tea’. We do think there is a variation of no-statements that needs to be considered, when rejecting the no.

How does post-critical pedagogy, which obviously aims more at selecting positive variations and stabilising them, relate to the evolutionary power of saying no and to the many nos that each affirmation produces? In any case, the constant emphasis on the positive and affirmation suggests the following conclusion: Variation could only be avoided if our world already provides the best of all possibilities, and it is only a matter of selecting and establishing the best possibilities. In a world that is becoming more and more complex, it is a challenge to follow this diagnosis and to trust oneself to be able to select these best possibilities.

The second insight comes from the sociology of critique. In claiming that “radical critique seems not to bring about any significant change in the order of things” (Hodgson et al., 2017, p. 81), there seems to be an overestimation of the controlling potential of critique. This is an imposition on the relationship between critical practice and social movement on the one hand and sociological critique or critical theory on the other. It can be well illustrated by Kafka’s “Give It Up!”:

Fortunately, there was a policeman at hand, I ran to him and breathlessly asked him the way. He smiled and said:

‘You asking me the way?’

‘Yes’, I said, ‘since I can’t find it myself.’

‘Give it up! Give it up’ said he, and turned with a sudden jerk, like someone who want to be alone with his laughter (Kafka, 2017, p. 257).

Sure, here it is, the aloofness and simultaneous detachment of critical sociology, impersonated by the policeman (for the diagnosis of sociology as police see Bröckling, 2013). However, on the one hand, critique cannot live up to the call for it to lead the way and take over the social steering wheel. Modern societies do not allow themselves to be directed from a control centre. On the other hand, a critical sociology that turns its back on critical practice and is no longer able to show its ways threatens to leave it Kafkaesque. The contact between academic critique and social movement would be lost.

However, this dilemma is not necessarily a reason to turn away from critique in a second turn. Critical sociology, which with concepts as society, discourse, knowledge-slash-power, fields of forces ... has always known that any critique is doomed to successful failure (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2006; see also Bröckling, 2013), can use this paradox in two ways. It can paralyse and lead to a *fatigue of critique* if only failure is seen repeatedly (e.g., Wortmann, 2019). But it can also have an activating effect when success is considered. The successful failure of feminist critique, for example – through which values such as equality have become common sense, even if they are repeatedly undermined in practice (Wetterer, 2013) – could then be reinterpreted as a programme of critique, in which negative, because counterfactual, norms in relation to reality repeatedly force a change in practice. In this case, diagnosis of society and programme are aligned with each other. Critique by means of these norms, however, is by no means “utopian critique, driven from a transcendent position” (Hodgson et al., 2017, p. 17), nor “inherent critique of societal institutions focused on their dysfunctionality” (Hodgson et al., 2017, p. 17), nor an “external point of view” (Hodgson et al., 2017, p. 18).

Critique by means of these norms is oriented towards realistic utopias (Habermas, 2010).

So how does post-critical pedagogy relate to contemporary norms and social movements? Does it see Greta Thunberg saying “No!” to current climate policy as a rejectable, hateful, ineffective position because she says: “I want you to panic”? And where does post-critical pedagogy get the standards by which it evaluates what is “good in the world”? And if it is looking for the good in a not-so-good world, what exactly is the utopian dimension of post-critical pedagogy?

Our remarks have shown a close connection between diagnosis and programme. We can find this in critical theory and sociology as well as in the affirmation of a post-critical pedagogy. And as it stands, it does end up boiling down to a special yes-no-debate. All hasty readings of Bourdieu, all sociology seminars, all regulars’ tables aside, the question is whether the concept of society and the totality inherent in this concept can claim social-scientific objectivity, that is not referring to an essence, but to an intersubjective validity that goes beyond the context-dependent perception of individuals. If so, Latour’s diagnosis of the present in “Why has Critique Run out of Steam?” is clearly undercomplex and a programme that refers to it cannot meet the challenge of a more and more complex society. There is much to suggest that this foundation of post-critical pedagogy is questionable. Not least Latour’s (2013) own turn in *Modes of Existence* in which he describes his old theory as not sufficient. Of course, Latour would never use such old-fashioned sociological terms like field of forces, society or capitalism. He uses the innovative and original term “value system” (Latour, 2013, pp. 28–46). At this point, we see no other way than a differentiated discussion of the sociological and philosophical concepts criticized and rejected by Latour and the post-critical pedagogy. Otherwise, post-critique and post-critical pedagogy are just new and cool labels that remain too vague for academic discussion.

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¹ „Die Gesellschaft ist widerspruchsvoll und doch bestimmbar; rational und irrational in eins, System und brüchig, blinde Natur und durch Bewußtsein vermittelt. Dem muß die Verfahrensweise der Soziologie sich beugen. Sonst gerät sie, aus puristischem Eifer gegen den Widerspruch, in den verhängnisvollsten: den zwischen ihrer Struktur und der ihres Objekts“ (Adorno, 2020, p. 548). Translated by:
<http://www.autodidactproject.org/other/positivismusstreit/adorno-logic.html>

² „dass die soziokulturelle Evolution durch das Fegefeuer der Kritik hindurch muss“ (Brunkhorst, 2000, p. 9)