

Bernard Harcourt, *Critique & Praxis: A Critical Philosophy of Illusions, Values, and Actions*

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COLLIDING PARTICLES

For the first time since the 1970s, theory seems to be lagging behind practice. The effects of the 2008 crash moved quickly across the globe, accelerating inequalities, destabilizing ruling blocs and unleashing a wave of uprisings, from Occupy Wall Street and the movement of squares, to Black Lives Matter and Standing Rock, to the Gilets Jaunes and the Hong Kong protests. How will theory keep pace of these social movements? What new configurations of theory and practice will suggest themselves as these struggles unfold? How should theorists orient themselves politically in the 2020s? These are the questions taken up by Bernard Harcourt in *Critique & Praxis*, a book written with an apt sense of urgency. ‘We are living through one of the most critical periods, if not *the* most critical, in human history’, he writes, as intensifying climate change, vertiginous degrees of inequality, digital surveillance, the rise of new right-wing forces and the social devastation wrought by neoliberalism combine in unprecedented fashion. But at this moment of danger, critical theory is ‘missing in action’.

‘To change the world!’ is the resounding first sentence of *Critique & Praxis*. In Harcourt’s telling, Marx was the historic progenitor of critical philosophy, sealing its birth certificate with the Eleventh Thesis. For a century, critical theory took its political practice to be, broadly speaking, proletarian revolution. But since the defeat of the movements of 1968 and atomization of organized labour, that link has been broken. There is no longer a coherent relation between theory and ‘praxis’—generally understood in an earlier Marxian tradition as political struggle informed by the critical understanding of a wider class-consciousness. Meanwhile, critical theory has lost its way. First restricting itself to questions of ideology or critical analysis, it then became

the preserve of the professoriat in ‘effete universities’—and even there, was largely confined to the English departments. Worse still, it has become bogged down in an internecine feud between the heirs of the Frankfurt School and those of Foucault. Harcourt’s mission, then, is to resolve that feud and return critical philosophy to its original world-changing mission.

This is quite a task, but Harcourt’s roster of achievements is undeniably impressive. As a US litigator, he has been representing death-row inmates in Alabama for thirty years. He gives a powerful account here of travelling to Montgomery in 1989 as a third-year Harvard Law student, after hearing a college talk about conditions there. Meeting the prisoners on death row and witnessing the ‘justice’ they confronted—one prosecutor had potential jury members listed under the headings ‘Strong’, ‘Medium’, ‘Weak’, ‘Black’, then started striking jurors from the bottom of the ‘Black’ list, to ensure that African-American defendants would face an all-white jury—Harcourt says, simply, that he knew what he had to do. In addition to legal work, he completed his PhD at Harvard in 2000 with a dissertation on ‘broken-windows’ policing, plunging into deep study of Foucault and Nietzsche.

Scion of a French-Jewish intellectual family, the Hamburgers, who fled to New York in 1940, Harcourt has maintained strong connections with the Hexagon. He is the editor of several volumes of Foucault’s lectures (*Théories et institutions pénales*, 1971–72; *La Société punitive*, 1972–73), focusing above all on the militant years when Foucault and Daniel Defert were involved in solidarity actions with the Maoist students jailed in France under Pompidou’s post-1968 crackdown, rather than the notably neutral commentator on neoliberalism or advocate of care of the self. Harcourt currently holds a named chair in law at Columbia University, where he runs the Center for Contemporary Critical Thought, and has a teaching position at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales. Ironically for an opponent of the death penalty, he is also executive director of the Eric Holder Initiative for Civil and Political Rights at Columbia. (As Obama’s Attorney General, Holder was notorious for defending the extrajudicial execution of American citizens by drone strike, regardless of any threat to national security, as well as prosecuting a record number of whistle-blowers under the 1917 Espionage Act, denying Chelsea Manning, Edward Snowden and others the right to plead that they were serving the public interest.) Over the past fifteen years, Harcourt has also published a notable sequence of critical studies on policing, punishment, the illusion of the free market and the US mode of counterinsurgency, works that trace a steady leftward curve.

Critique & Praxis, though, marks something of a change of pace for Harcourt. It is at once a synoptic work, covering an astonishing range of critical theorists and practices; a Foucauldian settling of accounts with the Frankfurt School; and a somewhat indirect appeal for critical theorists to

take political action. In this third register, following Foucault's demurral in a 1977 interview—'It is not up to us to propose. As soon as one "proposes", one proposes a vocabulary, an ideology, which can only have effects of domination'—Harcourt explains that the critical theorist must not impose his or her praxis on others and should only write in the first person. Accordingly, Harcourt proposes a new 'model' which 'turns the analysis entirely on my own practices and confronts only my praxis and my critical theory.' The classic question 'What is to be done?' needs to be reformulated for our reflexive age as the more modest: 'What work is my praxis doing? What more am I to do?'

How then should we conceive the relation between theory and practice? Following in the footsteps of Richard Bernstein's *Praxis and Action* (1971) Harcourt tracks the question from Aristotle to Marx. Though he firmly denies any contemporary relevance for the author of *Capital*, Harcourt has a soft spot for the young, constructivist Marx and would like to recover his way of 'doing critique', oriented to both intellectual emancipation and social change. Noting Adorno's classical formulation of a continuous dialectical contradiction between the two poles, *Critique & Praxis* identifies four further positions. First, the idea that critical theoretical work is itself a form of critical practice—the diagnosis of crises or critique of ideology, for example; Harcourt identifies this position with Foucault's declaration that the most he can offer is 'tools' for others to use, dismissed as 'too contemplative'. Second, the notion that critical theory should guide practice—'help the proletariat to see', as Horkheimer put it in "Traditional and Critical Theory" (1937). This is the position adopted by Hardt and Negri, as counsellors to the movement, in *Assembly* (2017). For Harcourt, this falls foul of the Foucauldian knowledge-power problem: they will simply be offering a new form of domination; besides, even if Hardt and Negri are good theorists, it doesn't necessarily mean they are good strategists or practitioners.

Third, one can theorize praxis after the event; Harcourt offers the example of Banu Bargu's *Starve and Immolate* (2014), which builds a biopolitical framework on the basis of Turkish political prisoners' hunger strikes. The fourth position posits the autonomy of praxis: revolts are generated by political-economic dynamics; theorists are irrelevant to this spontaneous process. Harcourt rejects all of these, in favour of a method that would 'accentuate' the tensions and contradictions between theory and practice, force them into collisions: 'Put them into a Large Hadron Collider. Smash them to pieces.' This is the way to create a 'unified field' of critical theoretical practice—'in the conflict between my praxis and my critical theory, I develop and push both.' In answer to the question, 'What more can I do?', he duly replies: 'I litigate, I militate, I write, I advocate, I organize, I teach, I convene—and throughout, at all times, I brutally confront my own

praxis with critical theory, and vice versa.’ As a result, his critical praxis has evolved to include not just the abolition of the death penalty in the US, his starting point, but the broader goal of abolishing the punitive paradigm of governing—America’s ‘punitive society’.

Before this can be developed any further, however, Harcourt must settle the ongoing feud between the Frankfurt and post-structuralist factions in critical theory. While sensitive about not imposing his views on political practice on anyone else, Harcourt is an ultra-dogmatist when it comes to philosophy. There is no question here of recognizing what Seyla Benhabib has called the ‘legitimate pluralization’ of critical theory. From the beginning—which he dates to ‘Traditional and Critical Theory’—the Frankfurt School has contained a good, reflexive-constructivist strand and a bad, scientific-foundationalist, essentially Marxian one, which must be ruthlessly eliminated. Marx’s philosophy of history no longer holds today, and his analysis of political economy is outdated. *Critique & Praxis* gives Horkheimer’s essay high marks for grasping that the social world and all knowledge of it are contingent and constructed. ‘Theory’, in this sense, is necessarily a ‘reflexive’ project, since it always recognizes its own complicity in current power structures and lays no claim to absolute truth or non-ideological formulations. But it is faulted for arguing that capitalist society produces contradictions, and that the proletariat is best situated to perceive and act on them.

Even when the heirs of the Frankfurt School mercifully abandoned Marx, they typically found their footing in Kant or Hegel. The result, exemplified by Habermas, was a German theory that veered toward liberal philosophy, and away from critical praxis. Here Harcourt is at his sharpest. Habermas’s promotion of an idealized public sphere, where private individuals could come together and put their reason to use, is ‘not critical’ but ‘liberal and Kantian, in a universalizing way’—an exercise in consensus. The Hegelianism of Axel Honneth and Rahel Jaeggi offers a bland, Whiggish outlook on history, in which progress is seen as a gradual learning process. Benhabib’s *Critique, Norm, and Utopia* (1986) looked to renew the foundations of critical theory, but ended in dialogue with Rawls, defending ‘a community of rights and entitlements’. These are all dead-ends for Harcourt, serving to illustrate that foundationalism in critical philosophy is a ‘plague’, ill-suited to effect meaningful change.

Things went much better in France, where Foucault and Deleuze deployed Nietzsche as a powerful weapon against Marx. Harcourt, who is always informative about Foucault (and not uncritical), reveals on the basis of a conversation with Defert that Foucault had turned to Nietzsche as early as 1953, to ‘free himself’ from the French Communist Party; he would do so again in 1967, to distance himself from Marx. Deleuze’s *Nietzsche and*

Philosophy (1962) proposed him as an antidote to Hegel and the dialectic. Their project involved ‘a radical critique of knowledge that aimed to unmask the idea that it was ever possible to sever knowledge from relations of power and, accordingly, to reach a solid normative foundation.’ For Harcourt, this Nietzschean challenge ‘fractured any possible coherence that Marxism had originally lent to the enterprise’ and opened a new space for critical theory. The effects of this were ambiguous, however. In the first place, defetishizing critique was extended brilliantly to new domains of research by thinkers such as Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak and Judith Butler. After a time, however, critical theory began to devour itself, and became ‘mired in tribal politics and internecine struggles for influence among its offshoots’. As such it was disconnected from the world of praxis.

How does Harcourt propose to exit this impasse? In a chapter called ‘The Nub of the Problem’, he explains that the two critical-theory factions—foundationalists and defetishizers—share an attachment to reflexivity, the goal of emancipation and a recognition of the importance of ideas. At the heart of their difference is ‘the problem of truth’. In Harcourt’s view, one position is grounded in the notion that ‘critique produces a normative order that is correct and can serve to justify practices and institutions’ [sic]. The other is based on ‘endless unmasking’—‘interpretation all the way down’. The problem can’t be resolved by allowing critical theorists the option to go one way or the other. Proto-scientific tendencies are indefensible, serving only to undermine critical praxis. Claims to rationality are just a power play, an attempt to achieve consensus. Harcourt allows a minimal role for ‘truth’ (avoiding altogether the concept of objective reality). Truth is the fact that we will all die; but however much we want claims about climate change or inequality to have the same sense of certainty, to call them true would be exceeding the bounds—veering dangerously close to scientism. Truth claims must be restricted to ontology and epistemology, and not extended to political or moral realms. At most, we should speak of a ‘better interpretation’ of the available evidence.

As his winning move, Harcourt introduces what he calls his ‘conceptual can-opener’: the counter-point. The inspiration is once again Foucault, who often used the technique in his Collège de France lectures: opposing positivism, for example, not with anti-positivism—nor, of course, with dialectical critique—but with ‘counter-positivism’; deploying positivistic sensibilities against positivism itself, in Harcourt’s gloss, like a form of jujutsu that uses ‘the force of the attack and transforms it into something else, something that is neither an attack nor a block’. This counter-move, Harcourt continues, culminates in a philosophical intervention that does not depend on either positivism or anti-positivism, but rather exceeds its object to become an autonomous method. He offers the example of US counter-insurgency,

developed for use against small groups of anti-imperialist guerrillas, but now used globally in the War on Terror and deployed at home in a new form of coercive rule.

Harcourt's plan is to use 'counter-foundationalist critique' to purge any remaining traces of Marxism from critical theory. He assures us, however, that—unlike counter-insurgency—this method will not be allowed to grow into a new form of domination. Once its job is done, it will be discarded. That moment will presumably arrive when all critical theorists understand, as Harcourt does, that the world is constituted as an endless flux of power relations: 'Each moment is produced by the infinite actions and inactions of each and every one of us. There is nothing but a constant struggle over resources, wealth, reputation, force, influence, values, and ideals.' The imperative for critical theorists is constant re-interpretation and re-evaluation, not least of the social and distributional consequences that their own interpretations create.

Having settled the question of theory, Harcourt looks more briefly at the recent history of praxis. Drawing again on a conversation with Defert, he puts great explanatory emphasis on the brief episode of Euro-Maoism, arguing that a structural transformation took place in the late 1960s: 'A shift from Marx to Mao', he writes, 'moved critical theory away from the modern concept of revolution to more situated uprisings, revolts and political disobedience.' For student radicals, the concept of cultural revolution was immensely appealing, since it freed them from their own Moscow-oriented communist parties and allowed them to engage in new forms of protest—from Dadaist pranks to armed insurrection—and cleared a new landscape for critical praxis. But the new militants could not count on the support of the masses, who had been won over to capitalist consumerism. Hence, in Harcourt's view, the radical left was isolated in the 1980s and 90s—decades that saw the predominance of theory over practice and the rise of internecine theoretical feuds.

Left liberalism now became the main pole of attraction for critical theorists, signalled by Habermas's proximity to Rawls. For *Critique & Praxis*, liberalism is a chimera, founded on legal definitions of property that allow unlimited private accumulation; the illusion it breeds of a fair and neutral order helps to create docile political subjects and stifles calls for change. Here Harcourt introduces his central pitch, 'A Way Forward', based on the embrace of values—equality, compassion, respect, solidarity, social justice and so forth—upon which all critical theorists should be able to agree. The task is not to challenge or fight for a particular political-economic regime—capitalism, socialism—since, per Harcourt and Foucault, all such systems are essentially micro-regulated, so there's no real difference between them. Instead, the aim is to edge the actually existing system in the direction of

the critical values: to make it a little more respectful, compassionate or just. Harcourt must tread lightly here because these values sound a lot like rights, and rights belong to a liberal conception of politics—anathema to critical thought. In addition, his defetishizing mode of critique is allergic to any notion of stable or foundational values. *Critique & Praxis* navigates this problem by explaining that the values are not eternal and fixed but historical, inherited through past struggles. Within a given cultural-historical situation, it is up to the individual to interrogate and pursue them, ‘in confrontation with really existing political circumstances’. To avoid making claims for others, one’s values, like one’s praxis, must be for oneself alone.

Harcourt’s longest chapter maps the landscape of contemporary critical praxis, taking in both theorists and movements. His first sweep clears the field of any lingering hopes for old-fashioned proletarian revolution: Žižek, for example, is reminded that Lenin equals Stalin plus the Gulag. At the other end of the spectrum, as Harcourt sees it, lie the left electoral movements that broke through in the 2010s: Sanders, Corbyn, Podemos, La France insoumise and so forth. Do these count as a kind of critical praxis? Turning first to the Sanders campaign, Harcourt answers in the affirmative. Sanders’s programme is radical, and he doesn’t deploy notions of ideology or false consciousness in his messaging. *Critique & Praxis* rebukes those who, like Adam Tooze, have criticized Sanders for ‘nationalist and patriotic’ appeals, especially on immigration reform. This is simply a cost of doing electoral politics, argues Harcourt, which places constraints on political speech. A more generous reading of the immigration proposals—‘between the lines’—reveals a broad desire for change.

Next, Chantal Mouffe, leading theorist of ‘left populism’, who stands in here for Podemos, Syriza, Corbyn’s Labour and Mélenchon’s La France insoumise. Populism rightly produces anxiety on the left, Harcourt notes. In calling for the unity of a people, it can shade into forms of xenophobia. Mouffe’s, however, is a good-faith effort ‘to imbue left populism with an ethos of equality, social justice, and popular sovereignty. Those values inherently resist—or are intended to resist—the dangers that the critics identify’. As such, there is no reason to believe that the left-populist movements would necessarily succumb to the defects of ‘populism in power’. *Critique & Praxis* dwells longest upon the example of Black Lives Matter, ‘a movement of movements’ as he calls it, identifying numerous affiliated campaigns. For Harcourt, the fact that BLM began as a Twitter hashtag was instrumental to its success, since the hashtag resists appropriation by any person or group, and allows individuals to identify with the movement without formally joining it. Accordingly, ‘There was no authoritative policing, no institutional judge of who could legitimately claim to be part of the movement; and perhaps as a result, the edges and boundaries of the

movement were fluid'. BLM was willing to engage in policy discussions, but at the same time, had 'no ambition to be the state'. This was reminiscent of the Foucauldian idea of critique as the desire not to be governed thusly. Ultimately, for Harcourt, the power of BLM lay in its mission not to promote class struggle or revolution, but to revive and repoliticize the public sphere by countering a growing politics of despair during the Obama years.

Critique & Praxis gives more glancing attention to the various forms of occupation and assembly, from Occupy Wall Street and the movement of the squares in Cairo, Spain and Istanbul, to Nuit debout in Paris. Its typology of praxis extends beyond social movements to include individual acts of resistance: hacking, whistleblowing, 'killjoy' feminist interventions at the dinner table, civil-rights litigation. What interests Harcourt here is not so much how these struggles were conducted on the ground, but how they were theorized by prominent thinkers. Judith Butler's 'performative theory of assembly' is mildly chastised for its tautology: since the very purpose of an assembly is to 'affect our conception of politics', what does performative theory add to praxis by saying that it does so? On the other hand, Butler is favourably contrasted to Hardt and Negri's *Assembly*, which counsels protestors not to go leaderless but to embrace organizational forms, with the aim of seizing power. Whereas Butler 'looks at these assemblies and sets out, in a constructive way, to figure out everything that they do', Hardt and Negri want to 'fix them, change them, guide them', to help bring about the revolution. Worse, despite their admiration for Foucault, they sometimes slip into a Marxian register, speaking of such concepts as the domination of the ruling class. For Harcourt, it is important to emphasize that the occupations were more about political disobedience than revolution: the political intention of Zuccotti Park was to edge Obama leftwards, he avers, and the general mood—'the dancing ballerina, the drumming circles, the mimes, the human microphone'—was one of carnival.

Amusingly, the theory that turns out to 'collide' most productively with Harcourt's praxis is the wild-man communitarian anarchism of the Invisible Committee, a grouplet allegedly based in a commune in rural France, whose first pamphlet, *The Coming Insurrection* (2007), was an international hit. Although the Invisible Committee is scathing about 'critiques of critiques', Harcourt admires its Foucauldian suspicion of institutions. He finds traces of the master in the Committee's latest tract, *Now* (2017), whose considerations on the police remind him of *Security, Territory, Population*, while its discussion of civil war chimes with *The Punitive Society*. Harcourt focuses in particular on the Committee's notion of destituent power, counterposed to the ideas of 'constituent power' advanced in the occupations and assemblies. The goal should be to 'destitute' institutions by emptying them of their substance, letting them wither and die—a position Harcourt likens to the

‘space of refusal’ in Fred Moten and Stefano Harney’s *Undercommons* (2013). For the Committee, this involves disengaging from struggle against the ruling authorities and fastening onto the ‘positivity’ of alternatives. To destitute the university could involve not only abandoning the campus but establishing research centres elsewhere. To destitute government would be, more obliquely, ‘to make ourselves ungovernable’.

His survey complete, Harcourt returns to the question of how we might ‘reframe the praxis imperative’ in the 2020s. He is adamant that the only honourable way to carry out this investigation is to examine one’s own commitments, since the act of formulating praxis in a general way ‘policing others’. He also believes that the relationship of theory to practice must be one ‘not of implications or applications, but of confrontation’—on the model of the high-speed collision of sub-atomic particles generated by CERN’s Large Hadron Collider. Equally, such head-on theory-praxis collisions must take place *en situation*, in a loosely Sartrean sense, specified by time and place. Harcourt’s focus on himself is thus no mere solipsistic narrative convenience but an ethical injunction: all critical praxis is situated self-critical praxis. As a model, he offers the example of Foucault’s 1972 visit to Attica Prison in New York, an experience the philosopher found ‘overwhelming’, and which left him ‘upset’ and ‘undermined’. It forced him to confront the inadequacies of his ‘archaeology of knowledge’ approach and to think about the positive functions of the prison system: what effects are produced by these procedures for punishment and exclusion—what role does capitalist society make its penal system play? For *Critique & Praxis*, Attica and the French prison riots of 1971–72 were crucial for Foucault’s turn to ‘civil war’ as the conceptual matrix of the social order in this period.

As readers, we are fortunate also to have Harcourt’s example, for he has ‘toiled in these fields for many decades’ and his self-examination is correspondingly broad. For years, he agonized over his death-row litigation: by offering the condemned the hope of appeal, perhaps only of commutation to an unbearable life-long imprisonment, was he merely legitimating injustice? Bombarding his praxis with Foucauldian critique allowed him both to expand his political work and to formulate a more encompassing critique of the US social order. From seeing the death penalty as a unique evil, he moved to an understanding of its role in reinforcing the racialized social hierarchy that instantiated America’s ‘punitive paradigm’, under the rule of its counter-insurgent state. He developed the goal of shifting society from a paradigm based on punishment towards one based on education. Within that framework, he provided legal counsel for Occupy protesters, challenged Trump’s Muslim ban in court and filed a case against the North Dakota authorities for their harassment of the water protectors at Standing Rock.

As centrist liberal democrats gave up on equality and embraced neoliberalism, on the model of Obama, Harcourt realized that he must look to the critical left and to radical theory for answers to his questions about a more just society. He confronts Foucault's formulation, to not be governed thusly, with the Invisible Committee's proposal to 'make ourselves ungovernable'. Foucault was surely right that there is no unregulated space, so in theory one cannot not be governed. But by bringing his praxis into collision with the Committee's theory, Harcourt now sees that his ambition, ultimately, is to be ungovernable, even if he knows he can't be ungoverned. He offers the striking example of Harold Koh, dean of Yale Law School, hired by Obama to write the rules of engagement for lethal drone warfare. This was, perhaps, a 'better' form of governing than Bush. But, Harcourt asks of Koh: 'How on earth does a dedicated human-rights campaigner allow himself to become an executioner? By buying into the notion that we are necessarily governed, and therefore justifying a less nefarious form of it.' This was intolerable: 'I want to be the one who finds the best argument *against* execution protocols, not *for* them, who spends his time *challenging* our mode of governing and punitive society, rather than *justifying* it.'

What then is Harcourt's critical praxis *en situation*, when he encounters the Yellow Vest protestors in January 2019 while in Paris to conduct his EHESS seminar? Although he sympathized with the movement's aims, he was wary of its identitarian and nationalist rhetoric, and merely lingered by the Place de l'Étoile as an observer during the protest. Later at a panel discussion with Balibar, Negri and historian Ludvine Bantigny, Harcourt attempts to justify his position as a *compagnon de route*—a 'fellow traveller' of the movement, who declined to put on the vest. A challenge from a young philosopher in the audience 'cuts him to the quick': by refusing to participate, wasn't Harcourt enabling the very thing he feared—namely, that the movement would be captured by the right? Troubled by this, Harcourt is forced to reassess. The question brings home to him the importance of the performative dimension: the movement's identity didn't matter so much as the act of joining it and protesting. 'Presence itself', writes Harcourt, channelling Butler, 'has real effects'. His own contribution, meanwhile, will be to keep up his legal work, 'litigating, challenging, blocking and delaying counterrevolutionary policies as much as possible'. A second priority is to get more people involved in the democratic process: registering new voters, listening to the voices of the excluded and creating 'space for the next generations to speak and give us direction'. With this somewhat subdued message, Harcourt completes his self-study and invites critical theorists to undertake the exercise themselves.

By any measure, *Critique & Praxis* is an impressive contribution, passionate, lucid, deeply committed and nearly always generous in its

disagreements. As a conversation between Foucauldian philosophy and radical-political engagement, it is a *tour de force*. Few writers could match Harcourt's mapping of contemporary thinkers and movements in such crystal-clear, accessible prose. Moreover, he aligns himself clearly on the left and delivers a number of searing political judgements—above all against the horrors of the carceral system in the US. The urgency and directness of the book lend it the feel of a manifesto. It was plainly written to stand beside, or rather supersede, Hardt and Negri's most ringing interventions. In literary terms, it could have benefitted from more stringent editing at Columbia: the text suffers from an inordinate degree of repetition; if everything in it was said once, and once only, its near-700 pages would be cut by half. Inevitably, there are a few blunders. British readers will be surprised to learn that Corbyn's Labour Party scooped up votes from UKIP. Perry Anderson, presented as advocating a return to proletarian revolution, has famously urged a lucid registration of its defeat. Marx did not exclude civil and political rights from his emancipatory agenda; it's baffling that any reader could forget *The Civil War in France*.

More important, how should the core theoretical proposals of *Critique & Praxis* be assessed? Harcourt's choice of the Large Hadron Collider as metaphor for his method is probably unfortunate. This expensive project is currently shut down; its results have been disappointing. The discovery of the Higgs boson particle, predicted since the 1960s, only confirmed the paradigm of the old-science Standard Model; the LHC has signally failed to provide evidence of dark-matter particles or generate any 'new-science' paradigms. Scientists grumble that medium-scale experiments in the quantum realm are missing out on funding as a result of unproductive mega-projects like CERN's. Not too much should be made of this. No one is asking Harcourt to become an astrophysicist on top of all his other achievements, and critical theorists have form in getting science wrong—one thinks of Jameson's invocation (to describe a Koolhaas essay) of a black hole generating prodigious energies in all directions. But it does raise the question of what is gained by Harcourt's 'constant clash and collision' of theory and praxis. Does this in fact serve, as he hopes, to generate a unified field of critical-theoretical praxis?

The results of the Yellow Vest experiment are underwhelming. Having concluded that he can square participation in the protests with his political conscience, Harcourt boards a plane for New York. The next act of tear gas and flash-balls unfolds without him. The empirical-autobiographical evidence he presents suggests that he moved left due to disappointment in Obama, whose 2008 election he had greeted with tears of joy, and alarm at Trump; so far, so conventional. Philosophically, *Critique & Praxis* hovers between two modes: pragmatism and existentialism. Its main line

of argument urges us to abandon notions of truth, and, politically, to do whatever works, in classical pragmatist fashion. Hence Harcourt is able to survey a wide range of practices—from anarchist insurgency to criminal litigation—with a notable lack of judgement. Richard Rorty is duly awarded a central place in the genealogy of American critical thought for his willingness to set aside philosophical scepticism and discuss ‘core critical values of equality and solidarity’. Cutting against this pragmatism is Harcourt’s existentialist sensibility, which sees political activity as an individual project, a way to endow one’s life with meaning. ‘Early on’, he recalls, ‘I read and was taken by Sartre’s play *Dirty Hands*, and I have been haunted ever since by the question of giving meaning to one’s actions.’

In *Critique & Praxis*, this sentiment is inflected in part through the late Foucault, preoccupied with the ‘techniques of the self’. Harcourt writes, ‘Rather than ground his actions on normative foundations, Foucault sought instead to lead his political life like a work of art and developed the idea of an aesthetics of existence’. After his short-lived Maoist phase, Foucault was generally reluctant to strategize about politics. Towards the end of his life, however, he began to see the self as a potential space of freedom and experimentation. If we cannot change the world, we can at least subvert power by changing our relationship to ourselves. As many have noted, this position bears a striking resemblance to neoliberal conceptions of the entrepreneurial, self-reliant individual. Harcourt brushes off these criticisms, but they are legitimate concerns. The problem of left critical praxis is inescapably one of collective action, for the strength of the dispossessed lies in numbers. If praxis is undertaken as an individual journey, how world-changing is it likely to be? Harcourt’s opposition to collective praxis does not obviate the need for it; it merely shields him from the problem of how to elaborate non-coercive decision-making processes. Politics is unavoidably normative, and naturally involves persuasion and disagreement. But praxis as conscious political action can also aim at democratic accountability—a concept entirely absent from this book.

Harcourt is caught here between his desire to imitate Foucault’s anti-normative ‘aesthetics of existence’ and his wish to overcome Foucault’s deep scepticism about the possibility of transforming the world. The upshot is an uneasy tension between the liberal-reformist project of ‘edging’ the existing regime in the direction of compassion and respect, and the anarchist-individualist rhetoric of ungovernability. In reframing the praxis imperative as ‘How is my practice working?’, Harcourt favours the former option, proposing a pragmatist political sensibility, oriented toward self-fulfilment. (A similar contradiction informs his self-denying ordinance against counselling others, while presumably hoping they will read his book.) We should be grateful, nevertheless, that Harcourt has composed the autobiographical

sections of *Critique & Praxis* in the existentialist rather than the pragmatist style. A reviewer once rightly said of W. V. O. Quine's *The Time of My Life* that it read like an ironmonger's catalogue. The model for Harcourt seems rather to be Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo*. The references to it are not subtle: 'collision, contradiction and confrontation: this is where I would situate myself'. One must test concepts 'with a hammer'—or a sub-atomic particle blaster—until they 'burst apart'. Harcourt thus positions himself as the untimely philosopher whose boldness and creativity leads by example.

This stylization, however, has drawbacks. For one, it enables Harcourt to avoid any genuine self-criticism. The Yellow Vests episode is unconvincing as a conversion narrative; after this halting attempt at self-examination, we swiftly return to a celebration of the author's less unequivocal accomplishments. Nietzsche's chapter titles from *Ecce Homo*—'Why I Write Such Great Books', 'Why I Am Dynamite'—would not be out of place here. This is an opportunity missed—the chance seriously to review his political and intellectual commitments and genuinely situate his outlook in terms of age, class, race and profession. But Harcourt's sense of self-importance—offering the hope of critical awareness to 'the next generations'—prohibits any such irony or self-distance. The other drawback of the Nietzschean voice is that it calls attention to the book's lack of boldness and imagination. There is no utopian dimension to speak of in *Critique & Praxis* because Harcourt suspects this mode of thinking to be complicit with normativity and foundationalism. For all the book's ambition, culture is entirely absent here, as largely from Foucault—perhaps because its irrepressible variety serves as a standing rebuke to monotone conceptions of knowledge-power. Lacking therefore is any sense of what new possibilities protest might bring about. What would it mean, for example, to cancel debt in the US, or to defy eviction? What new forms of sociability could be enacted within the separatist communities he discusses? Though Harcourt hints at a social paradigm based on education, he offers no ideas for how we get there from here—the very stuff of political praxis.

This absence is related to the book's radically impoverished conception of the critical-theory tradition, here reduced to Horkheimer–Habermas–Honneth, on the one hand, and the school of Foucault on the other. Marxian thinkers—from Korsch and Lukács to Gramsci, Della Volpe, Sartre, Althusser, Poulantzas, Williams, Hall—are eliminated without explanation. By disqualifying all attempts to theorize and strategize around the workers' movement, Harcourt dismisses much of what counted as praxis in the history of critical thought. Exaggerating the significance of Euro-Maoism—and making no mention of its mixed legacy, which includes such neoconservative ghouls as Alain Finkielkraut, André Glucksmann and Stéphane Courtois—Harcourt omits the more significant body of literature

that emerged alongside the student and worker struggles in the 1960s and 70s: Marxist feminism, Autonomia, the Situationists, the New Left, eco-socialism, anti-colonial theory: these are scarcely mentioned, if at all. Few Marxists today would recognize Harcourt's crude portrait of a schematic historical determinism and class reductionism.

In particular, Harcourt excises any analyses, Marxian or otherwise, of capitalism as a system. Harvey, Arrighi, Brenner, Mason, Streeck are nowhere to be seen. These bodies of work are, of course, 'interpretations based on the available evidence', yet they also offer testable hypotheses and are capable of generating predictions that can themselves be falsified—unlike such abstractions as the 'punitive society'. If critical praxis is to be as radical as reality itself, it can hardly avoid engagement with the massively creative-destructive tendencies of the globalized economy. In this context, one might expect a panoptic survey of contemporary protest movements to focus at some length on the largest meltdown since the Great Depression. But the 2008 crash is mentioned only twice. The same silence prevails with respect to labour issues: it is as if wage stagnation, unemployment, zero-hour contracts, informalization and the creation of a college-educated precariat played no role whatsoever in the subsequent decade of protest. As a result, momentous labour struggles like the Chicago teachers' strike are excluded from this vaulting study. In Harcourt's view, Occupy Wall Street had nothing to do with opposing the banks and the bailouts—the debt issue is not even mentioned. In his discussion of the Nuit debout protest in Paris, he makes no reference to the hated El Khomri austerity laws that inspired them. Harcourt's conception of power results in a kind of political pointillism that is ill-suited for tracking globally interconnected phenomena. Missing these connections undermines Harcourt's discussion of praxis, since he does not grasp what these movements were against.

Finally, the political interpretation of the present at which *Critique & Praxis* arrives is distinctly unbold. We are told in effect that Trump represents a fascist threat to the US and must be removed from office by electoral means—the position of any Democratic Party official. As if anticipating the reader's deflation, Harcourt's conclusion gestures towards the notion that militants must be allowed to 'fully represent their constituencies'—whatever that means. But if the results are disappointing, it would be unfair to conclude that the mountain has produced a mouse. In its radical commitment and intellectual ambition, *Critique & Praxis* represents something more than that. Merely to table the question with such panache demonstrates the continued vitality of American Foucauldianism as a radical-intellectual current. Those critical theorists who dare to speak capitalism's name should rise to the challenge.