

Philosophy in Review



Bernard E. Harcourt. "Critique and Praxis"

Giacomo Borbone

Volume 42, Number 2, May 2022

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1089700ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1089700ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

University of Victoria

ISSN

1206-5269 (print)

1920-8936 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Borbone, G. (2022). Review of [Bernard E. Harcourt. "Critique and Praxis"]. *Philosophy in Review*, 42(2), 19–21. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1089700ar>

Copyright © Giacomo Borbone, 2022



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

Bernard E. Harcourt. *Critique and Praxis*. Columbia University Press 2020. 696 pp. \$40.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780231195720); \$30.00 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780231195737).

The world we live in is currently shaken by a series of systematic crises that are affecting the economy, politics, and even the natural environment. We are witnessing a series of economic crises, politics is increasingly incapable of making decisions and for this reason has become subservient to big financial capital, the capitalist mode of production has accelerated the consumption of goods generating ever-increasing exploitation and pollution of the natural environment. It is therefore necessary to rethink not only our relationship with nature, but also our social behavior, which now seems to be in the grip of large multinationals, while politics seems to be interested only in bureaucracy and administration. Long ago, Marx expressed the need to change the world, rather than interpret it, but this was only possible under certain conditions: overcoming private property, abolishing the capitalist regime, higher wages, better working conditions. The current situation, compared to Marx's, has changed profoundly, but the need expressed by the philosopher is still valid, especially in light of the great failure of critical philosophy and its attempt to change the world. These problems are addressed by Bernard E. Harcourt in his large volume *Critique and Praxis*. Harcourt, in the opening part of his book, describes the current situation for critical philosophy as follows: 'The collapse of critical philosophy and of its ambition to change the world, not just to interpret it, could not have come at a worse time. It coincides with the most pressing crises that humans have ever faced; the looming cataclysm of global climate change, the hegemonic rise of neoliberalism and growing inequalities within nations, the surge of a fascist New Right at the international dimension, the emerging threat of pandemics, nuclear proliferation and conflict between rogue nations' (10). This delicate world situation, according to Harcourt, poses the need to reinterpret critical philosophy in a new key, to 'return to the task of critical philosophy: not to merely interpret the world, but to change it – to develop critical praxis appropriate to these critical times' (13). But Harcourt is quick to point out that this emphasis on the philosophy of praxis and Marx's expressed need to change the world rather than interpret it, should not be confused with some sort of Marxist program. On the contrary, Harcourt argues, 'Marx's philosophy of history no longer holds today, and his analysis of political economy is dated. In many ways, the reconstructed critical praxis theory proposed here, with its emphasis on illusions and values, may be closer to Nietzsche than to Marx, even though just as much of Nietzsche's philosophy also must be set aside' (19).

The author's aim in this book is not to inspire critical theorists to become activists. Rather, it is to 'instantiate a personal corrective moment – to push myself back toward praxis and to confront my praxis with critical theory' (21). Harcourt puts the question in these terms because it is not a question of telling others what should be done, but rather of asking 'what more can I do?' More importantly, 'how does what I am doing work?' If you set the problem in this way then, writes Harcourt, 'the question "What more am I to do?" places emphasis and the onus on my own praxis. It places the focus on *my* actions' (24). But it is not only the political world that is in crisis, with political bankruptcy, environmental disasters, economic collapse and growing social inequalities. It is critical theory itself that is in crisis, so it is primarily a matter of solving the problem that afflicts critical theory of praxis itself by constructing a new one: 'While the aim of this work is to push



critical theory back toward praxis, the starting point must be to propose a resolution of the internecine battles and struggles for influence that currently plague critical philosophy' (43).

The author deals with this specific problem in the first chapter of his volume, entitled 'The Original Foundations.' He begins his analysis by considering Max Horkheimer and the Marxian normative foundations. Horkheimer's analyzes follow a dual path; on the one hand the constructivist aspect, on the other the purely scientific one. Horkheimer completes his analysis by directing his critique in an epistemological register, i.e. towards a critique of ideology. This is followed by analyzes of the conceptions of Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno. Harcourt concludes this first chapter by outlining two versions of the critical theory of the Frankfurt School:

'The first variation is critical theory as *critique of Marxism*. Drawing on the elements of reflexivity and constructivism and highlighting Adorno's writings in particular, this version unwinds dialectical materialism, liberates itself from the historical determinism of political economy. [...] The second version is critical theory as *corrective to Marxism*. Drawing on the more scientific elements of the first generation, this version recuperates dialectical logic to rehabilitate Marx, or at least rejuvenate a more foundational leftism – one that is true and normatively correct. The ambition here is to preserve the normative correctness of the Hegelian dialectic by means of concepts such as rationality, acceptability, and learning processes' (70-1).

In the second chapter, Harcourt analyzes what can be considered as alternative authors to the leading representatives of the Frankfurt School: Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault. Deleuze 'locates in Nietzsche's writings a pure form of critique, the very essence of critical philosophy, its core: namely, questioning the value of truth' (79). Foucault, whom Harcourt addresses more extensively in chapter three, brings back the question of critical philosophy to the time of Socrates. For these reasons, Harcourt states, 'rather than identify the criteria to determine the truth, Foucault's project was to write a history of truth production, of truth-telling, of truth-making' (107). The critical remarks of chapter four are also interesting, confronting the theoretical positions held by Hannah Arendt, Habermas, Rawls, and others. Habermas, Harcourt argues, abandons the mainstream Marxist perspective to turn his gaze to authors such as Kant and Hegel. The result was the arrival of a sort of philosophical liberalism that ended up without a critical praxis, especially with the notion of an idealized public sphere, which seems to belong not so much to a critical perspective in the Marxian sense, but rather a liberal and Kantian one.

Beginning with chapter seven, Harcourt analyzes the problem of illusions as conceived within a radical critical philosophy. After considering Freud's reflections and the illusions of the free market present in the United States, which Harcourt traces back to the physiocrats, the author proposes an anti-foundationalist conception: 'This is a world in which we never get to the original meaning or first source. We never get truth in politics. Instead, we unveil, and act, and continue to unveil more. But we do not get to solid ground' (213). For these reasons, Harcourt is convinced - on the basis of this anti-foundationalist perspective - that a reconstructed critical theory can operate in any context and must be guided by certain fundamental ethical principles: 'a reconstructed critical theory must be guided by the values that critical philosophy has placed front and center: equality, solidarity, social justice, and autonomy' (230). But the main point is that a reconstructed critical theory does not have to keep the theoretical aspects separate from the practical ones. It must

overcome certain dichotomies, such as leaving an idealist and a materialist perspective in opposition. It is rather a matter of keeping these two levels together by evaluating and judging them on the basis of the values that are at the heart of reconstructed critical theory. As Harcourt states in chapter ten regarding the centrality of critical values: ‘a reconstructed critical theory, a radical theory of illusions, has to focus, almost by default, on its core values and ideals. It needs to be idealist and materialist at the same time – entirely so – but then normatively assess on the basis of the values at the heart of critical philosophy: to shape a world of equal and compassionate citizens in solidarity and autonomy’ (257).

Since it is not possible to address all the themes present in this extensive book (including violence, epistemological detour, and so on), the aspect that seems central to me in this book, addressed in chapter fourteen, is that relating to the transformation of praxis. Harcourt considers the reflections of Žižek, who in turn is inspired by the theories of the economist Joseph Stiglitz. In this case Harcourt, on the basis of an anti-deterministic perspective, asserts that current social problems – including social inequality – are not intrinsic to either capitalism or the liberal economy but are rather the result of certain political choices. This means that the problem is not related to the economy at all, but to politics. The problem is that it is no longer possible to see that our world is surrounded by so many revolutions, such as the capitalization of China, the rise of new right movements in Italy, Germany, Austria, climate change, and so on. As Harcourt writes in his postscript: ‘a radical critical philosophy of illusions entails a radical theory of values and demands a radical theory of action. This book proposes a critical praxis theory of the twenty-first century that confronts these revolutionary times and challenges the intolerable that is all around us. Faced with the utter singularity and endlessness of the struggle, it offers a contextualized critical theory and praxis, *en situation*, relentlessly confronting each other, and it lays the groundwork for equality; compassion, respect, social justice, and autonomy. It is urgent. Time is running out’ (539).

Giacomo Borbone, Catania University