Lonely and beyond truth? Two objections to Bernard Harcourt's *Critique & Praxis*

Bernard Harcourt's latest book is bold, brave, and too short.

It is bold in its ambition to return critical theory to praxis, to action, to changing the world instead of interpreting it. Harcourt urges critical theorists to stop infighting over epistemological issues and focus on what is important—for the world needs changing, as he makes abundantly clear.

The book is brave because it does precisely what Harcourt argues critical theory should do: It sketches critical theory's history in the 20th century in order to offer a way forward. According to Harcourt's diagnosis, critical theory has gradually separated itself from critical praxis because it embarked on an "epistemological detour" (Harcourt, 2020, p. 4, see chapter 1–5; henceforth CP). In order to guide critical theory back to the main road, towards praxis, three steps must be taken, Harcourt claims: First, critical theory must learn the lesson of the "epistemological detour" and develop a "radical philosophy of illusions" (CP 46, see chapters 6 and 7). This radical philosophy of illusion defends a defetishizing critique as an endless process of unmasking, knowing full well that each time it unveils something to be something else, this something else eventually will be unmasked, too. No truths are offered because truth is only a pretence of solid foundations to better hide the exercise of power (see CP 184–190).

In order not to get lost in the infinite series of denunciations of illusions, critical theory needs, second, a "radical critical theory of values" (CP 48, see chapters 8–10) that includes an extended discussion of the problem of violence. Whereas the radical philosophy of values—Harcourt repeatedly names "equality, solidarity, social justice and autonomy" (e.g. CP 1, 46 f., 164, 230) and sometimes adds "compassion" and "respect" for good measure (e.g. CP 16, 265, 280)[1]—serves to orient the endless defetishizing critique, the discussion of violence is necessary because critical theory affirms a horizon of "endless struggles" (CP chapters 11–13).

By this point, we are only halfway through the book, and the third step, which is also the most important for Harcourt, is yet to come: Critical theory must be reconnected to praxis via a "radical critical theory of strategies and tactics" (CP 48, see chapters 14–16). This involves a historical sketch of how critical practices have changed during the 20th century and a dazzling tour de force through contemporary forms of critical practices. The upshot, according to Harcourt, is that the "radical critical philosophy of strategies and tactics" should no longer ask Lenin's question "What is to be done?" but the humbler question "What more am I to do?" (CP 438 f.)

Again, Harcourt does what he argues for. Adhering to his individualized version of the "praxis imperative" (CP 438 f.), he reflects on his own critical theory and praxis as well as its development in the last decades in a deeply personal account that takes up the last 100 pages (CP chapters 17–19). Calling the book brave thus is twice justified: On the one hand, the sheer scope of Harcourt's reconstructed critical theory and its critical praxis is breathtakingly ambitious. On the other hand, it is courageous to implicate oneself in the way Harcourt does in giving an account of his own efforts in the last part of the book.

However, the book is too short to argue in detail for what it tries to accomplish—and too long for a comprehensive review. Given the gargantuan mass of issues worth engaging with, I will be utterly selective in addressing just two. I will do so in the spirit of Harcourt's last line of his conclusion, namely by taking up his invitation to "continue the conversation, confrontation, and endless struggles" (CP 536). For I will argue that there are serious flaws in the book's two guiding ideas that have grave consequences for critical theory and praxis: Harcourt is wrong to blame an "epistemological

detour" for critical theory's separation from praxis (1). And he draws the wrong lesson from the "epistemological detour" by arguing that the critical praxis imperative must be individualized to the point of solipsism (2). Both mistakes stem from Harcourt's tendency to amass material without taking the time to work it through argumentatively.

1 | FALSELY ACCUSED: EPISTEMOLOGY IN CRITICAL THEORY

Given the scope and ambition of Harcourt's sweeping history of critical theory in its whole variety during the 20th century, there are a lot of details one could legitimately quarrel about. For example, I have strong reservations about Harcourt's interpretation of Max Horkheimer's seminal essay "Traditional and Critical Theory" as torn between Marxist foundationalism and anti-foundationalist reflexivity. On the one hand, Horkheimer stresses the reflexive structure of critical theory to the point where he argues that it cannot take for granted that the economy and economic categories will be as important for future societies as they are for our capitalist society (see Horkheimer, 2002, p. 249). Thus, even his commitment to Marx' philosophy of history is not as dogmatic as Harcourt seems to think it is. On the other hand, Horkheimer is convinced that critical theory needs to be carried out as an interdisciplinary, materialist theory of society precisely because of its reflexive structure and its anti-foundationalism. Only by understanding scientific practices as social practices within the social formation of their time can critical theorists account for the conditions of existence of their own knowledge-producing practices. Theoretical self-reflexivity is empty without social theory, social theory is blind without theoretical self-reflexivity. So, the interdisciplinary, materialist theory of society, that Harcourt interprets as a remnant of Marxian scientism, is necessitated by the insight into critical theory's self-reflexive structure and anti-foundational stance.

Granted, Horkheimer's proposal is neither fully coherent nor as clearly put as one would like. Yet its fault lines lie elsewhere, especially in the feasibility of his interdisciplinary, materialistic theory of society (see e.g. Bonß, 1993; Honneth, 1993) and in his problematic conception of reason (see e.g. Benhabib, 1986: chapter 5). Harcourt dogmatically—without further reflection or discussion—assumes that any form of social science of social theory must lead to scientism (see e.g. CP 58–60, 172–174), strangely obscuring Horkheimer's most fundamental conviction that theory (and science) can be done differently—namely as "critical theory." The very name of this program is owed to the fact that scientism (or, in Horkheimer's words: positivism) can be shown to be an ideological self-misunderstanding of scientists but is not the fate of science. Perhaps it is no coincidence that Harcourt's title, *Critique and Praxis*, omits "Theory."

Yet never mind such details. What about the overarching storyline of critical theory having been firmly wedded to praxis in its inception and having been more and more separated from it on its "epistemological detour" in the 20th century? The answer partly depends, of course, on how broadly we understand the term "critical theory." Still, if we follow Harcourt and focus on Frankfurt School critical theory as well as Michel Foucault and other French post-structuralists (Harcourt mostly mentions Gilles Deleuze), we have to acknowledge that epistemological questions were much more important for Adorno and Horkheimer (especially in their early writings) and for the early Foucault than for their successors. Adorno and Horkheimer were firmly convinced that epistemology and social theory must be intertwined, and they argued fiercely over how that could be achieved (see the notes from their discussions in the 1930s in Horkheimer, 1985: part V).[2] Jürgen Habermas' *Knowledge and Human Interest* (1971) belongs to this line of inquiry but was the last sustained attempt to integrate epistemology in Frankfurt School critical theory. Habermas denounced his effort shortly afterwards (as demonstrated by his Gauss Lectures in Habermas, 2001; see also Habermas, 2000) and there are few if any explicit attempts to take up Adorno's and Horkheimer's intention to intertwine epistemology and social theory within Frankfurt School critical theory (but see Shomali, 2010).

Similarly, Foucault worked on epistemological questions much more intensely before 1970 than after. *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (Foucault, 2010) certainly represents his most concentrated effort, and he still grappled with the epistemological side of "power-knowledge" in the lecture courses at the Collège de France in the early 1970s, especially in his first lecture course (Foucault, 2014a). He returns to it in 1981, announcing that it is time to rethink the notion of "power-knowledge" once more. Having revised "power" via the reflections on governmentality, Foucault

argues, we must do the same by rethinking "knowledge" from the perspective of "governing through truth." Yet he never uses the concepts he proposes—"truth act", "regime of truth," "alethurgy" (Foucault, 2014b: 81 f.)—again and instead returns to his older pair of *savoir/connaissances*. So, although epistemological concerns shape Foucault's work throughout (see Vogelmann, 2017a, 2017b: chapter 2), they are most prominent in the early stages of his critical theory.

Hence, for Frankfurt School critical theory and for Foucault, epistemological reflections are no late addition to the critical theory that drives a wedge between a prior harmony of critical theory and praxis but are especially pertinent at the beginning. Does that mean there is no "epistemological detour," no separation of critical theory and praxis? At least we should be very careful with any separation thesis, and especially with attributing its cause to an "epistemological detour." If we widen our view and include feminist and postcolonial theory (which Harcourt mentions at times, though not systematically), they can legitimately claim to have inspired and guided critical praxis in the last decades as well as having been informed and transformed by praxis (Hawkesworth & Disch, 2016; Kerner, 2018). The presence and importance of feminist and post-colonial epistemology seem not to have posed an obstacle to their relevance for praxis—quite the contrary.

Even if we grant Harcourt that parts of critical theory have been putting less emphasis on praxis in the last 30 years, epistemology is not the reason. Nor is epistemology the root cause for the divide between Frankfurt School critical theory and Foucault or poststructuralism more generally. Methodological principles are, and they concern first and foremost questions about normativity, not about knowledge or truth. Recent Frankfurt School critical theory has picked up the neo-Kantian conviction of the 19th century that values and validity reside in their own realm of normativity above or beyond our material social practices. "Normativity" thus becomes a paradigm, a way of viewing the world in two separate registers. Foucault, and perhaps poststructuralists more generally, see "normativity" instead as a phenomenon in the world, not a perspective on the world. Hence methodological questions, for example how to account for social norms and values but also how to understand truth and truth-claims, appear very differently from either side of this divide, as we know quite well from the unfinished debate about the relationship between normativity and facticity, reason and power or critique and its normative foundations.[3]

Perhaps Harcourt will smile at the distinction between methodology and epistemology, viewing it as proof that I am still pursuing the "epistemological detour." Yet conflating these differences has serious consequences: Since Harcourt believes that epistemology is responsible for critical theory's separation from praxis, he is unwilling to reflect on epistemological questions—and equates any claim to the truth with foundationalism. Therefore, he argues for abandoning truth: "The imposition of a foundation, the claim to truth, is itself a power play. Critical philosophy must avoid that." (CP 184).

Given Harcourt's general reliance on Foucault, this is a surprisingly anti-Foucauldian (rather Rortyan) claim, for Foucault aims to understand truth as "a thing of this world" (Foucault, 1998, p. 131), as historically made and unmade (as Harcourt very well knows: see CP 107–115). Such a history of truth presupposes that we neither abandon truth nor demote it, Foucault argues, for then the history of truth would lose its critical force:

> the critique of knowledge I would propose does not in fact consist in denouncing what is continually [...] oppressive under reason, for after all, believe me, insanity (*déraison*) is just as oppressive. Nor would this political critique of knowledge consist in flushing out the presumption of power in every truth affirmed, for again, believe me, there is just as much abuse of power in the lie or error. The critique I propose consists in determining under what conditions and with what effects a veridiction is exercised [...]. For example, [...] you can see that the problem would not consist in saying: Look how oppressive psychiatry is, because it is false. Nor would it consist in being a little more sophisticated and saying: Look how oppressive it is, because it is true. It would consist in saying that the problem is to bring to light the conditions that had to be met for it to be possible to hold a discourse on madness—but the same would hold for delinquency and for sex—that can be true or false according to the rules of medicine, say, or of confession, psychology, or psychoanalysis. (Foucault, 2008:36).

Foucault and early Frankfurt School critical theory are surprisingly close in this respect: They argue that critique needs a materialistic, non-foundational understanding of truth, even if they conceptualize it very differently. In both cases, however, their critical reconceptualizations do not match the strength and precision of their critiques of truth. So there is work to be done on a critical theory of truth—and not just to fill in a lacuna in critical theory. We urgently need to develop a materialistic, non-foundational understanding of truth that can support a Foucauldian history of truth in order to fight the rise of untruth in politics without either succumbing to a naïve positivism or ceding ground to science denialism. Instead of helpless fact-checking and ineffective liberal resistance to those who breed, foster, and spread untruth in politics, critical theory must develop its early impulse towards political epistemology: it must conceptualize the intertwinement of epistemology with social and political theory. Retreating from this contemporary challenge by abandoning truth seems precisely the wrong turn to take.[4]

2 | THE ILLUSION OF SOLITARY SOVEREIGNTY

Abandoning truth is, however, an important step for Harcourt in order to motivate his reformulation of the action imperative in critical theory. Returning the action imperative to its rightful place at the center of critical theory is perhaps the most important task Harcourt sets himself. Yet the action imperative must be reformulated, he argues, to incorporate what we have learned on the "epistemological detour" (see e.g. CP 14). The lesson is one of heightened reflexivity of critical theory: Lenin (1978) could still ask "What Is to Be Done?" Yet after more than 120 years of debating the problems posed by a model of critical praxis that assumes that the critical theorist can speak for others, giving them advice or even orders, Harcourt argues for a radical reformulation of the very question: "What more am I to do?" (CP 17 and see chapter 17).

Since this shift from an impersonal to a personal question is one of the crucial operations of Harcourt's book, we do well to examine his arguments for it and what exactly his new formulation means. To begin with the latter, Harcourt states that the most important lesson to be learned from critical theory's "epistemological detour" is the need for more reflexivity. This crucially includes the acknowledgment that critical theory is radically contextual and that it matters who speaks to whom. It also includes realizing that we cannot speak for others but just for ourselves: "I cannot counsel uprisings. I cannot tell others what to do. I cannot advise militants. I can only confront my own praxis." (CP 28) Or: "I can and should theorize only about my actions." (CP 35) Or, slightly longer:

> Critical theory cannot speak for others. It must instead foster a space for everyone who shares the critical ambition to speak and be heard. The solution to the problem of speaking for others is not to silence anyone, but the opposite: to collaborate and cultivate spaces where all can be heard, especially those who are most affected by our crises today. (CP 17).

My point in collecting these quotes—and there are more—is to convey how serious Harcourt is advocating the transition from "What is to be done?" to "What more am I to do?"[5] It is therefore surprising that we find very few arguments for making this shift. Even more surprising is that Harcourt never engages with the rich tradition against speaking for others, for example in feminist theory.[6] Consider Joyce Treblicot's widely discussed article "Dyke Methods" from 1988 in which she explains and defends the following three principles:

> *First principle*: I speak only for myself.

> *Second principle*: I do not try to get other wimmin to accept my beliefs in place of their own.

> *Third principle*: There is no "given". (Treblicot, 1988, p. 1)

Harcourt takes a very similar position yet feels less inclined to argue for it, perhaps because it is obvious to him that speaking for others must be always problematic. This is suggested by his dismissal of three alternative models of the intellectual which he opposes to his action imperative. First, Harcourt states that it is plainly wrong to believe critical theory could propose universal norms and ideals because it, as well as critical praxis, must be contextual (CP chapter 16). Hence the model of the "universal intellectual," as Foucault (1998, p. 126–133) calls it, is clearly not an option (CP 25 f.). Harcourt also judges Foucault's second, alternative model of the "specific intellectual" to be too "arrogant" (CP 30) because it still aspires that others might find useful ideas in one's books or speeches.[7] Third, it is "too self-absorbed" and "too self-righteous" (CP 28) to cast oneself in the role of a truth-teller, Harcourt argues against Balibar's (2018) model of the "singular intellectual" (see CP 26–28).

These negative arguments leave us with the individualized praxis imperative. Yet nowhere do we find a sustained discussion of the potential problems of Harcourt's solipsistic model. Although he repeatedly mentions Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's objection against Foucault's and Deleuze's insistence on letting subjugated subjects speak for themselves (CP 16 f., 101–103, 478 f.) in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (2010), he never considers whether his reformulated action imperative is vulnerable to her criticism (it is, unsurprisingly). Nor does he consider the wider debate about abandoning representation in feminism (or beyond).

Two important objections from this debate are especially pertinent because Linda Martín Alcoff, who raises them against Treblicot's principles, shares Harcourt's radical contextual view of critique and praxis. Yet the idea that I can only speak for myself is premised on the belief that it is my choice for whom I speak when I speak and that I am able to speak only for myself. As Alcoff argues, this.

> assumes that one can retreat into one's discrete location and make claims entirely and singularly based on that location that do not range over others, that one can disentangle oneself from the implicating networks between one's discursive practices and others' locations, situations, and practices. [...] But there is no neutral place to stand free and clear in which one's words do not prescriptively affect or mediate the experience of others, nor is there a way to decisively demarcate a boundary between one's location and all others. Even a complete retreat from speech is of course not neutral since it allows the continued dominance of current discourses and acts by omission to reinforce their dominance. (Alcoff, 1991, p. 20).

In short, the idea that I can speak only for myself presupposes and reinforces the liberal fiction of an autonomous self that completely knows and controls its social relations: a stark imagination of lonely sovereignty that is seriously at odds with Harcourt's emphasis on the contextual nature of critical theory and critical praxis as well as with his insistence that the meaning of our thoughts and actions depend on the social locations from which they come.

This theoretical objection already casts doubt on Harcourt's reformation of critical theory's action imperative. Yet Alcoff also presents a second, political objection against the idea that one could speak only for oneself: for her, it is mostly a form of evading accountability (Alcoff, 1991, p. 20). By declaring, for example, that I can only theorize my own action, I give myself licence to not engage in a critical discussion with others about their actions, even though they might affect (or are affected by) mine. Furthermore, by declaring that we can only speak for ourselves, we must assume that anyone can do so, as if the chances of being heard are equally distributed, ignoring Spivak's critique. Alcoff summarizes her two criticisms sharply:

> [T]he attempt to avoid the problematic of speaking for by retreating into an individualist realm is based on an illusion, well-supported in the individualist ideology of the West, that a self is not constituted by multiple intersecting discourses but consists in a unified whole capable of autonomy from others. It is an illusion that I can separate from others to such an extent that I can avoid affecting them. (Alcoff, 1991, p. 21).

Now Harcourt's intention is certainly not to avoid accountability for his thoughts and actions—his whole book, but especially part IV, in which he gives an account of his own critical theory and praxis, speaks to the fact that his intention is just the opposite. If I am correct, however, he must change his reformulation of critical theory's action imperative to honor that intention. He must actively engage, rather than ignore, the debates about the unavoidability of affecting others. Carefully forming a critical concept of representation that avoids the twin mistakes of either abolishing representation altogether or fixating on representation as a correct mapping of supposedly pre-existing identities that are thereby reified would be a good starting point (see Martinez Mateo, 2019).

For this next step in his confrontation of his critical theory and critical praxis, Harcourt already has an intriguing conceptual instrument at hand: the counter-move (see CP 192–202). Extracted from Foucault's work, the counter-move designates a movement that begins with an opposition according to the coordinate system of that which it opposes but breaks free from this very coordinate system and ends at a position entirely independent from what it opposed in the beginning. For Harcourt, the counter-move is an alternative to the various forms of dialectics (CP 199) and can be described by its three dimensions. First, the counter-move starts by opposing something but does not oppose it from outside. "Instead, it burrows into [its] logic and deploys it against its opponent." (CP 199) Thus, second, the counter-move uses the internal logic of its opponent to sabotage it from within. Yet it does not remain tied to its opponent. The crucial third dimension of the counter-move is its trajectory beyond what it opposes and sabotages:

> When the counter-move works, it gives rise to something that is not the opposite [...] but instead is perfectly autonomous and self-sufficient—a concept that functions all on its own. Counter-conduct is no longer conduct that resists something, but conduct that has become its own form, a pure form of force, disobedience, or resistance. (CP 201)

If we use the counter-move to rethink the action imperative, Harcourt could ward off the impression that an answer to the question "what is to be done?" should mimic its decontextual, ahistorical and universal formulation and would have to be based on equally decontextualized, ahistorical and universal principles (first dimension). He could instead develop his alternative immanently by turning the internal logic of the question against itself (second dimension) and finally invent a different action imperative altogether that can exist on its own and is no longer merely a revised form of Lenin's question (third dimension). This would be an action imperative freed from the facile opposition between speaking for others or speaking only for myself because it will have learned, e.g. from the impressive overview of critical praxis that Harcourt has put together, that there is no way to speak without speaking for others and for myself, since this self is bound up with these others. How to speak and be heard, how to ensure that others can speak and will be heard equally, and how to ensure that it is not only me that is heard, even when I speak—these are the questions Harcourt might then be free to pursue.

I, for one, would certainly listen—if the arguments become longer and the next book becomes shorter.

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ENDNOTES

[1] We also sometimes find "dignity" (CP 295) thrown into the mix. What is missing are justifications for and explanations of these values. Why these, and how should we understand them?

[2] Adorno pursued this question throughout his live, I would argue, as is well demonstrated by his lecture on epistemology from 1957/8 in Adorno (2018). Horkheimer concluded that no criteria for truth can be named and hence epistemological questions need not be pursued any further. Debunking false claims to truth is enough, Horkheimer argues in "The Problem of Truth" (Horkheimer, 1993), and, uncharacteristically frank, in a letter to Otto Neurath from 1937 (see Horkheimer, 1995, p. 345).

[3] Allen (2016) revives this debate, that has been abandoned rather than ended in the 1990s, in a helpful manner. On the distinction between normativity as a paradigm and as a phenomenon, see Vogelmann (2021).

[4] See my defense of this view in Vogelmann (2020).

[5] Harcourt stresses that this is his reformulation, so there is no objection against him by pointing out a performative contradiction. At least I will not make this argument.

[6] See Martinez Mateo (2019). I have profited enormously from her article.

[7] This also takes care of any Nietzschean ideas of leading by examples (see CP 221).

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On the unity and dissonance of *Critique and Praxis*

In 1937, Max Horkheimer, the German social philosopher and founder of the Institut für Sozialforschung at the University of Frankfurt, wrote a famous essay called "Traditional and Critical Theory."[1] This essay is considered paradigmatic for that unique blend of philosophical theory and social science research which the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School came to represent, the 1937 essay was written at a time when the defeat of the German working class and its socialist and communist parties by fascism appeared complete, and when Stalinist terror and purges in the Soviet Union destroyed all illusions about this first experiment of socialism. Horkheimer, therefore, emphasizes that a thinker's relation to social movements may be one of opposition and critique rather than affirming common goals and solidarity.

What is critical about Critical Theory if it no longer considers itself to be in close alliance with an emancipatory social movement? Marcuse expresses this disjunction forcefully in "Philosophy and Critical Theory," written in response to the discussion generated by Horkheimer's essay. "What then, when the developments outlined by the theory do not take place, when the forces which should have led to the transformation are pushed back and appear to be defeated?... The changing function of the theory in the new situation gives it the character of 'critical theory' in a more poignant sense." (ZfS, 1937, pp. 636–637. My translation)[2]

According to Horkheimer, both specialized sciences and philosophical theories which consider the former's achievements to be the only valid model of knowledge are built on a dual epistemological illusion: the object of cognition is presented as a ready-made ahistorical reality, while the relationship of the knowing subject to this object is assumed to be one of passive cognition or limited experimentation alone. The concepts, constructions, and scientific operations of traditional theory reproduce a distorted image of social reality in that they deny the social formation and construction of the object of knowledge. The task of Critical Theory is not just to offer an epistemological critique of traditional theorizing but also to engage in defetishizing false objectivity and to reveal the contradictory forces composing it, hoping to change them to advance a better future.

Like positivistic science and philosophy, spontaneous everyday consciousness proceeds from the assumption that social reality is an objective law-governed sphere impervious to human intervention. Neither the social relationships nor the human activities that give rise to this appearance is taken into account. But Horkheimer and Marcuse hope that "[T]he materialist concept of a free, self-determining society" envisions a praxis that can "shape social reality in such a way as to make it correspond to human potentials." (ZfS, 1937, pp. 628/248)

Bernard Harcourt's *Critique and Praxis*[3] is a searing and noteworthy account of the development and eventual disintegration of this theoretical paradigm and the unity of critique and praxis once advocated by it. Harcourt claims that with Marxian theory and struggles fading ever more into the background after the post-WW II years, Kant replaced Marx in the work of critical theorists such as Jürgen Habermas and Rainer Forst, whereas Axel Honneth and Rahel Jaeggi found their grounding in a reborn Hegelianism. "Critical theory became even more contemplative as it struggled over the questions of epistemology and foundations," (CP, 123; 406) Harcourt writes, and juxtaposes to this epistemological turn an anti-foundationalist ethos (CP, 158). His inspiration comes