CRITIQUE, SUBVERSION, AND CHINESE PHILOSOPHY

Sociopolitical, Conceptual,
and Methodological Challenges

Edited by

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Critique, Subversion, and Chinese Philosophy

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and Methodological Challenges*

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Introduction: Conflict, Contradiction, Reconciliation: (Dis-)harmonious Critique in Chinese Philosophies

Hans-Georg Moeller and Andrew K. Whitehead

To someone who studied philosophy at a university in mainland China in the 1980s, the development of Chinese thought would have seemed like an endless chain of critiques and subversions. At the time, most textbooks and overviews of the history of philosophy still applied the framework of dialectical materialism quite rigidly. Accordingly, socioeconomic contradictions were regarded as the "base structure" of society and the ensuing class struggles as determining all intellectual developments. Some schools of thought, such as the Legalists and Daoists, were located within the progressive, materialist camp opposing feudal structures, while other schools, most prominently the Confucians, were seen as reactionary idealists whose ideology served the function of legitimizing oppressive social hierarchies and maintaining exploitative modes of production.

In the wake of the reform politics and modernizations initiated in 1978, China underwent rapid changes which eventually swept away traditional Marxist and Maoist modes of thought. China's 1990s should prove dialectical materialism correct, albeit in a most ironic way: Indeed, the shift toward a new mode of production, namely capitalism, once more brought about fundamental changes in philosophical thought—this time, however, these changes resulted in an almost complete demise of old-school dialectical materialism in mainstream Chinese philosophy. Since the 1990s, the philosophical discourse in mainland China has replaced emphasis on conflict and contradiction with emphasis on unity and, especially, harmony (*hexie* 和谐)—which has become a major buzzword in the present decade. If, for instance, one points out today at an academic conference in mainland China that early Daoist texts tend to harshly criticize their Confucian counterparts, one is soon likely to be reminded that in the end Daoists and Confucians nevertheless pursue more or less the same goals.

In philosophy, the current focus on harmony is sometimes implicitly or explicitly connected with the traditional motto of the "unity of the three teachings" (*sanjiao heyi* 三教合, referring to Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism), the roots of which can be traced back to the sixth century CE (Gentz 2011). The *sanjiao heyi* discourse typically

What Is Critique and What Does It Subvert? Epistemic Intransparency in the Critique of Modern Society

Ady Van den Stock

What Is Critique ...

Any attempt to outline and clarify the semantic and conceptual range of the notion of "critique" (for an example with a refreshing focus on everyday discourse instead of philosophical language, see Irandoust 2006) is immediately complicated by the considerable historical baggage of this term. It has become such an integral part of the self-understanding of modern societies and the self-appointed mission of post-Enlightenment philosophers, and hence so broad in scope and varied in content, that we would lapse into indeterminacy if we simply treated it as a known quantity that allows us to analyze (and indeed, in some sense, to transform or pave the way toward the transformation of) other social phenomena. In its ubiquity, "critique" becomes "increasingly vague and ambiguous" and even risks turning into "a liability and a caricature of itself" (Raffnsøe 2015: 3). Additionally, in assuming "critique" to be a self-evident concept, we would perhaps already be violating the first basic requirement of the critical endeavor, that is to say, the demand to be reflexive. The practice of critique is something from which we (not unreasonably) expect a considerable amount of self-awareness, an unconscious critique being a contradiction in terms. No form of critique, it would seem, is complete without the ability to call its own conditions of possibility into question. This already raises the possibility that the critical enterprise can become self-undermining and, in a sense, that critique cannot but (at least rhetorically) welcome this possibility as consistent with and reflective of its own basic outlook and attitude.

Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* from 1781 probably counts as the most famous philosophical testament to this demand for reflexivity, and it is often seen as marking the beginning of a turn toward the subject as a transcendental source of epistemological spontaneity (reason as the "lawgiver of nature") as well as of normative autonomy. Ironically, the post-Kantian development of German Idealism eventually steered thinkers away from subjectivity as the privileged locus of the transcendental (for the

peculiar example of Schelling, see Habermas 1963). Attempts to safeguard the self-grounding status of the subject while at the same time preserving a space for the facticity of the world as non-reducible to thought or consciousness (Fichte, Hegel) came to be seen as largely unsuccessful, and these attempts were criticized for having overinflated the conditioning (subject) at the expense of the conditioned (object) and effectively imploding the latter into the former. A "worldless" (in Heidegger's words) condition of possibility cannot make the world (or, for that matter, any world) possible. It merely ends up putting itself in the world's place, as its much-impooverished substitute.

By contrast, the novel and revolutionary focus, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, on the determining influence of factors such as labor, language, civilization/culture, and the unconscious, categories which do not fit easily within the convenient subject-object scheme, opened up a space that Foucault famously described by means of the (in his own words) "barbarous" term, "*historical a priori*" (italics in original; Foucault 2002: 143). Interestingly enough, these historically fluid categories would come to be seen, to a considerable extent, as structurally independent from human beings, analytically, and factually subject to them. As such, there was no longer a necessary overlap between reflexivity and human autonomy (see "The Reflexivity of Critique"). Marx's critique of industrial capitalism, for instance, was grounded precisely in an analysis of the historically specific conditions in which capital can come to subsume the concreteness of human labor within the operations of a self-valorizing form of exchange value that progressively strives to liberate itself from any dependence on actual use value (see Postone 1993). In more general and positive terms, within the space described by such "*historical a priori*" as the pair capital/labor, the conceptual powerhouse that is reflexivity could be dislodged from the problematic figure of a self-constituting (human) subject fatally severed from the world; for the status and condition of the latter is precisely what is at stake in practicing the "patient labor" (to quote Hegel) of critique. The conditions of the possibility for criticizing the world coincide with the conditions of the social world itself. As such, they can only be understood through a radically immanent and self-implicative analysis. Any claim to take up a "critical" position outside of the observable world opens itself to the accusation of being predicated on an ideologically motivated withdrawal from the urgent sublunary concerns of the here and now. Or as Marx put it more memorably: "the criticism of religion is the prerequisite of all criticism" (Marx 1844 [no pagination]).

... and What Does It Subvert?

Perhaps the preceding paragraphs have already led us too far away from the rich and evocative quality of the word "critique" in more straightforward forms of everyday communication by reproducing a potted summary of relatively well-trodden paths in the history of Western philosophy. Another and potentially more productive way to proceed would be to depart from the contingent (if not entirely coincidental, let alone random) fact that the notion of critique is aligned with the equally suggestive and loaded word "subversion," which appears in the title of the current volume. Whatever critique may be, and however we choose to characterize the historically specific conditions for

its emergence and enactment, it seems clear that it is not all that uncommon for us today to expect it to subvert and be subversive. Having a closer look in the following section at the closely related idea of "subversion" will, I believe, help us further clarify the notion of critique in a more determinate manner.

For one thing, in academic as well as popular discourse, terms such as "subvert," "disrupt," "interrupt," "destabilize," "transgress," and "upset" have increasingly taken on a positive, commendable, appealing, and indeed urgent and imperative quality. The need or the call to subvert can be found in contexts as diverse as that of aesthetic production, economic theory, and social criticism. These examples were not chosen entirely at random. Indeed, according to Boltanski and Chiapello's by-now classic study, the post-May '68 revolution in managerial discourse (and more broadly speaking, in social analysis), which accompanied the birth of what they call the "new spirit of capitalism," was grounded in the incorporation and cooptation (we could also say "subversion") of "aesthetic" (as opposed to "social") critiques of capitalist society in its Fordist guise (Boltanski and Chiapello 2006). In this sense, the continuing preference in political rhetoric for reassuring promises of continuity, order, predictability, security, and control, in societies that are economically dependent on a considerable amount of instability and volatility ("flexibility"), is the exception that proves the rule: we have "resigned" ourselves (in a manner of speaking) not only to living and coping with the contingency and fluidity of what Zygmunt Bauman has called "liquid modernity," but also to upholding and celebrating it as a normative expectation, aesthetic criterion, measure of behavioral competency, and so on. While politicians are the rare species that is generally still rewarded for promoting instead of subverting stability (which of course can paradoxically enough only be provided for by means of continuous "growth" and "reform"), it seems that most other domains of society and forms of social activity have found ways to ideologically accommodate the idea and practice of subversion. Academics must subvert established research paradigms, artists are expected to subvert existing styles and genres, couples can subvert inherited modes for living their social and gender roles (a lot of empirical ifs and buts are at work at this instance), teachers should subvert conventional pedagogical methods, "modern" CEOs willingly subvert established hierarchical boundaries, entrepreneurs performatively subvert institutional and professional identities (at least according to Bureau 2013, as well as Kauppinen and Daskalaki 2015), and so on.

Dismissing such phenomena as a mere matter of hollow rhetoric (which may be accurate enough in specific cases) would miss the point that the way we communicate about our activities and responsibilities in society is hardly extrinsic or inconsequential to the way we enact, experience, and assess our social roles. To be sure, we cannot all be subversive all of the time, either logically speaking or in practical terms. To begin with, this would involve the counterfactual and unrealistic assumption that our everyday activities are carried out with a constant and paralyzing sense of reflexive awareness. A person should be allowed to eat a steak in peace without having to worry about raising a political storm, although this example is probably poorly chosen (after all, why not opt for a plant-based alternative instead?). There are obviously also domains of society such as religion and the legal system where "subversion" usually designates only a negative value, something to be excluded, prevented, or counteracted (then

again, see Myles 2016 on the fetishization of the notion of subversion in the unlikely domain of research about the historical Jesus). That being said, while certain forms of behavior or speech may not "really" be subversive at all (this requires a prior determination of precisely what is being subverted and what qualifies as a subversive act or observation), it is significant enough in itself that they are often valued positively simply for being perceived or presented (I am tempted to say "marketed") as subversive. In Luhmann's words, "the production of deviating ideas gains a certain regularity, an almost businesslike nature" (Luhmann 2012-13: vol. 1, 275). In any case, the most straightforward candidate for occupying the other side of the category of subversion, that is to say, "conformism," is hardly ever openly embraced as a commendable attitude or course of action. To give an example from politics, conservatives too will be inclined to perceive and communicate about their political stance as challenging and "subverting" the liberal/progressive dogma. The indeterminacy of the category of what qualifies as subversive or critical implies that we cannot approach these notions in ontological terms, but are always forced to ask, as the sociologist Niklas Luhmann never tired of repeating: "who says so?" (e.g., see Luhmann 2013: 99-100 and Esposito 2017: 21). I will address Luhmann's constructivist position, which I am drawing on throughout this chapter, in somewhat more detail in the next section.

Just as is the case with "critique," "subversion" is an interesting case of a politically hazardous term that has acquired a predominantly positive moral connotation instead of (exclusively) invoking images of political and military conflict, social turmoil, or physical violence. However, an important difference between the notions of "critique" and "subversion" would seem to be that whereas the former is marked by a more militant, ambitious, and demanding outlook in aiming for a transformation of a given state of affairs that has been identified as in some sense problematic and in need of critique, "subversion" appears more open-ended and ambiguous in its (often unstated) goals. Like critique, subversion cannot but be "concerned with the position of the proponent relative to [a given] reality" (Irandoost 2006: 133), but insofar as "subversiveness" is merely approached as the quality of an action or observation made by a subject, it does not necessarily include a determination about whether or not the act or observation in question effects (or prepares for the effectuation of) a positive transformation in the subverted object. In short, "subversive" subjects can, in principle, remain relatively indifferent to the clarion call of Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, according to which we should not merely interpret, but also change the world. Instead they can remain content with adopting the posture of someone who knows it ought to be changed and profiting from the cultural capital this affords them. Moreover, if subversiveness as an attitude or stance is restrictively situated within a predetermined domain of social activity or mode of action that in itself is left unquestioned (such as when entrepreneurs are treated as skilled subverters of the economic "game"), the capacity for subversion to genuinely undermine and change what it purports to reject or distance itself from risks being severely compromised.

As such, in abstract terms at least, the idea of "subversion" is perfectly compatible with the acceptance of a high degree of structural stability in pregiven relations of power and domination (see Grindon 2011: 868-9), although it remains to be determined whether the same might be said about "critique" as well. The question thus becomes

to what extent it is possible to truly subvert something (e.g., a gender role, a hierarchy, a discourse) without also in a more radical sense deconstructing or dismantling it. After all, when approached in a generalizing and depoliticized fashion, "to subvert" does not so much mean to reject, abolish or overcome, but rather comes to resemble a perverted version of the Hegelian notion of "sublation" (*Aufhebung*) in seeking to "preserve while/by overcoming" (or the other way around).

We would in all likelihood be going too far in claiming that subversion is a covert or more subtle form of reactionary conformism, and that any attempt to subvert existing models or procedures of thought or action is doomed to failure because "the system" already includes its own critique within itself as a diabolical means of structurally precluding any challenges to its existence. In doing so, we would effectively be further blurring the distinction between the position of the critic and that of the conspiracy theorist, as one famous critic of critique has observed (see Latour 2004: 228-30). That being said, the above observations indicate that we should be wary of treating "subversion" as a capacity that is first and foremost expressive of the creative potential and the indomitable spirit of human subjectivity. The phenomenon and discourse of subversion is conditioned by larger social and cultural developments that transcend the individuals usually assumed to be the ultimate agents of subversion. No one, I suspect, could have anticipated that the idea of subversion would become so culturally and institutionally entrenched in everyday behavior and discourse as to begin to appear as a sign of social conformity. While the very term "subversion" is often closely aligned with the ability of individual agents to modify or repurpose their conditions of existence, it is precisely these conditions themselves which have, in modern society at least, become marked by a structural and systemic form of "subversion." In a sense, it is systems such as the capitalist economy that are the real subverters of social life. By contrast, individual human beings can easily come to feel that their attempts at critique and subversion amount to little more than an inconsequential form of moral posturing, a situation that the late Mark Fisher described as leading to a self-reinforcing sense of "reflexive impotence" (Fisher 2009: 21). At the very least, we should not take for granted the presumed capacity of human beings to emancipate themselves through the reflexivity we tend to associate with the transformative activities of critique and subversion.

The Reflexivity of Critique: Epistemic Intransparency in Modern Society

Unlike subversion, the idea of critique retains a close and decisive connection to that of reflexivity. It would not sound all that far-fetched (anymore) to claim that "dance subverts movement" or "jokes subvert language," which suggests that no reflexive self-awareness need be involved in subversion, as something that may occur as an event without being carried out as a conscious practice. As such, whereas subversion can apparently happen in a quasi-unconscious and spontaneous manner, the same cannot be said for critique. If the subject of critique is to maintain an edge over its object of critique, it must not only know what it is doing, but also take this (self-)knowledge

into account in its analysis. At the same time, however, the central position accorded to reflexivity in our contemporary understanding of (the quintessentially modern notion of) critique poses considerable difficulties for critique as a practice aimed toward the transformation of (particular aspects of) modern society in all its structural complexity (see Esposito 2017). As I will try to explain in what follows, this complexity casts doubt on its hallowed status as part of the Enlightenment's "double deity Reason and Critique" (Luhmann 2012–13: vol. 1, 5; compare with vol. 1, 109). Due to limitations of space as well as the tentative nature of my own research, my discussion will mostly remain on a relatively abstract, epistemological level.

Let me proceed by focusing on what at first sight may very well appear to be a completely trivial observation, although one that has considerable consequences at a deeper level of analysis: critique is not concerned with *states of affairs* at a first-order level, but rather with *observations* or *representations*. What we normally understand by a critique cannot be directly targeted at a given state of affairs that, for one reason or another, is seen as problematic, undesirable, or condemnable. Critique functions on the level of representation, not on that of the immediacy of reality as such (even if, from a constructivist epistemological perspective at least, the categories of "immediacy" and "reality" are not so easy to reconcile). Otherwise, it would be indistinguishable from mere condemnation. One cannot "criticize" a hurricane or an earthquake, or even "man-made" phenomena such as global warming. Let us take the more straightforward example of poverty. Of course, a critique of poverty must depart from the commonsensical observation that poverty is a bad thing and that it would be good if it were somehow abolished or overcome in the future (even if treating the problem in moral terms is not necessarily a "good thing," *pace* Moeller 2009). In this sense, agents of critique remain firmly anchored in the pregiven social reality that they intend to address, reconceptualize, and possibly even change for the better. But as soon as we imagine what a critique of poverty as a factual state of affairs would look like, it is fairly easy to see that the critic in question would almost immediately proceed by concentrating their critical energies on tackling certain *representations* of poverty. A critic might argue, for example, that poverty is not the result of a natural order or divine ordinance, of "laziness" or a lack of entrepreneurship, but rather of structural social conditions such as systemic class discrimination or racial bias. He or she would deal with prevalent or neglected views of poverty and adopt a position with respect to what others have said and are saying. In some cases, this might involve the prior labor of convincing another observer of the existence of the state of affairs in question (think of global warming), or, alternatively, of its problematic nature.

Hence, a critic is forced to join the ranks of other observers and make a specific intervention in a preexisting discourse concerning the state of affairs he or she is criticizing. Just as importantly, a critique must be articulated in such a way as to be communicatively productive; that is to say, it must have the potential to become the topic of and usher in new communication. Representations of states of affairs, critical ones perhaps even more so than others, are forced to invest a considerable amount of time and energy in representing themselves, that is to say, in making sure they are seen and heard (and are perceived as "critical" to begin with). In any case, critique cannot function without communication, and it is an inherently social category.

This also expresses itself in the expectation that critique will reflexively situate both its object and itself in a broader discursive as well as societal context. As Irandoust notes in drawing a distinction between "critique" and mere "criticism": "criticism ... is understood to remain content with passing judgement upon an object in a way which reifies the object, isolating it from its real and concrete relations with other objects" (Irandoust 2006: 134). Among other concerns, this implies that, ideally at least, critique does not concern itself so much with targeting the specific enunciators of a certain representation as individual people, but rather with these representations themselves, insofar as they are part of a broader social problem or ideological discourse. In other words, "critique can only apply to products, and never to individuals" (Irandoust 2006: 135).

The fact that critique deals with representations and not with states of affairs undergirds and reinforces its status as inherently reflexive, but also complicates it. Critique observes, but primarily observes other observations, and will in turn be observed in ways it cannot always foresee, and must try to take this inevitable self-exposure into account lest it consign itself to irrelevance. Reflexivity thus creates a certain distance between the subject and object of critique, a distance that can in turn be presented or experienced as pathological, as a sign of disengagement or even indifference. Critique is the archetypal Kantian stance that refuses to deal with "things in themselves." In modern societies in particular, the endeavor of critique is expected to internalize and bear out, in a more radical and consistent fashion, the general pervasiveness of reflexivity that is institutionalized in procedures of self-examination and self-assessment. Michael Power's notion that we are currently living in an "audit society" pervaded by "rituals of verification" is worth invoking here (quoted in Raffnsøe 2015: 5). This also affects our personal sense of self-identity and the possibilities on offer to identify with our social roles (see Moeller 2017: 37–41). As Luhmann put it, "an individual in the modern sense of the term is someone who can observe his or her own observing" (Luhmann 1998: 7). In more general terms, Luhmann claims that the prevalence of second-order observation (the observation of observers, including self-observation and self-description) is a structural feature of modern society that characterizes and defines all its functionally differentiated subsystems. Each of these systems (law, politics, economy, art, the mass media, etc.) operates "rationally" in its own manner; that is to say, each "autopoietically" constructs (its own) reality according to a certain code that is not grounded in an external, self-sufficient foundation (e.g., in the case of the legal system, legal/illegal). However, there is no overarching "meta-rationality" with the ability to authoritatively represent, let alone steer, society as a whole (e.g., see Luhmann 2012–13: vol. 2, 87–108 and Moeller 2017: 30–7). From this "polycontextural" and "postontological" perspective, "suppositions of reality are needed ... only in order to accept a multiplicity of incommensurable constructions and, when needed, to move from one of them to another" (Luhmann 2002: 52). What is "rational" depends very much on the functional subsystem and type of rationality involved (see Luhmann 1998: 22–43).

For our present purposes, it is perhaps enough to elaborate a bit more on the relatively straightforward observation that critical thought is expected to be aware of its own position in relation to what it critiques. In criticizing a certain state of affairs,

a critique must at the same time try to monitor its own position vis-à-vis the reality in question and gauge its ability to intervene and modify its object, if only by means of an altered representation. As such, critique involves a "capacity to reflexively incorporate the sociohistorical conditions and contexts of its own emergence," which in turn presupposes a "heightened awareness of time" (Kompridis 2006: 18). Critique is thus anything but a view from nowhere, but rather "a thing of this world" (Boland 2014). This implies that agents of critique have to be cognizant of the fact that their observations will in turn be observed by other observers and that any critique will be assessed both according to its own stated goals (in internal critiques) as well as in terms of how well it supposedly presents and/or transforms (or allows for the transformation of) the object of critique (in an external critique, which starts out by offering up an alternative representation of the object in question and assessing the first critique's representation in comparison to this alternative). To again quote Luhmann: "in self-description, description is always part of what it describes and changes what it describes simply by appearing and exposing itself to observation" (Luhmann 2012-13: vol. 2, 178, compare with 327-8). Consequently, we can no longer expect to see without being seen or to know without being known. The first casualty in critique is the critic.

Hence, we should not so much or exclusively expect a critique to pass judgment on the content of a certain representation, but also, and perhaps above all, on the way it represents its own position over and against what it constructs (for that is what it must do) as its immediate object of critique. To phrase it in a Luhmannian style: how does critique see itself in seeing what it sees (and what others do not see)? One of the most important implications here is that if we want to formulate a concept of ideology (still the most likely target of contemporary critiques) that does not already presuppose the acceptance of a specific political position (so that anything opposed to that position can simply be rejected as "ideological," and thus wrong and dangerous), one way to proceed would be to approach it in a more formalistic manner, by conceiving it in terms of how it (implicitly or explicitly) portrays the relation to its own social context (see Van den Stock 2016: 16-19). Ideological distortion not only operates on the level of representation but also on the more reflexive level of how representations are presented in relation to the reality they make accessible.

Consequently, we have to look at how certain modes of observation observe their own observations. This is not an easy task, but there are no convincing shortcuts on offer which would allow us to directly see things as they really are. The epistemic intransparency of society, as the ultimate "object" of any critique, and of our own observational position, as well as the unforeseeable effects of our observations in a social world where rationality is, to use Luhmann's preferred phrasing, "discharged" by function systems, complicates the desire to be done with the complexities of critique and return to "things themselves." Lacking a determinate understanding of how the societies in which we currently live are structured and how they function, critique always risks deteriorating into a dogmatic replication of one's preferred political positions, and hence reproducing a predetermined set of questions that can be answered by ticking the right boxes. By contrast, as Judith Butler has rightly cautioned, the historical specificity of the critical endeavor forces us to pay attention to "certain kinds of questions [which] cannot be posed or, rather, can only be framed and posed by

breaking through a certain prohibition that functions to condition and circumscribe the domain of the speakable" (Butler 2009: 777).

To be sure, the question remains whether we can realistically continue to expect the reflexivity of critique to serve, if not as a guarantee, then at least an enabling condition, for arriving at the affirmative moment expected of it. In the prevalent understanding, critique is supposed not merely to reject but also to indicate how things could be different and how to make the leap from the "is" to the "ought." To paraphrase Žižek, what do we do on the "morning after," when critique has scored its final victory over what it set out to expose and dismantle? Do we have no other choice than to learn to enjoy the ensuing hangover in the proverbial "desert of the real"? But isn't the notion of critique always grounded in an audacious hope that what it critiques can be positively changed by unearthing or exposing the ideological fabrications that prevent other observers from seeing through it and coming to terms with what it really is? Additionally, doesn't the very idea of critique presuppose something like an overlap or continuity between the epistemic reflexivity we have explored above, and a more positive and concrete form of normative autonomy?¹

Building on the preceding observations, it seems that such expectations have become increasingly unlikely and untenable. Reflexivity cannot function as the "lifeboat" Bruno Latour accuses critique of always looking for; for this presupposes an "ascetic" and "thrifty" division of the world into "two packs, a little one that is sure and certain, the immense rest which is simply believed and in dire need of being criticized, founded, re-educated, straightened up" (Latour 1987: 85). One of the most often-voiced complaints against the concept of critique is that it tends to assume a privileged position vis-à-vis the normal or "uncritical" attitude it distinguishes itself from (see Raffnsøe 2015: 5). It can thus observe social reality and those "duped" by ideological representations of social order from a safe distance, a distance without which it cannot function or even begin. Like a complicit and complacent subverter, critique postures as a form of thought that can pass judgment on society without implicating itself in what it criticizes.

In highly simplistic terms, the critic appears as a figure who *knows better*, *makes better*, and thus in some sense, *is better*. This is, it seems to me, precisely the sort of attitude and outlook critique must learn to set itself apart from within the specific conditions of modernity. We do not necessarily know better because we are aware of being seen and have learned to modify our cognitive habits accordingly or because we know that our observations take place within conditions that already determine the modes of observation and action at our disposal. Such conditions can, in turn, only be observed by drawing specific distinctions (which always exclude and hide something else) without ever yielding a transparent object or allowing the observer to bask in the radiance of self-transparency. As Luhmann nicely put it in a different context, "the mirror itself is opaque" (Luhmann 2012-13: vol. 2, 318). The state of epistemic intransparency in which the observed world is placed when one particular distinction is chosen over another, out of a potentially infinite number of others, applies just as much to the observer; and even an observer who knows that this is so has no *a priori* strategic advantage over other, first-order observers who appear as more "naïve" by contrast. Even if this were so, the question would remain what greater potential for

action a full, reflexive knowledge of the object of a critique would have. After all, the truth will not necessarily set us free, but might just as likely have a paralyzing effect, or, less dramatically, may turn out to be rather boring. As Mahāyāna Buddhist thinkers have long known, the "ontological significance of our epistemic stance to the world" places the world in a state of "ontological indeterminacy" (Kantor 2006: 135). But does all of this mean we can wallow in this intransparency as a superior form of ignorance? To continue on a Buddhist note, such "resignation" (which critical theorists such as Adorno have always struggled with) would only be morally justifiable if there were no suffering in the world and if compassion would not force us to act, instead of waiting for a moment of complete insight that will never arrive without compassion in the first place. That being said, I suspect no one is eagerly waiting for philosophers to take on the role of Bodhisattvas and enlighten those who often know all too well how socially determined they are and do not need someone to instruct them in the extent of their "conditioned arising" and "ignorance." "Ignorance" is not only a diagnosis by someone equipped with the cure, but before all else, a basic source of solidarity. As such, it seems that we must, contra Bob Dylan, find ways to criticize what we can't understand.

Note

- 1 Max Horkheimer's famous text "Traditional and Critical Theory" from 1937 is interesting to consider in this context, particularly since Horkheimer's name is more often associated with the overtly bleak analysis of the prospects for social emancipation put forward in *Dialectics of Enlightenment* from 1944, coauthored with Adorno, while both Frankfurter Schule luminaries were exiled in California. In this earlier text, Horkheimer still claimed that "in the transition from the present form of society to a future one, mankind will for the first time be a conscious subject and actively determine its own way of life" (Horkheimer [1937] 2002: 233). As is the case in Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* from 1923, the epistemological relation between subject (humanity) and object (society) is at the same time conceived of in emancipatory terms here, with reflexive self-consciousness being presented as in some sense coinciding with normative self-determination and human autonomy. That being said, Horkheimer already had a highly distinctive understanding of reflexivity. In the course of his text, Horkheimer makes it clear that he sees the critical attitude as to some extent overlapping with the ability of observers to see themselves as situated within a broader social context. In contrast to "traditional theory," critical theory does not understand itself as confined to a specialized role in society and does not lay claim to a form of false self-sufficiency that Horkheimer condemns as amounting to a "hypostatization of Logos" (199). Rather, critical theory recognizes itself as part of and conditioned by larger social and historical processes (197–200). As he puts it pointedly, "the insistence that thinking is a fixed vocation, a self-enclosed realm within society as a whole, betrays the very essence of thought" (243). Horkheimer believes that the reflexive awareness he expects of critical as opposed to traditional theory is foreshadowed in an idealist form in the philosophy of Kant and its transcendental turn toward the subject. He reads such an outlook as an abstract blueprint for a real process of emancipation, in which human beings will come to recognize society as their own product (200–11). Kant's Copernican revolution thus becomes the logical precondition

for social emancipation. What transcendentalism formulates as the subjective foundation of objectivity will be practically realized as social autonomy in a future society. As Horkheimer writes: "in genuinely critical thought explanation signifies not only a logical process but a concrete historical one as well. In the course of it, both the social structure as a whole and the relation of the theoretician to society are altered, that is, both the subject and the role of thought are changed" (211).

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Contributors

Dimitra Amarantidou (易冬蘭) is a PhD candidate in the Department of Chinese Philosophy at East China Normal University (ECNU, Shanghai). Her research focuses on irony and paradox in early Confucian thought. For the past three years, she has taught Chinese philosophy courses at ECNU and has been working both individually and collaboratively on several translation projects, including Chen Guying's 陳鼓應 *Annotated Critical Laozi*, Guo Qiyong's 郭齊勇 *Contemporary Studies of Chinese Philosophy, 1949–2009*, and Yang Guorong's 楊國榮 *Twenty Discourses on Chinese Philosophy*, as well as the latter's *Zhuangzi's World of Thought*.

Rudi Capra completed his BA in philosophy and classical studies at Siena University in 2011 and his MA in philosophy and aesthetics in 2013 at Paris-Sorbonne University. He was awarded his PhD in comparative philosophy east-west at University College Cork in 2019, with a doctoral fellowship from the Irish Research Council. His research focuses on the role of irony in the *Blue Cliff Record* (biyan lu 碧巖錄) and Chinese Buddhism. His scholarly interests are Buddhism; Chinese, Japanese, and Greek philosophies; and philosophy of film.

Robert A. Carleo III, holds an MPhil in Chinese Philosophy from Fudan University, and a PhD in Philosophy from the Chinese University of Hong Kong. He works principally on comparative and Chinese philosophy, specializing in Confucian and liberal moral and political theory.

Paul J. D'Ambrosio is Associate Professor of Chinese Philosophy at East China Normal University (ECNU) in Shanghai, Fellow of the Institute of Modern Chinese Thought and Culture, Dean of the Center for Intercultural Research, and Program Coordinator for ECNU's English-language MA and PhD programs. He is the author of *真假之间* (*Between Truth and Falsity*), co-author (with Hans-Georg Moeller) of *Genuine Pretending*, editor (with Michael Sandel) of *Encountering China*. Additionally, he has authored over seventy articles, chapters, and reviews, and is translator of over a dozen books on Chinese philosophy.

Ting-mien Lee is Assistant Professor in the Philosophy and Religious Studies Programme at University of Macau. She received her BA in Chinese literature from National Taiwan University and MA in philosophy from University of Leuven. She completed her PhD in sinology at University of Leuven. Lee's main research interest lies in the area of classical Chinese philosophy, with a specific focus on the interaction of language, power-struggle strategies, and moral theories in pre-Han and early Han China. She also conducts research in the history of Mohist studies.