MARXISM AND LEFT POLITICS
Critique, we have recently been told, has ‘run out of steam’, making it a poor weapon for engaging in contemporary theoretical battles. Worse still, not only does critique appear blunted, even anachronistic, but the enemy is wise to the critical trick and has turned its back on ‘our’ forces. Field marshals of the academy are even calling for a regrouping, a new assessment of the strategic disposition that has come down to us via the critical tradition (see Latour 2004).

Today, even in politics, there is less patience for interventions that take a critical form (and which cannot always be dismissed as a capitulation to power). For instance, in my own experience, criticism of dominant political narratives and practices are often met with the objection: ‘Your criticisms are all very well and good, but what does it say about the alternative?’

If we (sometimes) concede the sincerity of such statements, and admit the need to direct ourselves towards finding an alternative, why should we bother with critique? ‘Write all the critical words you want,’ they might even say, ‘but it’s the new world that we’re really interested in.’

By presenting the problem in these terms, I do not mean to suggest that we all, and always, mean the same thing when we talk about critique or criticism. Summarising the wide spectrum of practices that go under the name ‘critique’, a recent contribution by Michael Hardt (2011: 19) speaks of ‘relatively generic
means of fault-finding; methods to question the truth of authority; techniques to reveal the figures of power that operate in dominant discourses or ideologies; and even specific Kantian procedures of investigating the human understanding, reason, or judgment. Nevertheless, for Hardt (2011: 19), in spite of the differences between ways of doing critique – conceived in his paper as the primary mode of practising theory as political intervention – they all remain open to the charge of being ‘insufficient as political methods in so far as they lack the capacity both to transform the existing structures of power and create alternative social arrangements’.

I have respect for ‘this critique of critique’, which motivates for politically engaged modes of doing theory, self-consciously and militantly, directed at a positive, or better, constitutive task. Indeed, in this chapter, I trace a similar path to that of Hardt in his insistence on a ‘militancy of theory’, but here, in the name of critique. It seems to me that we lose much more than we gain by writing off critique and it might well be that without it, our new worlds will remain only as words. Still, the challenge raised by Hardt is a crucial one: what (if anything at all) does critique have to do with ‘the constitutive political tasks’ which fall on us today?

As a way of addressing this important question, I begin by tracing a line between and within what have been, for me, important landmarks for ‘doing critique’. In the latter sections of this chapter I focus on the work of Michel Foucault, which is not only a formative point of reference for a number of contemporary critical perspectives, but also the primary point of inspiration for the mode of ‘philosophical and political militancy, beyond critique’ advocated by Hardt (2011: 20). In the next section, however, I begin marking Foucault’s relation to something more familiar, perhaps in the same way that one searches for a nearby landmark in order to establish a preliminary bearing.

A line, then, that runs from Karl Marx to Foucault.

LANDMARKS

Maurizio Lazzarato (2002: 102) has noted that Foucault’s writings on political economy and government are at once very close to and very far from Marx. Even more generally, however, Foucault’s relationship to Marx is a double relation: a certain tension combined with a shared set of concerns and often real methodological and political intersections between the two projects. On the
one hand, Marxism (if not Marx himself) has often appeared in Foucault’s writings, lectures and interviews as the subject of polemical statements or inferred critique. On the other hand, his later work, in particular his lectures on the genealogy of modern government, will, as Bob Jessop (2007: 34) has noted, move towards an ‘appropriation and development of insights from Marx himself’.

Already in 1975, however, Foucault had indicated that his relationship to Marx was more complex than what might appear to be the case skimming through reference sections of any one of his works. It would seem, rather than ignoring Marx, his ‘negligence’ in offering up the appropriate citation might have been linked to his aversion to a certain cultish character he associated with Marxism:

> I often quote concepts, texts and phrases from Marx, but without feeling obliged to add the authenticating label of a footnote with a laudatory phrase to accompany the quotation. As long as one does that, one is regarded as someone who knows and reveres Marx, and will be suitably honoured in the so-called Marxist journals. But I quote Marx without saying so, without quotation marks, and because people are incapable of recognising Marx’s texts I am thought to be someone who doesn’t quote Marx. When a physicist writes a work of physics, does he feel it necessary to quote Newton and Einstein? He uses them, but he doesn’t need the quotation marks, the footnote and the eulogistic comment to prove how completely he is being faithful to the master’s thought (Foucault 1980: 52–53).

There can be little doubt, however, that the relationship between these two projects, their various intersections and fissures, runs deeper than the anxieties of offering (or not) the ‘appropriate citation’. As Thomas Lemke (2000: 1), following Etienne Balibar, has noted, Foucault’s thought is characterised by a ‘genuine struggle’ with Marx, a struggle that will prove one of the ‘principle sources of its productivity’. If Foucault’s (1980: 57) criticisms of Marxism – whether with respect to its inattention to the question of ‘the body’ or Foucault’s (1990a: 92–102) refusal of an analytic practice that would reduce relations of power to relations of production or a bipolar field of social antagonism, or even, for that matter, the sense in which Foucault’s (2004: 30–33) methodological elaboration seems to self-consciously run in the opposite direction from Marxism’s ‘descending’ method – are suggestive of a theoretical antagonism,
it is no less true that his later work will increasingly throw light on what has been called a broader ‘tactical alliance’ (Balibar 1995 in Lemke 2000: 1) between the two projects. As Lazzarato (2002: 102) notes, in both Foucault and Marx, what will be crucial will be the forms through which relations between men, or ‘between man and “things”’, become the object of strategies to ’coordinate and command’ human action with an eye to the extraction of a surplus (of power in Foucault and value in Marx). And in both Marx and Foucault, these strategies will unfold in ways that produce effects that are neither simply economic, nor even political, but also ontological.

It seems to me, however, that a more subtle affinity between Marx and Foucault – and which, in an odd way, underlies and reinforces the sense of a ‘tactical alliance’ between their respective projects – goes beyond the thematic or analytic intersections between their respective works, to clarify their respective approaches to critique.

Such a connection is, however, by no means self-evident and the suggestion of an affinity between Marx and Foucault with respect to critique is not made without an element of (hermeneutic) risk. After all, on all the occasions where Foucault (in Kelly 1994: 148) draws the line of influence that gives the tradition within which he locates his own work, there is the un-ignorable and consistent exclusion of a proper name ‘from Hegel, through Nietzsche and Max Weber, to the Frankfurt school’ – the scandal of a critical tradition without the name Marx!

Although these risks are lessened by Foucault’s confession – ‘a citation without citation’ – a gesture perhaps motivated by his desire for the ‘unburdening and liberation of Marx in relation to party dogma’ (Foucault in Kelly 1994: 135) and thus the possibility of reading Marx’s place in the silences and in-between spaces of a list of proper names, risk is re-inscribed in the strategy of this essay, which makes its case in relation to ‘The Young Marx’, or at least, a younger one.

BEGINNINGS

In 1843, as the 25-year-old Marx was preparing to leave behind the ‘oppressive air’ of Germany after being forced to resign as editor of Rheinische Zeitung (which was shut down less than one month later), he was already working on his next project, the ‘critical journal’ Deutsch–Französische Jahrbücher (German–French Annals). Although only one issue of the journal was published, with the majority of the print run eventually finding its way into the hands of the police,
the contribution the journal makes to ‘critique’ is, if not an important one, then at least not an altogether uninteresting one; no less for giving us a glimpse into the attitude that shaped the philosophical practice of a young Marx (whatever its limitations) – one of the many ‘beginnings’, however contingent, on the way to his *Critique of Political Economy* (1867).

Notably, in addition to Marx’s *On the Jewish Question* (1844), the journal also published two texts explicitly written in the tradition of critique: Friedrich Engels’s *Outline of a Critique of Political Economy* (1844), and Marx’s own *Introduction for a Contribution to a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* (1844). Leaving aside questions of what Louis Althusser called the ‘enormous layer of ideology’ (2005: 74) that the young Marx was said to be still struggling to escape from, we can note that, along with these texts, the journal also published a series of correspondences, concluding with Marx’s stirring letter to Arnold Ruge (the co-editor of the journal), encouraging ‘relentless criticism’. Beyond the militant lyricism of a young Marx, what makes these letters particularly intriguing is the light they throw on a ‘critical attitude’, an attitude that I suspect is, in part, what establishes Marx in a critical relationship to his own beginnings; what Althusser (2005: 84) called his ‘ferocious insistence on freeing himself from the myths which presented themselves to him as truth’ and his insistence on the grounding of intellectual practice in the ‘experience of real history’ that will elbow ‘these myths aside’. But, if there is a binding thread in these letters and the approach that they take to critique, it is their immediately political character and their commitment to the task of making revolution. And it is this question, that is, of ‘revolution’, or rather the potential for one, which is a deeper thread that runs through the exchange.

**A RELENTLESS CRITICISM**

Marx’s analysis of political conditions in Germany (whose very air he complained ‘makes one a serf’) are interesting for a number of reasons, not least of which are its subtle reflections on the political and the question of autonomy (see Veriava 2013). What I want to underline here, however, is that this is a thought already inserted in what, elsewhere, I call the militant’s questioning: ‘at the level of every move’ making an assessment of ‘our ability to resist control, or of our submission to it’ (Marx 1967: 211).
In Marx’s final letter, where he outlines the perspective of the proposed journal, the task appears intimately tied to the ‘self-understanding (critical philosophy) of the age concerning its struggles and wishes’ (Marx 1967: 215). This self-understanding that the ‘present time’ must arrive at, or at any rate move toward, is, however, at once the task of the critic and that of the world (or in anticipation of Foucault, we could say, the work of the critic as witness and participant in the unfolding processes of the world). Marx (214) is emphatic: this does not mean raising up one or other ‘dogma’ through which the world can know itself – ‘[h]ere is the truth, kneel here!’ Instead, criticism will only develop new principles out of criticism of ‘the world’s own principles’ (214).

I do not want to exaggerate the importance of the letter. Although not obscure, it is more of a beginning (one of many) than anything else. What I want to do is to simply mark several points that I think are helpful for thinking about the movement of Marx’s thought.

Firstly, much of the letter is devoted to defining the role of the journal, a role that is explicitly related to a practice of criticism and the role of the critic. In Marx’s terms, this implies a concern with both the ‘theoretical’ existence and the ‘practical’ existence of ‘man’. In this Marx, there is still little that motivates one over the other and the socio-political contexts in which people find themselves, their forms of life and ‘economic processes’, for instance, stand alongside religion as an object of criticism. Secondly, Marx, with a marked Hegelian accent, sets up a striking opposition between a ‘reason’ that has always existed and the ‘reasonable form’ that has eluded it, noting that not only does the ‘modern state’ take on the demands of reason, but because of this, it everywhere becomes caught in a contradiction between its ‘function and its real prerequisites’. The third aspect of Marx’s critical practice I want to highlight is, in a sense, its deeply political character. In fact, Marx (1967: 214, Marx’s emphasis) writes: ‘nothing prevents us … from starting our criticism with criticism of politics, with taking sides in politics, and hence actual real struggles, and identifying ourselves with them’.

It is necessary to also say that Marx’s thought, and the questions that move his critical practice are here still bound to a ‘problematic’ that, just a few years later, he turns his critical sights on, and in so doing, remakes the terms and question of this political-intellectual project. The motto given to criticism in the letters, for instance, still bears the mark of a set of questions ‘all up in the head’, posed as ‘the reform of consciousness’ through ‘analysing the mystical consciousness’ that has become incomprehensible to itself. And it does so in
order to bring to light what is already latent to it, with Marx (1967: 214) offering that ‘it will be evident, then, that the world has long dreamed of something of which it only has to become conscious in order to possess it in actuality’. More crucially, however, Marx’s critic will only carry out this work within historically given limits – both in relation to a historical process, as well as to the ways in which individuals have come to see themselves in relation to this process (that is in relation to subjectivity) – precisely by confronting these limits. In an impassioned, and also daring passage, Marx outlines an intellectual practice that marks out a relationship to the existing state of things, his present, as one of ‘relentless criticism’:

Even greater than the external obstacles seem to be the inner ones. Even though there is no doubt about the ‘whence’, there does prevail all the more confusion about the ‘whither’. It is not only the fact that a general anarchy has broken out among the reformers; each one will have to admit to himself that he has no exact idea of what is to happen. But this is exactly the advantage of the new direction, namely, that we do not anticipate the world dogmatically, but rather wish to find the new world through criticism of the old. Until now the philosophers had the solutions to all riddles in their desks, and the stupid outside world simply had to open its mouth so that the roasted pigeons of absolute science might fly into it. Philosophy has become secularized, and the most striking proof for this is the fact that the philosophical consciousness itself is drawn into the torment of struggle, not only outwardly but inwardly as well. Even though the construction of the future and its completion for all times is not our task, what we have to accomplish at this time is all the more clear: relentless criticism of all existing conditions, relentless in the sense that the criticism is not afraid of its findings and just as little afraid of the conflict with the powers that be (Marx 1967: 212, Marx’s emphasis).

Marx’s story does not end here. In the letters, ‘the philosophical consciousness’ is already bending with the ‘torment of struggle’, but it will only ‘shift base’ by regrounding itself in the perspective of the ‘real movement’ that Marx, in ‘taking sides in politics’, in ‘actual real struggles’, allows to reshape the terms of his critical intellectual project. In fact, the Marx we find in the letters fits well with Althusser’s complaint that the critical practice of the young Marx remained prisoner to ‘a rationalist conception of critique’, whose essential
problem remained distinguishing the true from the false, conceived as a form of questioning to guard against ‘errors, prejudices and illusions’ (Althusser 2006: 17).

Doubtless, Marx’s treatment of the question of the state in these letters is one of the sources of this impression. More importantly, however, when Marx (1967: 212) later turns his critical thought to the ideological world of his own beginnings, we see emerging ‘an altogether different meaning and function’ for critique (see Marx and Engels [1847] 1998). While the full significance of these shifts is in many ways still beyond my own powers of philosophical-textual appreciation, it is less difficult to get a sense of the (political) temporality that marks the development of Marx’s thought in this period: its constant and unflinching confrontation of its own limits and the deepening urgency it gives to re-evaluating the ‘tasks of the present’ from within a new perspective. Althusser, in fact, insists on a certain ‘pace’ in the development of Marx’s thought, itself marked by the contingency of beginnings and which progressively calls into question the very problematic that gives the initial questions and terms of his critical philosophy.

Although I suspect that a work might produce results that go beyond the problematic that inspired it, Althusser’s reading of Marx and the specific development of his conception of critique, has turned out to be an important signpost in mapping the intellectual terrains I grapple with.

**BECOMING MARXIST**

Engels famously reported that Marx, the founder of Marxist philosophy, had once remarked that he (Marx) was not a Marxist. To be sure, Marx was not here repudiating his own thought, nor rejecting the possibility that this thought should take on a political life apart from him. It is more likely that Marx was responding to what in Marxism is (already within his own lifetime) beginning to take on the character of dogma (‘[h]ere is the truth, kneel here!’) and what years later Foucault found cause to insist Marx needed to be liberated from, as I have already mentioned. Althusser points out that the intellectual kinship that Marx’s works solicits is with a thought that is already thinking for itself, a thought grounded in real history and the struggles that belong to it. And it was in fact precisely on these materialist terms that Marx presented his critique of political economy for critique.
This fact, however, takes nothing away from the confidence of Marx’s texts, nor from Marx’s confidence in his texts. Marx was very much a Marxist in this sense: as Althusser (2006: 15) says, ‘he believed in his work’. Marx was not, however, a Marxist where this indexed subjection to a ‘total or totalizing unity, constituting a body of thought that could be labelled Marxism’. In fact, rather than a tenet of thought, in the late Althusser, Marx’s identity as a Marxist turns on the form of critique his intellectual practice comes to be regrounded in.

As is well known, the tremendous contribution, significance and controversy of Althusser’s writing is in no small part connected to his thesis that the development of Marx’s thought is marked by an ‘epistemological break’—characterised by a certain mode of ‘shifting ground’, by ‘the changing out of the elements’ of this thought—as Marx moves from the problematic that marked his early writings,7 to the properly materialist perspective that is beginning to emerge with his *Theses on Feuerbach* (1888) and *The German Ideology* (1932). What I want to emphasise, however, is the manner in which Althusser links this break in Marx’s thought to a shift in the ‘meaning and function’ this thought gives to critique. For where Althusser sees the young Marx’s critical practice stranded to a rationalist conception of critique that was bound to the idealist problematic of the state of reason, this practice shifts ground precisely by *regrounding* itself in the perspective of the ‘worker’s movement’ that the Marx of 1843 was soon to discover.8

While I have some reservations about the reduction of the critical practice of the young Marx to the ‘rationalist conception of critique’ that is clearly determining many of its questions and terms, it is the latter point that I find the most convincing and Althusser’s fixing of the shifts in Marx’s critical practice to the tempo of political struggle:

[C]ritique is not, for Marx, the judgment which the (true) Idea pronounces on the defective or contradictory real; critique is critique of existing reality by existing reality (either by another reality, or a contradiction internal to reality). For Marx, *critique is the real criticizing itself*, casting off its own detritus itself, in order to liberate and laboriously realize its dominant tendency, which is active within it. It is this materialist sense that Marx’s critique could, as early as 1845, treat communism as the very opposite of the ‘ideal’, the deepest tendency of the ‘real movement’. But Marx did not content himself with this still abstract notion of critique. For which ‘reality’ is in question here? … Marx tied critique to that which in the real movement, grounded critique: for him, in the last
instance, the class struggle of the exploited … (Althusser 2006: 17, Althusser’s emphasis)

I want to pause on this passage whose intelligence for me is the connection it makes between a conception of critique and ‘the real movement’ and thus the very definition Marx gives for communism in *The German Ideology*. In fact, between the letters of 1843, and Marx and Engels’s definition of communism in 1845, one might note an interesting shift, a kind of ‘changing out of elements’, in which the critic of ‘the relentless criticism’ of the present state of things, changes out with ‘the real movement’ whose ‘practical critique’ is now the author of the destruction of the existing state of things: ‘Communism is for us not a state of affairs which is to be established, an ideal to which reality (will) have to adjust itself. We call communism the real movement which abolishes the present state of things’ (Marx and Engels [1847] 1998: 57).

This real movement – whose condition is that of the class struggle itself – is in fact the real that Marx poses against reality, the real that, in Althusser’s words, is ‘the true author (the agent) of the real’s critique of itself’ (Althusser 2006: 18). Marx becomes Marxist by grounding critique in the real movement; in presenting the real, as the reality of the class struggle, from the perspective of the workers’ movement.

We can now turn to Foucault.

**IN FITS AND STARTS**

Between the publication of the first volume of Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality* (Foucault 1990a [1976]) and the two volumes that follow it (1990b [1984] and 1990c [1984]), there is a space of eight years. This ‘gap’ is, however, often thought of as more than a temporal one, dividing the two lines of Foucault’s later research; on the one hand a series of studies concerned with the problem of power and on the other, a set of investigations that take up the question of the subject. In spite of Foucault’s clarification in his 1982 essay, ‘The subject and power’, that it was the ‘subject’ and ‘not power’, that was the ‘general theme’ of his research (2002: 327) and his explicit confrontation of this ‘gap’ in the introduction to the second volume of *The History of Sexuality* (titled *The Use of Pleasure*), this shift has, if not confounded Foucauldian scholars, then at least presented itself as a problem needing resolution.
The great enthusiasm that accompanied the publication of Foucault’s lectures at the College de France is thus accounted for not only by the very real breakthrough it makes for a theoretical approach to the ‘government of state’, but also, it would seem, for the ways in which it helps fill in this apparent gap, drawing together these two apparently ‘disparate projects’. The blurb of the first English edition of *Security Territory Population* in fact carries, in these very terms, the endorsement of the *Continental Philosophy Review*, characterising the lectures’ publication as a ‘major event’ that ‘might properly be called the “missing link”’ revealing ‘the underlying unity of Foucault’s later thought’ (Foucault 2007).

There is certainly a real sense in which this is correct and the posthumously published lectures on government help us to understand and draw together the different lines emerging from Foucault’s later work. Nevertheless, we should still ask whether this is the way one ought to read Foucault. As Gilles Deleuze (1992: 159) says in his essay on Foucault’s concept of the ‘dispositif’, ‘[g]reat thinkers are somewhat seismic; they do not evolve but proceed by means of crisis, in fits and starts’. And, indeed, it is often the ‘holes’ in a philosopher’s work that contain the signs of these crises, the place of new beginnings. Would it therefore not be better to do something else? To assume discontinuity, breaks and even crises, along with the continuities, leaps and breakthroughs, but within a field that is opened up by our own questions, our own grappling with the present? In any case, a reading that is less about offering an account of the unity of the work, but instead (borrowing an analogy) which traces a ‘line of force’, linking and aligning elements that would give us the basis of a use, here-now. This is what Harry Cleaver (2000) calls a political reading, given of course that we ask the right questions.

Along these lines, I want to say that here, in relation to this ‘hole’ in a work, a political problem clarifies. As I argue elsewhere, while ‘the question of resistance is far from being already closed from the start in Foucault’, there is still an open question about what forms of political action might be most effective within a dynamic in which power is implicated in the very constitution of the subject who resists (Veriava 2013; see also Hardt 2010).

**BEGINNING AGAIN**

There is something uneasy, difficult even, about Foucault’s writings on critique, a superficial accessibility that covers over the affective work of the text, forcing
us to return to it every time we try to say something about it, searching for something already there, and yet, not-yet.

Their subtlety arises in part from the question form these works take (‘What is critique?’, ‘What is enlightenment?’), which presents a conception of critique through ‘enacting a certain mode of questioning which will prove central to this activity’ (Butler 2001: 2–3). Here the question – what is critique? – becomes the place of a displacement, the redrawing of a fold, daring us to think otherwise … ‘to stray afield’ of ourselves.14

Doubtless, the most well-known of Foucault’s texts on critique is his essay ‘What is enlightenment?’ (1997) which takes up a novel reading of Immanuel Kant’s essay by the same name. One can, however, find scattered throughout Foucault’s later work a number of references (some direct, others less so) to these threads, which collectively represent something of a sustained engagement with the theme of critique and with Kant’s essay.

In relation to these texts it is sometimes noted that Foucault allows us to ‘rethink critique as a practice’ and to rethink it in a way that is at a remove from what it wants to critique (see Butler 2001). This is true. However, it is important not to lose sight of the ways in which, in these threads, Foucault also comes to talk about the focus of his own intellectual work and the philosophical objects upon which this work centres.

In this section, I want to suggest that in these texts, next to his reading of Kant’s essay on the Enlightenment and in fact, in relation to it, Foucault also wants to underline a historically determined ‘relation’, or even ‘correlation’ between, as he once put it, ‘the government of self and the government of others’. Moreover, the practice of critique finds ‘no external support’, not only emerging with the ‘dispositifs’ or apparatuses that characterise modern power, but also (as Deleuze might say) belonging to it. It is at this impasse that Foucault offers us a reflection on the significance of his own work, in a way that not only details the methodological relations it establishes as a consequence, but also, I think, in a way that wants to underline the political and indeed also, ontological stakes this mode of critique is playing for.

**AN-OTHER POWER**

One of the things that is exciting about working between the lines of the texts on critique, or marking the development of concepts between these successive
statements, is the very real sense one gets of the movement of a thought coming to a ‘better perspective’ on itself. That is to say, of thought problematising its own practice, in ways that both clarify it and point a path beyond it: a thought crossing over behaviours and representations to find thought itself and with this movement, coming to the thought of the subject – what this thought was already becoming. And yet, or perhaps, for this reason, they are not straightforward, shifting terms and strategies, developing new ones even as they re-turn, every time, to the same place. Indeed it is Kant’s essay that exerts a particular gravity for this analysis.

However, I want to set aside Foucault’s commentary on Kant’s essay for the time being. As we will see, what he ascribes to this short piece by Kant is a new way of posing the question of the present. But he also locates the emergence of the ‘critical attitude’ that he links to Kant’s essay within a wider historical process.

In his lecture at the Sorbonne in 1978, Foucault suggests that between the lofty ‘Kantian enterprise and the small polemical-professional activities that bear the name “critique”’ one can find ‘a certain manner of thinking, of speaking, likewise of acting, and a certain relation to what exists, to what one knows, to what one does, as well as a relation to society, to culture, to others, and all this one might name the critical attitude’ (Foucault 1996: 382).

This work, which marks the first explicit formulation of Foucault’s conception of critique, and which was delivered shortly after his course Security Territory Population (focused on the problem of government), is interesting for the ways in which the emergence of this ‘critical attitude’ is linked to what he calls the ‘simultaneous movement of governmentalisation’ (384). This ‘movement’, which Foucault’s course at the College de France took as its subject, refers to the process, beginning from around the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, whereby a particular mode of directing the conduct of men – which had grown out of the institutional form of the Christian church – will increasingly shift, or rather be ‘displaced’ and expand into ‘civil society’, while at the same time becoming more focused (Foucault speaks about the ‘proliferation’ of treatise on conduct; on ‘conducting the conduct’ of children, the poor, cities, states, one’s body, one’s mind and so on) (383–384). And Foucault comes to speak about these treatises in terms of an ‘art of government’.

There is, however, a subtle point that is often overlooked in commentary on Foucault’s work on government, but which emerges far more starkly in this 1978 lecture on critique: the process of governmentalisation is in a sense always
double. It is the virtue of Hardt and Antonio Negri (2009: 56), in their recent book Commonwealth, to point to this ‘doubleness’ in Foucault’s theorisation of power, which they see at work in his monumental studies Discipline and Punish (1995) and the first volume of The History of Sexuality (1990a). For Hardt and Negri, there is in Foucault’s theory of power always an ‘other’ of power ‘or even an other power’, in relation to what Foucault calls resistance. And if this is true of books like Discipline and Punish and the History of Sexuality (Volume 1) as Hardt and Negri suggest, it is also true of Foucault’s courses on government as well as these statements on critique.

Echoing the formulation in his course Security Territory Population, in ‘What is critique?’ Foucault (1996: 384) tells us that a ‘fundamental question’ for the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was ‘How to govern?’, a question to which ‘all the institutions of government’ – pedagogical, economic, political – would come to respond. It is worth pointing out that in Security Territory Population the immediate backdrop of this new art of government was what he called the ‘insurrections of conduct’, linked to a whole series of revolts. In the Sorbonne lecture, he thus notes that this question (‘how to govern’), which for him was in a very real sense characteristic of the period, ‘cannot be dissociated’ from a second question, ‘how not to be governed’. It is important to point out, however, (in spite of his ‘slip’ at the end), that this question does not so much mark a rejection of government for Foucault, as it comes to function as a form of ‘constant contestation’ of the particular mode in which government might be realised:

In the great anxiety surrounding that way to govern and in the inquiries into modes of governing, one detects a perpetual question, which would be: ‘How not to be governed like that, by that, in the name of these principles, in view of such objectives and by means of such methods, not like that, not for that, not by them?’ (Foucault 1996: 384)

And it is exactly in relation to this ‘double movement’ – between the question ‘How to govern?’ and ‘How not to be governed?’ – that the drama of governmentalisation unfolds. However, what is crucial for the discussion on critique is that it is in relation to this ‘simultaneous movement of governmentalisation, of society and individuals’ (Foucault 1996: 384), and specifically in relation to this question of ‘How not to be governed?’, that Foucault uncovers ‘something close to what might be called the critical attitude’:
Against this, and like counterpoint, or rather at once partner and adversary of the arts of governing, as a way of suspecting them, of challenging them, of limiting them, of finding their right measure, of transforming them, of seeking to escape these arts of governing, or in any case to displace them, as an essential reluctance, but also in that way as a line of development of the arts of government, there would have been something born in Europe at this time, a kind of general cultural form, at once a moral and political attitude, a way of thinking … (384)

The ‘preliminary definition’ that the 1978 lecture gives to critique is thus the ‘art of not being governed so much’ (Foucault 1996: 384). Critique, as that which is linked to the other side of the process of governmentalisation, will thus find its specific points of development, or rather, what Foucault calls the ‘anchoring points’ of the critical attitude, in those domains that the ‘art of government’ takes as its source and support. In fact, Foucault sees emerging from this ‘game of governmentalisation and critique’ many of the forms of discursive reflection that characterise modern thought.

In this text we already get a strong sense of how, in relation to the genealogy of critique (which figures almost as the other side of the genealogy of government), Foucault wants to think of the relations between the three broad lines running through his work, which is in fact precisely what he reads as the focus of critique; that is, the relations that bind together knowledge, power and the subject. In ‘What is critique?’ Foucault shows us the ways in which critique emerges with a form of power and subjection whose mechanism forms a tight set of relations with knowledge. Moreover, in so far as the process of governmentalisation must be thought of as well as in relation to processes of subjection/subjectification, critique belongs to an alternate ‘movement’, a force of ‘desubjectification’:

If governmentalisation is really this movement concerned with subjugating individuals in the very reality of a social practice by mechanisms of power that appeal to a truth, I will say that critique is the movement through which the subject gives itself the right to question truth concerning its power effects and to question power about its discourses of truth. Critique will be the art of voluntary inservitude, of reflective indocility. The essential function of critique would be that of desubjectification in
the game of what one could call, in a word, the politics of truth (Foucault 1996: 386).

And it is in this context that the 1978 lecture turns to the question of Enlightenment (Aufklärung) and the ways in which Kant’s essay foregrounds the question of knowledge within an analysis coordinated along the axes of the question of autonomy and obedience to authority.

I would, however, like to linger a bit on Foucault’s characterisation here of the strategic field in which critique finds itself intervening. He describes it as a game and calls this game ‘a politics of truth’. To be sure, we are talking about a politics in which the contestation of power will, in a certain sense, also invest relations of knowledge, a contestation of a form of power marked by specific relations between power and knowledge (that is, specific relations between mechanisms to affect conduct and the systems of knowledge that determine their ‘application and validity’). However the subject of this politics, her conducts, and even her critical conduct, are already inserted into this terrain and in a strong sense take their form within it.

In this tight passage, this game, as a politics of truth, is in fact defined in relation to two forces, or rather two types of force; in the lecture Foucault calls them ‘movements’. The first is the movement of governmentalisation, by which Foucault indexes the process through which a particular form of power takes hold of life, subjugating it to specific forms of conduct and, as Foucault would have said, ‘through mechanisms that appeal to truth’. The second, alternative movement is characterised by a force of ‘inservitude’ and ‘indocility’, ‘a force of desubjectification’. In relation to this other side of the process of governmentalisati on, in Security Territory Population Foucault speaks about revolts of conduct and suggests the term ‘counter-conducts’ in relation to the ‘struggle against the processes implemented for conducting others’ (2007: 201). In the Sorbonne lecture, where Foucault seems far more focused on the specific ways in which struggles at the level of knowledge rebound on ‘this game’, the alternative or countermovement is described in terms of critique. What I want to highlight, which speaks to the truly profound stakes of this ‘double movement’ which characterises the politics of truth, is that it is in relation to it that the subject of this politics is decided. What makes Foucault indispensable to my own project is that he allows us to refocus our critical energy, beyond this or that particular intervention in the game, to the constitution of the game itself.
PROBLEMATISING GOVERNMENT

There are a number of questions about Foucault’s relationship to Kant’s essay. Unquestionably, there is something in it that Foucault finds inspiring. Yet this is not the whole story, since what he finds inspiring is perhaps not unrelated to the paradoxical relations this text potentially forms with its canonical terms. In fact, what seems to me crucial in grasping Foucault’s relationship to Kant’s essay is grappling with the way it is linked to a particular problematisation that is fundamental to modernity: the problematisation of government. Doubtless the specific difficulties that instigate thought to reflect on the special form of conduct we call government (which is after all the conduct of conduct itself) – to problematise it, so to speak, in terms of the question of ‘how to govern?’ (which cannot be disassociated from the question of ‘how not to be governed?’) is what Foucault first reflects on under the heading of ‘the insurrections of conduct’, linked to the pastoral revolts of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. If, under the heading of ‘Governmentality’, Foucault sought to grapple with solutions that the age of reason presented to this problem and the practices that grew with them, the theme of critique was for Foucault ‘a still open dossier’ running alongside this crucial thread in his work (and he says as much).

The 1978 lecture highlights the ways in which Kant’s way of defining enlightenment links up with Foucault’s own way of defining the ‘critical attitude’, in terms of intervention in a game that binds power, knowledge and the subject. Although, in this lecture, Foucault moves somewhat quickly through them, I want to pause on those aspects that he underlines in relation to Kant’s ‘definition’ of the Enlightenment since they collect – in raw form – many of the consistent themes of his engagement with this text.

Firstly, he tells us that Kant defined enlightenment in relation to ‘a certain state of immaturity in which humanity would be maintained and maintained authoritatively’ (Foucault 2007: 386). This immaturity, or minority (following Thomas Abbott’s translation of Kant’s essay) is, in a sense, ‘self-incurred’, at least in so far as it is here related to a ‘lack of determination and courage’ (Kant 2001: 135). But determination and courage for what? Kant tells us, ‘minority is the incapacity to use one’s intelligence without the guidance of another’, or as Foucault (1997: 305) explains in ‘What is enlightenment?’, it is ‘a certain state of our will which makes us accept someone else’s authority to lead us in areas where the use of reason is called for’. The problem here centres on the question
of subjectivity, since, as Foucault makes clear in his 1983 lecture (in his series *The Government of Self and Others*), it is not by an act of violence that we are prevented from thinking for ourselves, but instead, because of ourselves, or more precisely, *because 'of a certain relationship' we have 'to ourselves'* (2010: 33, my emphasis).

What I think is important here, and I will return to it, is that this state of minority is marked by a certain relation – Foucault also calls it a ‘correlation’ – between authority and a certain disposition with respect to the subject; as Foucault puts it in his reading of Kant, ‘a certain correlation between an authority that is exercised and that maintains humanity in this state of immaturity… [and] a lack of decision and courage’ (1996: 386).

Secondly, Foucault highlights that Kant defines enlightenment as ‘exit’ from minority, through an ‘appeal to courage’ that is itself connected to the public labour of philosopher. In the 1978 lecture this element of Foucault’s reading of Kant’s text is not well developed, but, I suspect that it was what formed the deeper basis of Foucault’s fascination with this text, and as Hardt (2011) has noted, is in no small part related to what he takes inspiration from. As Foucault emphasises in ‘What is enlightenment?’ and the 1983 lecture, Kant calls enlightenment an ‘exit’ (see Kant 2001: 135), a ‘way out’ (Foucault 1997: 305) from this state where our judgement is ceded to the authority of another. Where in 1978 Foucault underlined a certain correlation, in ‘What is enlightenment?’ this is formulated in slightly more rigorous terms, such that the ‘exit’ of enlightenment is here ‘defined by a modification of the preexisting relation linking will, authority, and the use of reason’ (1997: 305, my emphasis).

Part of the ambiguity of Kant’s text, which Foucault powerfully draws out, is that here enlightenment is at once a moment and a particular phenomenon, a process in which men are at the same time a part or element of, and as Foucault emphasises, also a ‘task and an obligation’ that will have to be undertaken (1997: 305). It is a collective process, but one which implies as well an individual disposition. In this sense then, there is enlightenment because people are actors within this process, and this process occurs only to the extent that they ‘decide to be its voluntary actors’ (1997: 306). And Kant’s motto for the Enlightenment, which is at the same time its very condition, is ‘Sapere aude! [Dare to know!] Have the courage to use your own intelligence’ (Kant 2001: 135).

What seems to move Foucault deeply here is the ways in which the essay connects Kant’s own intellectual enterprise to the moment in which he is writing, a moment that, in part, comes to assume its specific difference ‘because
he is writing’ (1997: 309). Enlightenment then, is in this sense a way of relating to the ‘present’ and the collective subject, the we, that constitutes this present. This questioning of the present, of the ‘we’ that belongs to it, and which is also an insertion in the present, a way of belonging to it and an intervention in the making of it, marks the specific difference, the new way of raising the question of modernity, introduced by Kant. This is undoubtedly the most important part of what Foucault takes from Kant’s essay, formulated as the question ‘Who are we today?’.

A NEW DISTRIBUTION

One aspect of what Foucault wants us to see is the ways in which Kant’s essay becomes part of enacting, by articulating, a certain strategy for exiting a correlation that links the exercise of authority to forms of subjectivity. It seems to me, however, that Foucault’s interest in the text is just as much about the new correlation it is suggesting and indeed, in a certain sense helping establish. In fact, I wonder if staging this paradox for the present is not part of the pleasure Foucault takes from his public readings of this essay.

In the 1978 lecture, when he reminds us of the motto of the Enlightenment, he therefore also immediately sets it next to a second, that of the sovereign, Frederick II, who says: ‘[l]et them reason as much as they want as long as they obey’ (1996: 387). There is a particularly interesting ambiguity here, for this movement of a subject exiting minority – who, as we saw, is at once agent and element of the necessarily collective undertaking called enlightenment – is ‘correlated’ with that of another at a second pole, that of the sovereign. In ‘What is enlightenment?’ Foucault writes:

Enlightenment, as we see, must not be conceived simply as a general process affecting all humanity, it must not be conceived only as an obligation prescribed to individuals: it now appears as a political problem. The question, in any event, is that of knowing how the use of reason can take the public form that it requires, how the audacity to know can be exercised in broad daylight, while individuals are obeying as scrupulously as possible. And Kant, in conclusion proposes to Frederick II, in scarcely veiled terms, a sort of contract – what might be called the
contract of rational despotism with free reason: the public and free use of autonomous reason will be the best guarantee of obedience, on condition, however, that the political principle which must be obeyed itself be in conformity with universal reason (1997: 308).

Foucault offers a rich discussion of the particular opposition between public and private that Kant’s thought is grounded in. All I want to do, however, is to underline the crucial significance Foucault seems to want to give this relation. In fact, in the 1983 lecture, Foucault suggests that, for Kant, it is Frederick (with some difficulty) who is given the role of the agent of the Enlightenment, for the way his mode of governing removes the ‘obstacles’ standing in the way of people using their own understanding:

[W]e have … through Frederick’s … way of governing, that adjustment between, on the one hand, a government of self which will develop in the form of the universal (as public discussion, public reasoning, and public use of understanding) and, on the other, the obedience to which all those who are part of a given society, state, or administration will be constrained. Frederick of Prussia is the very figure of Aufklärung, the essential agent who makes the right redistribution in the interplay between obedience and private use, universality and public use (Foucault 2010: 38).

An interesting aspect of the 1983 lecture is the way in which it clarifies the ground of development for this ‘correlation’ by setting it at the base of political modernity. Foucault suggests that Kant’s 1784 text was not the only time he presents a reflection on his present and points to his comments on the French Revolution in *The Conflict of the Faculties*. There the phenomenon of enthusiasm for the revolution now replaces the sovereign as the agent of the Enlightenment:

The difficulty Kant clearly experienced in giving the King of Prussia this role as agent of Aufklärung no doubt partly explains the fact that, in the 1798 text … the agent of Aufklärung, the very process of Aufklärung, will be transferred to the Revolution. Or, more exactly, it will not be transferred to the Revolution, but to that general phenomenon of
revolutionary enthusiasm produced around the Revolution. In the 1798
text, revolutionary enthusiasm replaces or succeeds the King of Prussia
in the role he was given in the 1784 text as agent of Aufklärung (Foucault
2010: 39).

Although Foucault himself does not put it in these terms, it is not unjustified to
think about this statement in relation to the crucial transition through which
the question of political modernity is often thought: that is the transition from
royal sovereignty to popular sovereignty.

More importantly in his 1983 lecture on Kant’s essay, when Foucault motiv-
atates beginning with this text, he suggests that, ‘to formulate it in rigorous terms’
it is exactly in line with the ‘relationship between the government of self and
the government of others’ (Foucault 2010: 7). It should be equally unsur-
prising then, that in the lecture that follows, he should come to refer to Kant’s
Enlightenment as a ‘new dividing up’, a ‘new distribution of the government of
the self and the government of others’.

METHOD

When, at the start of the 1983 course, The Government of Self and Others (after
clarifying the terms of his project as ‘a history of thought’), Foucault turns to
Kant’s essay on enlightenment, he describes this discussion as ‘not exactly an
excursus [ … but] a little epigraph’ (Foucault 2010: 7). Just a few sentences
later he also admits that Kant’s text is something of a ‘blazon’ and a ‘fetish’
for him. Now an epigraph, at least in the literary sense, is a short piece of text
(often a quotation) which precedes a work, and which, in some way, suggests
or connects with its theme. By contrast, in heraldic vexillology, a blazon is a
type of discursive description of an emblematic sign (such as a coat of arms or
a flag), marked by specific grammar for progressively specifying the elements
of an emblem.

These characterisations of Kant’s essay raise two questions. Firstly, in what
sense is this detailed discussion of Kant’s essay – what at any rate appears as a
digression or excursus – an epigraph for the course that follows, centred on the
theme of ‘parrhesia’ in ancient Hellenic writing. This question – of the rela-
tionship between the course’s discussion of Kant’s essay and its treatment of
the theme of parrhesia – is in fact what is taken up in Hardt’s (2011) recent
essay on the course. The second question is more along the lines of what I have been trying to get at in this last section, that is, to answer the question relating to the relationship between Foucault’s project and these discussions of Kant’s essay: how does Foucault’s discussion of ‘What is enlightenment?’ and his way of speaking about this text, come to specify the elements of something that would be an emblem for him, for his project as ‘a history of thought’? And what seems crucial here is the relationship that these public readings of Kant’s text form with something that Foucault sets next to it – what, for lack of a better way of putting it, is a discussion on method.

In relation to Kant’s question – that is, this question of ‘who we are today?’ – Foucault (1997: 315) wants to say something about what he is doing, about what is specific to his way of doing critique: that is a ‘philosophical ethos consisting in a critique of what we are saying, thinking, and doing, through a historical ontology of ourselves’. Kant’s question, in fact, becomes definitively Foucault’s for the way in which it comes to feature as the central element, or in keeping with the heraldic analogy, the principle ‘charge’, of what the discussions on method call the ‘historico-philosophical approach’ (in ‘What is critique?’), or ‘historico-critical analysis’ (in ‘What is enlightenment?’).

Reading across these texts it seems clear to me that Foucault (1996: 393) wants to set himself apart from various contemporary strands of a rationalist conception of critique. Then critique, for Foucault, cannot be a matter of fault-finding or searching for that ‘false idea knowledge makes of itself’. Rather, critique is directed at the relations that bind rationalisation to modes of domination, in order to identify what it is already possible for us to go beyond. If Foucault refuses to temper a critical disposition with respect to the forms of rationality that belong to modernity, he equally wants to underline the impossibility of making an intellectual practice outside of it. In fact, part of what is interesting about his displacement of the question of enlightenment in these essays, is his insistence on separating enlightenment from humanism and the way in which he poses against the latter’s static conception of the subject ‘the principle of critique and a permanent creation of ourselves in our autonomy’ (Foucault 1997: 314).

Against a mode of critique that would fall for ‘the blackmail of the Enlightenment’, or make an intellectual practice on the grounds of humanism, then, Foucault affirms an ethos no longer simply defined by its mode of opposition, but which, in ‘What is enlightenment?’, he now characterises ‘as a limit attitude’; an ethos going ‘beyond the outside-inside alternative’ to work at ‘the
frontiers’ of who we are now (1997: 315). We are in fact now properly on the positive side of the new ethos of criticism:

Criticism … consists of analyzing and reflecting upon limits. But if the Kantian question was that of knowing what limits knowledge must renounce exceeding, it seems to me that the critical question today must be turned into a positive one: In what is given to us as universal, necessary, obligatory, what place is occupied by the singular, contingent, and the product of arbitrary constraints? The point, in brief, is to transform the critique conducted in the form of necessary limitation into a practical critique that takes the form of possible crossing-over. … This entails an obvious consequence: that criticism is no longer going to be practised in search of the formal structures with universal value but, rather, as a historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying (Foucault 1997: 315, my emphasis).

FRANK TALK

What is going on here, in these ‘still open dossiers’ on critique? Is it that Foucault is searching, as Hardt (2010) suggests, for a way of going beyond a particular conceptual and also political dead end?

The problem arises with the implications of ‘the doubleness of power’ that Foucault’s work allows us to grasp. While the immense value and political potentiality of Foucault’s work on power is to open our thought to a ‘strictly relational’ dynamic in which ‘resistance comes first’ (see Deleuze 1999), it nevertheless struggled to show the possibility of a mode of resistance that is also an autonomous constitution of an alternative form of life.

The importance of Foucault’s thought on critique is its suggestion of a mode of ‘practical critique’ that would take the form of a ‘crossing over’ of the correlations and forms of subjection that characterise modern configurations of power (see also Hardt 2011).18 This, I would argue, is precisely the importance of Foucault’s reflections on Charles Baudelaire (in ‘What is enlightenment?’) and parrhesia (in the course that follows his lecture on Kant’s essay, The Government of Self and Others).
It is from this vantage point that I would like to return to Hardt’s (2011) essay. For it seems to me that the importance of this reading of Foucault is to emphasise the place of his (Foucault’s) reflections on parrhesia, where the political vocation of the latter is to mark out a model that pushes beyond the interplay of resistance and power, toward the constitution of a new collective subject, that is at the same time a making of the present and the forms of life that belong to it. The tremendous value of this reading to my own work is the perspective on later Foucault it opens up and its radicalisation of a conception of an ‘ontology of the present and ourselves’, which now takes on an explicitly political sense that is bound to ‘the making’ of a collective political subject:

By ontology here Foucault is clearly not referring to immutable, eternal being, as do conventional conceptions. The ontology of the present and ourselves, of ourselves in the present, can only be a process of becoming. This seemingly paradoxical notion of ontology as process in the present, a being of becoming, is key to Foucault’s conception of the potential role of theory and the theorist. The philosophical relation to the present is an active and collective relation that is not merely a matter of registering or even evaluating the present but acting on and transforming it. The task of theory is to make the present and thus to delimit or invent the subject of that making, a ‘we’ characterised not only by our belonging to the present but by our making it. It is not clear yet, though, how Foucault imagines we can accomplish the transformative and constitutive task (Hardt 2011: 21).

In Hardt’s account of the significance of Foucault’s lectures on parrhesia, and especially the forms it comes to take in the militant practice of the Cynics, is then the suggestion that it offers a model for this ‘ontology of ourselves’. As I have already noted, Foucault’s discussion of Kant’s essay and critique is followed by his development of this thematic of parrhesia, which is taken over to the following year’s course as well. Defined by Foucault as ‘true discourse in the political realm’ (2010: 6), or free, frank speech (‘franc-parler’), the courses illustrate three distinct appropriations of parrhesia at different moments in the ancient world. While the specific work of this chapter is to underline the points of inspiration for my own way of doing critique, thus setting a detailed
commentary on this thematic beyond my immediate tasks here, it seems to me important to point out the extremely interesting relation between Foucault’s discussion on parrhesia and his discussion of critique.

In the second lecture of the course, *The Government of Self and Others*, in which Foucault introduces his audience to this theme of parrhesia, he says:

> [W]e have, if you like, a whole structure, a whole bundle of important notions and themes: care of self, knowledge of self, art and exercises of oneself, relationship to the other, the truth on the part of the other. You can see that with parrhesia we have a notion which is situated at the meeting point of the obligation to speak the truth, procedures and techniques of governmentality, and the constitution of the relationship to self. Truth-telling by the other, as an essential component of how he governs us, is one of the essential conditions for us to able to form the right kind of relationship to ourselves that will give us virtue and happiness (2010: 45).

As Hardt (2010: 151) notes, this excursion into the ancient world and its concept of parrhesia is by no means ‘innocent’ and has contemporary political issues at its root. And I would argue that if, as we have suggested, at the centre of Foucault’s discussion of critique is the problem of the ‘correlation of the government of self and others’; then the profound importance of the theme of parrhesia is the manner in which it seems to turn the (modern) forms of such correlations on their head. Indeed, what we find in parrhesia, in particular in the form it takes with the Cynics, is correlation between a subject’s (autonomous) constitution and self-government and this subject’s subversion and antagonistic relation to ‘the government of others’; apolitical practice that militantly attempts to make the world anew:

> [T]he Cynic life defined itself as a royal life, and even as the royal life par excellence, fully sovereign over itself. I think that this sovereignty, by which the Cynic life characterized itself, expressed a double derision towards political sovereignty, the sovereignty of kings of the world. First, because Cynic sovereignty asserted itself aggressively, in a critical, polemical mode, as the only real monarchy. What basically was at issue in the meeting between Diogenes and Alexander was which of them was the true king. And Diogenes, of course, asserted himself and revealed
himself as the true king, facing Alexander, who held his monarchy, in the true sense of the term, only inasmuch as he too shared in the sovereignty of that wisdom … On the other hand – this was the other side of the Cynic derision of monarchies – the Cynics’ real monarchy inverted all the signs and distinguishing features of political monarchies (Foucault 2011: 307–308).

One in fact finds in Foucault’s discussion many passages highlighting the ways in which Cynic parrhesia inverts forms of correlating the government of self and others. However, by way of summary, I want to quote (at length) Hardt’s reading of this complex and rich thread in Foucault’s work:

The Cynics practised Parrhesia, Foucault explains, through a kind of public, critical preaching, often aimed against social institutions. They also sought to enact the truth through scandalous behavior that exposed to public view aspects of life that are generally hidden … Two fundamental principles of the true life for the Cynics were exposure and poverty: not only destroying any division between private and public, but also releasing the Cynic from the limits of individuality, so as to be able to construct a life addressed to humanity as a whole … The askesis of the ancient Cynics, Foucault claims, is a ‘militancy that aims to change the world, much more than a militancy that would seek to furnish its adepts with the means to arrive at a happy life’. The life the Cynics proposed is a militant left that struggles to change both ourselves and the world … [In the cynics’ struggle for social change] the care of the self is enlarged to the care not only of a few others but humanity as a whole … In terms of philosophical doctrine, Foucault argues, the ancient Cynics contributed little, merely adopting and transforming various traditional formulations. Their singular contribution instead is to make life the centre of a philosophical and political project … Foucault defines Cynics’ primary goal as ‘militant life, the life of combat and struggle against the self and for the self, against other and for others’. The only true life for the Cynics is a life transformed, and the only way to achieve such a life is to create another world out of this one … The key to the shift accomplished by the Cynics is the development of the terrain of life – a militant life, a revolutionary life – as the locus of politics (Hardt 2010: 158–159).
However, apart from the suggestion that the modern heirs of Cynic parrhesia are ‘revolutionaries whose lives enact a – sometimes violent – rupture with the conventions and values of the dominant society’ (Hardt 2010: 158–159), neither Foucault nor Hardt gives us a sense of what parrhesia in the modern context might look like, let alone something as an example. This, of course, is not their job. Elsewhere, I suggest that ‘we’, here at the southern tip of Africa, already have a rich instance of parrhesia to draw upon and one whose affective power already marks our world and works. For it seems to me that the clearest and most immediate referent (for us) of a parrhesia in the modern – that is, of a ‘frank talk’ that articulates a mode of correlating a strategy for making ourselves in our autonomy, with a strategy for remaking the world in which we live – is Steve Biko. What we find in Biko is an antagonistic style of life that breaks the interplay between resistance and power (see Biko 2004). This seems to me the form of practical critique that the best Foucault might be said to point towards.

It could well be objected that in Hardt’s reading such is not even critique, but what he poses as an alternative to this mode of political-intellectual engagement. For me, however, this is merely a semantic issue. By my reading, Hardt’s objections to critique arise from his dissatisfaction with a politics that becomes trapped in modes of opposition and negativity, a dissatisfaction with ways of doing critique that cannot articulate positive, or rather, constitutive practice. In fact, I suspect that the primary target of Hardt’s statement is not the mode of doing critique that I have attempted to outline in my discussion of Marx and Foucault,19 but rather, what takes the name of critique in today’s academic publics, and which has little to do with the real movement through which militant subjects and radical collective forms of life are constituted politically. By contrast, the militant critique I take from Marx and (a radicalised) Foucault already belongs to such a movement, is already grounded in the production of the common.

CONCLUSION

Marx to Foucault. This is the provisional line I want to draw, and which sets our critical aspirations apart from, and even against, ‘a rationalist conception of critique’.
There are of course many – and deep – differences between Marx and Foucault. Mine is not an attempt at synthesis, or at least not the type of synthesis that would want to erase these differences.

Where Marxism has often appeared in Foucault’s work as the object of ‘critique’, this is in part for the ways in which Marx appears to the Foucault of 1978 as an imposed limit, or the object of a particular ‘struggle’, as Lemke and Balibar might say. Conversely, what consolidates their ‘tactical alliance’ is a critical attitude towards the inherited epistemological field; Foucault’s critique as a ‘limit-attitude’ that calls into question our most intimate ‘ways of knowing’ and what Balibar (1995: 2) calls Marx’s ‘anti-philosophy’, neither ‘the doctrine’ nor ‘the system of an author called Marx’, but a constant ‘displacement of the sites, questions, and objectives of philosophy’ (5) that calls this very practice into question. Could the matter have been any other way? After all, is it not that, as Hardt once suggested, materialism cannot be a body of thought, but is instead ‘a constant questioning of the priority thought gives to itself’ (see Read 1999: 2)?

From Marx then, I take the potential for grounding a critical work in the perspective of the real movement for the destruction of the present order. It is for me a matter of presenting a perspective on the struggles of a post-apartheid South Africa from ‘our side’, that is, from the side of the antagonistic movements that have grown out of these struggles and posing this perspective in the reality of the political order against every perspective in support of the order. From Foucault, I take the potential to think about the constitution of the very game that will determine the character of the strategic terrain these movements and their struggles emerge upon and which, in different ways, affects any perspective such a movement might come to form of itself and its struggles.

We should not, however, lose sight of our own differences. After all, the subject Marx was concerned with was the European working class; for Foucault, it was ‘western man as the subject of desire’ and it is only by the violence of a dislocation that we should find something about our story in these respective his-stories. But clarity can be found in the very silences and absences of these texts, the place of our own ‘productive struggles’ with Marx and Foucault.

We read Marx and Foucault for the weapons they might contain, or the tools for making new ones. It is on these terms that we negotiate our tactical alliance with both Marx and Foucault.
NOTES

1 In fact, depending on how we define critique, it might well be necessary to move away from a straightforward association of this term with what we ordinarily mean when we speak of ‘criticism’.

2 As Etienne Balibar (1995: 6) notes, ‘Marx is the philosopher of eternal new beginning’, constantly leaving behind projects and drafts, changing direction and shifting onto new paths. See also Louis Althusser’s ‘On the young Marx’ (Althusser 2005) for a discussion of the ‘contingent’ beginnings of the young Marx.

3 These quotations are lifted out of an interview with Deleuze conducted by Negri (Gilles Deleuze and Antonio Negri 1990). Elsewhere I use it to help explain the disposition of the militant (Veriava 2013).

4 What is emphasised by the young Marx, however, is that historically determined state forms in which conflicts appear as a consequence, stand as a ‘table of contents’ for the practical struggles of a particular society (a role that religion is said to have played in relation to mankind’s ‘theoretical struggles’).

5 Engels wrote: ‘[W]hat is known as “Marxism” in France is, indeed, an altogether peculiar product – so much so that Marx once said to Lafargue: ‘Ce qu’il y a de certain c’est que moi, je ne suis pas Marxiste’ (If anything is certain, it is that I myself am not a Marxist) (Engels 1882). See also Althusser (2006) from whom this line of argument is borrowed.

6 Althusser points to Marx’s ‘invitation’ in the preface to Capital to his reader to ‘think for himself’, welcoming ‘every opinion based on scientific criticism’ (2006: 14).

7 In Althusser’s reading, this period comes to be weighted down by the untenable marriage between a ‘Hegelianized-Feurbachian philosophy of alienation’ and ‘the mythical ideology of a political economy adopted without a critique’ (2006: 28).

8 Drawing on Auguste Cornu’s writing on the life of the early Marx, Althusser suggests that an important turning point was Marx’s time in France where he became a communist, around 1843–1844.

9 On the website www.marxists.org practical critique is explained as follows: ‘Marxism is a tendency within the workers movement and it is concerned with both theoretical and practical critique. By “practical critique” is meant political action which undermines and “exposes” the object and mobilises opposition to it.’ (Blunden 2012)

10 This is in fact precisely how it appeared in Thomas Lemke’s formulation: ‘The “missing link” between these two research interests is the problem of government. It is a link because Foucault uses it exactly to analyse the connection between what he called technologies of the self and technologies of domination and the formation of the state’ (Lemke 2000: 2).

11 Remarking on an eight-year period of silence in his work Deleuze wrote: ‘It’s like a hole in my life, an eight year hole. That is what I find interesting in lives, the holes that they have, the lacunas, sometimes dramatic, sometimes no … Perhaps it is in the holes that movement takes place’ (Deleuze in Hardt 1993: xix).

12 For Harry Cleaver, what distinguishes a political reading is that it ‘self-consciously and unilaterally structures its approach to determine the meaning and relevance of every concept to the development of working-class struggle. It is a reading which
eschews all detached interpretation and abstract theorising in favour of grasping concepts only within that concrete totality of struggle whose determinations they designate’ (Cleaver 2000: 30).

That is, it is by no means certain that power necessarily always trumps resistance (which is internal to power relations).

The phrase is borrowed from the introduction of the Use of Pleasure: ‘[W]hat would be the value of the passion for knowledge if it resulted only in a certain knowledgebleness and not, in one way or another and to the extent possible, in the knower’s straying afield of himself’ (Foucault 1990b: 8).

Foucault speaks here about civil society. However, I suspect what is more decisive is a certain shifting or crossing-over from the sacred to the profane world.

In the context of what I said about resistance above, it is possible to misread this quote and what Foucault means here. To be clear, in this context, Foucault means by the ‘simultaneous movement of governmentalisation’, the simultaneity of the movements through which, on the one hand, society is governmentalised, and on the other, individuals.

Not surprisingly then, critique is for Foucault in the first place ‘historically biblical’ (1996: 385) and looks for a source of support in scripture. Secondly, critique takes on a juridical character, taking the form of a ‘problematisation’ of law. Finally, the question of ‘how not to be governed’ underlines the problem of truth and a questioning of what authority presents as true. In this regard Foucault says that critique will imply accepting authority ‘only if one thinks oneself that the reasons for accepting it are good’ (385). Critique’s third anchoring point is therefore the problematisation of ‘certainty in the face of authority’ (385).

Elsewhere I trace in more detail the development of Foucault’s thought on critique (Veriava 2013).

In fact, for me, the original source of a formulation that makes critique both a ‘destruction of the existing state of things’ and the articulation of a constitutive project is Michael Hardt and Antonia Negri’s ‘critique of the state form’ (see Hardt and Negri 1994: 6).

REFERENCES


