

Nigel Tubbs:

### **Decadent Critique**

Ilan has asked for some thoughts on alternatives to critique to begin our second session. Perhaps part of this work lies in rehearsing the question of the relation between theory and practice. In particular, what kind of education was critique expected or hoped to be? What kind of education did critique presume for itself? If it was or remains 'praxis' then was it ever clear exactly what kind of educational theory grounded praxis? This is perhaps a harder question to answer than is the related one of what kind of political change did it seek.

Is critique, for example, in the business of changing hearts and minds, believing that if people see the world differently then they and the world change? Did it ever have a clear educational rationale that was based in any kind of theory of learning? Has critique ever really successfully distanced itself from associations with the crudity of the false-consciousness thesis? Is critique grounded in a simple idea of (political) enlightenment with its presupposition of truth at the end of it? Or, is critique just another power-game played with radical pretensions, as some cultural critics argue? Is a notion of praxis sustainable against concerns that it repeats the power structure of enlightenment, of white masculine Western culture, and of rationalism, subjectivity, the logos, etc.?

Perhaps deconstruction offers a more or a less complicit form of critique of power structures than praxis? But then what is its educational rationale and credibility? How does its education work?

My question as an educator to both the political and cultural activist is this:

what theory of education lies behind your political activity? We know that Marx said philosophers have only interpreted the world; the point is to change it.

Should educators not also say that activists have only wanted to change the world; the point, however, is to understand the view and the concept of education (if there is one) that is presupposed in the notion of 'change'. It is in the idea of education carried by 'change' that some of the world's worst excesses have been justified.

In addition, whatever the educational hopes for the education carried in critique, did critique ever really recover from the totality thesis of the dialectic of enlightenment? Has critique ever known how to critique itself? Has it known how or even tried to learn from the dialectic of enlightenment it which it is embroiled? Has it, in short, ever taken up the challenge of the decadence of critique (thinking of decadence here as in Nietzsche from Twilight of the Gods) within modern bourgeois social relations, that it is part of the sickness that it diagnoses? If not, has such work been taken up by the cultural criticisms of critique mentioned above? Ilan has worked hard to try to draw together the strands of cultural critique and those of critical theory and our meeting in Oxford and elsewhere is testament to his efforts. But are his efforts also in vain? Is there anything that really draws us together when we meet apart, perhaps, from good intentions? If so, what is it? If an answer to this question is that we are all concerned to educate for a better world, then we return to the first question: what kind of education is it that we think can achieve this? Do educators have any special insights to bring to this debate? Is this what educators can bring to the table - a caution about the use and abuse of 'education' for political ends, a caution about what critique can and

cannot achieve, and a warning about the unintended repetition of relations of power that critique seeks to overcome?

Is there cause for more or less of Adorno's melancholy 50 years after his death? Is critique so domesticated now that it amounts to no more than moving the furniture around the room? Perhaps there will be time to think about this in our meeting with regard to 'Contradictions' from *Dialectic of Enlightenment* pp. 237-40, and 'Resignation'.

Finally, I wonder if such problems with critique should direct its practitioners to some different but more fundamental questions. For example, should the West be encouraged to undertake a radical review of what its 'mastery' now means in the world? How might the dialectic of enlightenment be used to reassess the totality of the complicity that critique cannot avoid. Might there need to be a re-think about the relationship of the mastery of critical practitioners over those that have always been the object of their enquiries? And might this, in turn, and rather enigmatically, mean that the masters have to become more of what they are before they can also become less than they are?