

MARK STEVEN

Weaponizing Criticism

There is no need to fear or hope,
but only to look for new weapons.
– Gilles Deleuze

Choose your side.
Choose your weapons.
– Mark Fisher

1. Choosing Sides

In what has since become a flagship essay in the growing armada of post-critical thought, Bruno Latour speculates that criticism has, as of 2003, “run out of steam.” The reason for its exhaustion, he claims, is its tethering to an undesirable culture of conflict, which at that time had reached fever pitch in the lead-up to the American invasion of Iraq. The essay begins with a salvo of metaphors:

Wars. So many wars. Wars outside and wars inside. Cultural wars, science wars, and wars against terrorism. Wars against poverty and wars against the poor. Wars against ignorance and wars out of ignorance. My question is simple: Should we be at war, too, we, the scholars, the intellectuals? Is it really our duty to add fresh ruins to fields of ruins? Is it really the task of the humanities to add deconstruction to destruction? More iconoclasm to iconoclasm?¹

¹ Bruno Latour, “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern,” *Critical Inquiry* 30 (2004): 225. My dating, 2003, refers to when a version of this essay was presented as a lecture. Though I focus on Latour’s argument and formulations, I do so because of their influence within and against critical thought more generally. The most enthusiastic adopter of Latour’s arguments has been Rita Felski, whose book on that topic—*The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015)—has been the catalyst of serious debates in the literary-critical humanities. For those debates, see the March 2017 issue of *PMLA*.

Despite this opening, Latour does not endorse a philosophy of leaving the skirmish behind to make full steam ahead. The stated purpose of his intervention is not to encourage the reactionary quiescence of wholesale critical disarmament. Latour's objective is instead to implement a Wittgensteinian adjustment to the targeting systems of critical ordnance: "military experts," he clarifies, "constantly revise their strategic doctrines, their contingency plans, the size, direction, and technology of their projectiles, their smart bombs, their missiles."² Not only is criticism bombing the wrong targets; it is, for Latour, fighting the wrong war. "Would it not be rather terrible," he asks, "if we were still training young kids—yes, young recruits, young cadets—for wars that are no longer possible, fighting enemies long gone, conquering territories that no longer exist, leaving them ill-equipped in the face of threats we had not anticipated, for which we are so thoroughly unprepared?"³

While there is good reason to be concerned about any collective inability to perceive new enemies—perhaps as much reason as there is to feel squeamish about describing students as kids, recruits, or cadets—Latour's ultimately technocratic fix means to purge philosophy of its most belligerent tendencies by separating the critical from the political. "What would critique do," he asks, "if it could be associated with more, not with less, with multiplication, not subtraction."⁴ A critical answer to this question might posit that, in shifting from subtractive destruction to wilful positivism, critique would effectively transmute into its antipode, a kind of secular enthusiasm. For Latour, however, such a shift has become necessary in order to redeploy criticism on different fronts, where our weapons are less likely to fall into the wrong hands. "Of course," he insists, "conspiracy theories are an absurd deformation of our own arguments, but, like weapons smuggled through a fuzzy border to the wrong party, these are our weapons nonetheless."⁵ By contrast, I contend that precisely this aspect of criticism—that, like the abandoned Kalashnikov buried in the sand, it can be seized as a weapon by those outside of institutional power—is the source of its value. It is also what makes criticism fundamentally incompatible with the reformist program that Latour advocates it should serve.

² Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?," 230.

³ Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?," 225.

⁴ Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?," 248.

⁵ Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?," 230.

Adapting Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, Louis Althusser once affirmed the value of a certain type of thinking in precisely these terms. "In the union of Marxist theory and the Workers' Movement," he claimed, "philosophy ceases, as Marx said, to 'interpret the world.' It becomes a weapon with which 'to change it': revolution."⁶ To insist on the weaponization of philosophy, and to do so amidst the world-historic agitations of 1968, is to emphasize the altogether practical dimension of thought, which occurs when analytic frameworks merge with political strategy and real struggle. It is this kind of thought, too, that inevitably finds itself in violent opposition to the safeguards of institutional knowledge, for institutions and their knowledge are just as likely to fall under critical bombardment. Indeed, the possibility of that bombardment introduced an irresolvable contradiction into Althusser's philosophy, through which revolutionary militancy devolved into conservative policing. As Jacques Rancière would paraphrase the views of his former teacher and collaborator, "the students, petit bourgeois one and all, wanted to give lessons to the working class and teach workers how to make revolution," whereas "the working class wanted to have nothing to do with the students and their revolution," fighting instead for "better economic conditions."⁷ While Althusser cut a lonely figure within the context of 1968, his isolation was the result of this dogmatic approach to praxis and a concomitant will to preserve specific kinds of scientific order and institutional authority within the realm of academic theory.

As a counter to Althusser's emphasis on "class struggle in theory," which championed the economic demands of the workers over the revolutionary impulse of the students, Rancière reframes the task of criticism as something like "class struggle against theory," adopting the self-critical line of the movement's ultra-left faction, according to which

⁶ Louis Althusser, "Philosophy as a Revolutionary Weapon" (c. 1968), *Marxists Internet Archive*, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1968/philosophy-as-weapon.htm>, accessed on 2 October 2018. The references in this essay are, whenever possible, to freely available online texts. While Marxists.org is not as reliable as, say, the Marx Engels Collected Works, to cite materials in this more accessible format is in keeping with the essay's political aims.

⁷ Jacques Rancière, *Althusser's Lesson*, trans. Emiliano Battista (London: Continuum, 1974), 68-72.

bourgeois ideological domination is first and foremost the work of a set of institutions against which one must wage a material political combat. Intellectuals are welcome to participate in this combat, as long as they are willing to strike down the foundations that support this system: the power of ‘science,’ the separation of the intellectual from manual labour, the separation of intellectuals and the masses. Today, the ideological combat of revolutionary intellectuals has nothing to do with refuting reactionary books with revolutionary books; it has to do, instead, with abandoning their specific roles as intellectuals and joining the masses, with helping the masses themselves to speak up and with fighting all the apparatuses—from unions to the police—that stand in the way of this free expression.⁸

Despite their disagreement, both Althusser and Rancière share a commitment to criticism as a tool for political and social transformation, and one that had been reformed in the political crucible of 1968. When Latour advocates for a “stubbornly realist” mode of empirical description as the worthy replacement for old-school, politically motivated criticism, this is what gets left behind: what Althusser described as weaponization and what Rancière calls “material political combat,” namely the critical tradition’s commitment to social transformation and the kinds of thinking and action and persons such a commitment requires. These would be the “weapons smuggled through a fuzzy border” we are now being asked to police. The difference in perspective from Althusser and Rancière and then to Latour is between wars of revolution, for the first two, and border conflicts, for the latter.

What follows these preliminary remarks is partisan writing. Siding hard against Latour and post-critical thought more generally, I want to account for the kind of criticism Althusser proposes and Rancière affirms out of 1968, criticism that is knowingly warlike and readily weaponized, and to show how this criticism obtains in the combination of knowledge with praxis. My thesis is that revolutionary social change is not just a valuable part of criticism but the essential quality—that, without a political horizon, criticism is simply not worthy of its name. The essay’s first part develops this thesis genealogically through a sampling of well-known critical texts, all of which are lifted from the discursive field of Marxism. This is because Marxism has traditionally served as

⁸ Rancière, *Althusser’s Lesson*, 68-72.

and remains today one of the great sharpening blocks for critical thought, a reflexive discourse superlatively capable of refashioning political ideas and strategies for new and various contexts. As George Cicceriello-Maher has put it, referring to decolonial thought indebted to Marx and Hegel, “for more than a century, for better or for worse, the dialectical tradition has served as a go-to weapon in the struggle for not only class liberation but also—all ambiguities and tensions aside—for racial and national liberation.”⁹ Beginning with Marx’s 1843 letter to Arnold Ruge, then passing through the Bolsheviks and the Frankfurt School before arriving at the present conjuncture, my intention is to schematize some of the intersections between knowledge production and social transformation as they work together as criticism, and to situate these intersections within their varied historical contexts. Part two then proposes that, in an organic extension of the Marxist line of thought, criticism today is more alive than ever, but not necessarily in the realms of party politics or academic philosophy. This part will look at some weaponized tools for social change as their own forms of criticism.

2. *Ruthless Criticism, Then and Now*

From February 1842 through September 1843, as Europe approached its Year of Revolution, a twenty-five-year-old Karl Marx participated in an epistolary exchange with his comrade, Arnold Ruge, a fellow member of the Young Hegelian circle. In the final letter from their exchange, Marx reflects on political and intellectual life in Germany, which is said to suffer from “a real anarchy of the mind.” As a corrective to this prevailing condition, “the reign of stupidity itself,” Marx proposes the following program for a revolution in thought to be waged under the name of criticism:

Not only has a state of general anarchy set in among the reformers, but everyone will have to admit to himself that he has no exact idea what the future ought to be. On the other hand, it is precisely the advantage of the new trend that we do not dogmatically anticipate the world, but only want to find the new world through criticism of the old one. Hitherto philosophers have had the solution of all riddles lying in their writing-

⁹ George Cicceriello-Maher, *Decolonizing Dialectics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 12.

desks, and the stupid, exoteric world had only to open its mouth for the roast pigeons of absolute knowledge to fly into it. Now philosophy has become mundane, and the most striking proof of this is that philosophical consciousness itself has been drawn into the torment of the struggle, not only externally but also internally. But, if constructing the future and settling everything for all times are not our affair, it is all the more clear what we have to accomplish at present: I am referring to ruthless criticism of all that exists, ruthless both in the sense of not being afraid of the results it arrives at and in the sense of being just as little afraid of conflict with the powers that be.¹⁰

This program, which serves to inaugurate a modern critical method, comprises two distinct proposals. First, if philosophy has become mundane because, while confined to the “writing-desks” of safely institutionalized thinkers, it fails to project an ideal future, Marx’s suggestion is the dialectical antithesis of that approach: “to find the new world through criticism of the old one,” apprehending a liveable future as immanent within the present state of things, but only visible as a negative impress. To achieve such a task, criticism would have to be absolute and unsparing; it would have to be a totalizing, all-encompassing endeavour, the shadow antipode to global capitalism, and in that capacity it must not shy away from its own discoveries. In other words, criticism cannot afford to be either partial or reformist, and neither can it be a work of descriptive multiplication, for that would only perpetuate the way things are but for minor variation. Second, in order to effect real change in itself and on the ground, criticism would have to collapse the dichotomy of thought and practice, knowledge and action, the brilliant idea and the material commitment: “nothing,” Marx will later add, “prevents us from making criticism of politics, participation in politics, and therefore real struggles, the starting point of our criticism, and from identifying our criticism with them.”¹¹ This second proposal, however, needs to be differentiated from Marx’s principal antecedent. While philosophers are said to feed “the stupid, exoteric world” with “the roast pigeons of absolute knowledge,” here we should read this as a joke about Hegel’s “owl

¹⁰ Karl Marx, “Letters from the Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher” (c. 1843), *Marxists Online Archive*, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/letters/43_09.htm, accessed on 2 October 2018.

¹¹ Marx, “Letters from the Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher.”

of Minerva,” which was intended to exemplify philosophy’s dependence on practice insofar as, under the German-Christian state, “reality has completed its formative process, and made itself ready.”¹² Criticism, by contrast, would refute this nocturnal quiescence—the idea that, historically, “the shades of night are gathering”—and would instead be a source of illuminating conflict.

Criticism’s guiding hypothesis, which informs all of Marx’s works and eventually finds a mature form in his multivolume *Critique of Political Economy*, is that a new world can be made to exist but only through revolutionary transfiguration of the one we now inhabit. In the preface to an extended critique of Hegel, also written in 1843, Marx insists that “Germany can emancipate itself from the Middle Ages only if it emancipates itself at the same time from the partial victories over the Middle Ages,” and while this axiomatic sharpens into an assault on the state and its religion, the point here is that criticism, like revolution, is to be absolute, but not in the form of absolute knowledge: “no form of bondage can be broken without breaking all forms of bondage. Germany, which is renowned for its thoroughness, cannot make a revolution unless it is a thorough one.”¹³ What this amounts to, then, is a punitive inversion of Hegel’s entire project—the legendary standing of the older philosopher on his head. “It is,” for Marx, “the task of history, once the other-world of truth has vanished, to establish the truth of this world. It is the immediate task of philosophy, which is in the service of history, to unmask self-estrangement in its unholy forms once the holy form of human self-estrangement has been unmasked.”¹⁴ This, in a series of dialectical twists, is how “the criticism of Heaven turns into the criticism of Earth, the criticism of religion into the criticism of law, and the criticism of theology into the criticism of politics.”¹⁵ Instead of pigeons and owls, Marx summons forth a very different kind of aviary harbinger, this time an embodiment of revolutionary zeal. “When all the inner

¹² G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, trans. S. W. Dyde (c. 1820), *Marxist Online Archive*, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/pr/preface.htm>, accessed 2 October 2018.

¹³ Marx, *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* (c. 1844), *Marxists Online Archive*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/df-jahrbucher/law-abs.htm>, accessed on 2 October 2018.

¹⁴ Marx, *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*.

¹⁵ Marx, *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*.

conditions are met,” he says, “the day of the German resurrection will be heralded by the crowing of the cock of Gaul.”¹⁶ As critical thought-figures, the owl and cock could not be more different: whereas one ushers in the night, signifying the completion of history, the other greets dawn and thereby signifies a glorious, emancipatory awakening: this is a categorically distinct, because materialist as opposed to spiritual, absolute.

To be ruthlessly critical is to therefore scour literally everything between the heavens and earth: all that exists. It is to totalize. But totalizing criticism is not exclusively or even primarily the work of an individual; it belongs to what Marx would later call the “general intellect,” or more specifically to what Georg Lukács would eventually ascribe to the catalytic force of class consciousness: “Only when a historical situation has arisen in which a class must understand society if it is to assert itself; only when the fact that a class understands itself means that it understands society as a whole and when, in consequence, the class becomes both the subject and the object of knowledge; in short,” he confirms, “only when these conditions are all satisfied will the unity of theory and practice, the precondition of the revolutionary function of the theory, become possible.”¹⁷ And yet, in the long passage from 1843 through the 21st Century, thinking of this sort has decomposed into its constitutive parts, and it has done so in ways that have shaped the interlocking regions of criticism through the intervallic period. The primary severance—between criticism produced on the academic’s writing-desk and criticism forged in the exoteric world of workers and factories and fields—is as much the result of political and economic history as it is of philosophical inclination. The two complementary yet disunited forms of criticism can be figured sharply in the difference between self-criticism as understood by the Bolsheviks and their successors, and critical theory as pioneered by the Frankfurt School, and how they respond to the conditions of either socialist statecraft or capitalism’s decay into fascism.

One of the “burning questions” that dominated Lenin’s thinking as both theoretician and strategist was the role of criticism in revolutionary politics. On this, he distinguished between orthodox Marxism and the “new critical trend” of

¹⁶ Marx, *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*.

¹⁷ Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT Press), 2.

social-democratic reformism. The resulting distinction was not between criticism and dogmatism, but between two different types of criticism:

The disagreement between those Marxists who stand for the so-called “new critical trend” and those who stand for so-called “orthodoxy” is that they want to apply and develop Marxism in different directions: the one group want to remain consistent Marxists, developing the basic tenets of Marxism in accordance with the changing conditions and with the local characteristics of the different countries, and further elaborating the theory of dialectical materialism and the political-economic teachings of Marx; the other group reject certain more or less important aspects of Marx’s teachings, and in philosophy, for instance, take the side, not of dialectical materialism, but of neo-Kantianism, and in political economy the side of those who label some of Marx’s teachings as “tendentious,” etc.¹⁸

What Lenin is taking aim at, serried under the banner of neo-Kantianism, is the kind of thinking Marx had previously described as mundane, and which is once again, from a new site of revolutionary immanence, shown up as impractical and immaterial in the face of history. Clarifying the terms, Lenin stipulates that “the ‘orthodox’ do not reject criticism in general, but only ‘criticism’ by eclectics (who would only be entitled to call themselves advocates of ‘criticism’ to the extent that in the history of philosophy the teachings of Kant and of his followers are called ‘criticism,’ ‘critical philosophy’).”¹⁹ This position, which emphasizes the critical aspect of Marxism and the necessarily reflexive quality of dialectical materialism, would eventually harden under Stalin and Mao into doctrinal self-criticism, implemented as a strategy for exposing and eliminating weaknesses in the socialist state. It would then become a tool for bloodletting.

Fundamental to self-criticism, for Stalin, is that it had been outwardly intended to direct the critical energy of the working and peasant classes against state

¹⁸ V. I. Lenin, “Uncritical Criticism” (c. 1900), *Marxists Online Archive*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1900/mar/x01.htm>, accessed on 2 October 2018. These concerns would be taken up again in *What Is to Be Done?* (1902) in the section on “Dogmatism and ‘Freedom of Criticism’.”

¹⁹ Lenin, “Uncritical Criticism.”

bureaucracy. “It is not just any kind of self-criticism that we need,” he would clarify in 1928. “We need such self-criticism as will raise the cultural level of the working class, enhance its fighting spirit, fortify its faith in victory, augment its strength and help it to become the real master of the country.”²⁰ While history teaches that this is a doubtful formulation, Mao likewise insisted on self-criticism as a means of political correction designed to serve “the basic masses, the workers and peasants,” ensuring the revolutionary organization of the party. “As we say,” he reflects, “dust will accumulate if a room is not cleaned regularly, our faces will get dirty if they are not washed regularly. Our comrades’ minds and our Party’s work may also collect dust, and also need sweeping and washing.”²¹ Here, however, it must be confirmed that, when implemented in this way, criticism became a source of terror, a pretext for execution in both the USSR and China but also at its bleak and bloody apotheosis, as a kind of revolutionary fury, in Cambodia. This should be understood not as an aberration in criticism but a defect born of its instrumentalization, which shifted the critical horizon back from totality to focus on the subjective machinations of a party and its bureaucratic dispensation. It was not unpredictable, either. Mao warned of precisely this danger as early as 1929: “the main task of criticism is to point out political and organizational mistakes. As to personal shortcomings,” he clarifies, “unless they are related to political and organizational mistakes, there is no need to be overcritical or the comrades concerned will be at a loss as to what to do.”²²

The antipode to this kind of criticism, which combines theoretical reflection with revolutionary commitment at the cost of the former, is to be found in the first articulations of institutionalized critical theory. Echoing Marx and Lenin’s anti-reformism in a desire “to discourage thought from its practical tendency of pointing to the future,” Max Horkheimer defines critical theory as nevertheless practical:

²⁰ J. V. Stalin, “Against Vulgarising the Slogan of Self-Criticism” (c. 25 June 1928), *Marxists Online Archive*, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/-1928/06/26.htm>, accessed on 2 October 2018.

²¹ Mao Tse Tung, “Criticism and Self-Criticism” (c. 24 April 1945), *Marxists Online Archive*, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/works/red-book/ch27.htm>, accessed on 2 October 2018.

²² Mao, “Criticism and Self-Criticism” (c. December 1929).

The real social function of philosophy lies in its criticism of what is prevalent. That does not mean superficial fault-finding with individual ideas or conditions, as though a philosopher were a crank. Nor does it mean that the philosopher complains about this or that isolated condition and suggests remedies. The chief aim of such criticism is to prevent mankind from losing itself in those ideas and activities which the existing organization of society instils into its members. Man must be made to see the relationship between his activities and what is achieved thereby, between his particular existence and the general life of society, between his everyday projects and the great ideas which he acknowledges. Philosophy exposes the contradiction in which man is entangled in so far as he must attach himself to isolated ideas and concepts in everyday life.²³

This definition underscores social function in a way that leads to demystification. To criticize in this way is to reveal the relationship between the embodied practices of humankind and the ideological matrix that comprises each and every human. By describing criticism as an act of exposure, casting light on those antinomies between a “particular existence” and “the general life of society,” Horkheimer’s definition implies that criticism is more to do with knowledge than action. With ideas coming before activities, and with an emphasis on the necessarily contradictory relationship between the particular and the universal, this is a totalizing criticism that ultimately looks toward a revolutionary horizon but wants for actual revolution. Critical theory of this sort and its turn to cultural forms respond to an historical moment in which the revolutionary left seemed either dormant (in most of the West) or perverted (in the form of Stalinism). Instead of exploring the traditional or even new sites of praxis, critical theory sought out utopian stirrings and spaces of autonomy in Beckett and Kafka and Mann, the reading of whose works can be said to boast only the most distant affinity to anything like revolution. For the avoidance of a doubt, Horkheimer’s clarification of position goes on to confirm this implication. “By criticism,” he stipulates, “we mean that intellectual, and eventually practical, effort which is not satisfied to accept the prevailing ideas, actions, and social conditions unthinkingly and from mere habit...”²⁴ To change the world,

²³ Max Horkheimer, *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. M. O’Connell (New York: Continuum, 1972), 216.

²⁴ Horkheimer, 216.

from this standpoint, means to change one's thinking, and the practical change will "eventually" follow. The project of critical theory is, then, an "effort which aims to coordinate the individual sides of social life with each other and with the general ideas and aims of the epoch, to deduce them genetically, to distinguish the appearance from the essence, to examine the foundations of things, in short, really to know them."²⁵

While the Bolshevik mode of criticism found home in the party politics of Stalin and Mao, critical theory would be—in the wake of Hitler's rise to power and the Frankfurt School's collective exile from Germany—exported out to find home in American universities, first by way of tenured emigres such as Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse, but then as an ongoing legacy, embodied in the primary instance by Fredric Jameson. Critical theory is therefore the result of Marxist criticism entering an historical and institutional situation in which, as Jameson has summarized the challenge, it is "historically difficult to unify Left or 'anti-systemic' forces in any durable and effective organizational way," because political action takes the form of "single-issue movements" that only make demands and project strategies "theoretically incompatible with each other and impossible to coordinate on any practical political basis."²⁶ Or, from a less sympathetic perspective, this is a form of criticism "too far removed from the heat of political battles," as Cornel West has said of Jameson: "his works have little or no political praxis as texts; that is, they speak, refer or allude to no political movement in process with which his texts have some connexion."²⁷ Such a dismissive generalization is clearly arguable, and would require a thoroughgoing critical examination for the charge to stick, but it nevertheless speaks to a prevailing tendency within academic Marxism, which can be summarized as criticism's evolution into critical theory (with weight falling increasingly on the adjectivally-modified "theory") before re-emerging in relation to post-structuralism's American uptake as capital-T Theory, without the criticism and with materialism evaporating into metaphysics. Moishe Postone's mostly sympathetic review of Jacques Derrida's less critical and more theoretical

²⁵ Horkheimer, 216.

²⁶ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Routledge, 1981), 54.

²⁷ Cornel West, "Fredric Jameson's Marxist Hermeneutics," *boundary 2* 11.1-2 (Autumn 1982-Winter 1983): 196.

Specters of Marx, which was published in English in 1994, is an illustrative example of this tendency being met by materialist thought. “Although Derrida’s concept of spectrality has an important critical edge, directed against any given order and any notion of an end-state of history, it is too socially and historically indeterminate to serve as the basis for a critical analysis of contemporary historical developments. The concept of spectrality,” he concludes, “illuminates what should be an important dimension of a social critique today; but it is not fully adequate as a core concept of such a critique. It thereby reveals the need for a contemporary critical social theory.”²⁸ We can hear in this line of thought—Derrida’s, not Postone’s—either defeatism or utopianism, of course, but in either case and for all its elegance and dexterity the thinking is politically quiescent.

Skipping ahead to the second decade of twenty-first century, criticism has now come to assume two related forms, which gravitate much closer than their relative antecedents in self-criticism and critical theory. While the principal difference between those antecedents can be explained, in part, by historical situation—self-criticism is the property of socialist states and their parties, critical theory responds to late capitalism and its tendency toward fascism—what follows them, historically, must attune to new conditions. While, in the first decades of the twenty-first century, the popular ascendancy of a far-right has taken hold from within the institutions of state power and formed, in its explicitly neo-Nazi constructions, something like a fascist cultural front, a leftist counterforce gathers in disparate though related movements such as Antifa, Black Lives Matter, BDS, and Occupy, not to mention its filtration through the intensifying frequency of rank-and-file insurgencies. These movements, none of which take place in isolation from one another, suggest a moment when the old divisions between socialism and capitalism apply less to geopolitical blocs within the inter-state system or even to parties within a given state than to antagonisms flaring up all across the world and irrespective of sovereign boundaries. “Our era,” wrote the editors of a militant magazine, *Commune*, to mark its launch in 2018,

has as its central feature the near impossibility of any demands that eat into profits. As the global economy sinks into the mire of the twenty-first

²⁸ Moishe Postone, “Deconstruction as Social Critique: Derrida on Marx and the New World Order,” *History and Theory* 37.3 (October 1998): 387.

century, opportunities for return on investment are fewer and farther between. Programs to which capitalists might have once acceded with only moderate resistance are now treated as if they meant to wheel a guillotine onto Wall Street. In the nightmares of capitalists begin political projects: in such a state of affairs, if you want to win anything worth winning, a guillotine on Wall Street will probably be required. And once you've done that, there's really nothing left to demand.²⁹

Indeed, ours is a moment when the illegitimacy and insufficiency of established modes of political recourse have given way to collective discontent and, while that discontent is fanned by crises and collapse, our moment has also ushered in newfound critical intelligence and accompanying modes of agitation. What, then, do the two very different variations on “ruthless criticism” imply today?

Within the present conjuncture, criticism indebted to Marx's original formulation and following either strategic self-criticism or academic critical theory can be found in two related forms, both of which show a renewed interest in the practical aspects of criticism and the necessity of the self-determination of the dispossessed within the realm of knowledge production. Descended from the socialist model are manifestoes and field guides that use critical theory to account for anti-capitalist strategy. Their formal precedents include Mao Zedong's *On Guerrilla Warfare* (1937), Che Guevara's *Guerrilla Warfare: A Method* (1961), Carlos Marighella's *Minimanual of the Urban Guerrilla* (1961), and the Red Army Faction's *Urban Guerrilla Concept* (1971). The best-known contemporary articulation of these texts are three short books published by anarchist cell, the Invisible Committee: *The Coming Insurrection* (2007), *To Our Friends* (2014), and *Now* (2017). While the first of these books was famously taken as evidence in the prosecution of its authors for suspected terrorism, when they were arrested in rural France on conspiracy to commit railway sabotage, its preface stipulates that authorship is not subjective or institutional but a matter of class consciousness or general intellect. “Its editors,” we read, “are not its authors. They are merely content to do a little clean-up of what's scattered around the era's common areas, around the murmurings at bar-tables, behind

²⁹ “Introducing Commune,” *Commune* 1 (Fall 2018), <https://communemag.com/introducing-commune/>, accessed on 2 October 2018.

closed bedroom doors.”³⁰ While these books are wary of academic criticism—conveyed as it is by those that, with “their attachment to their grand intellectual critiques and their rejection of capitalism are stamped with their love of schooling”³¹—theirs is a model of criticism, totalizing and ruthless, which passes swiftly through self-contained knowledge production to become revolutionary praxis.

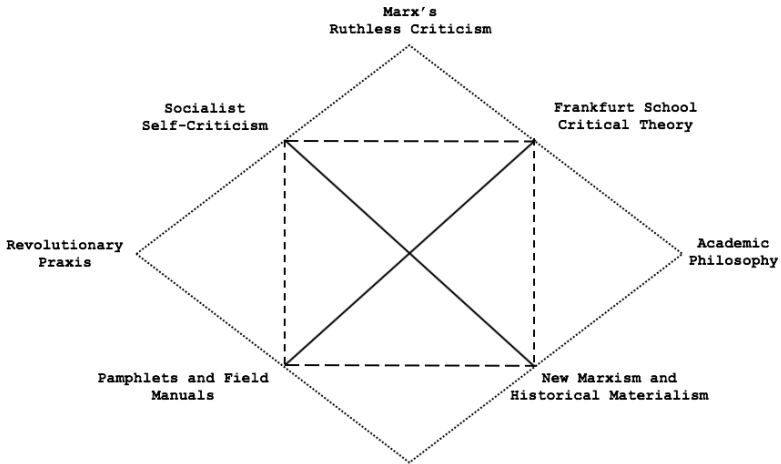
Similarly, though descended from the opposing line of criticism, are the academic thinkers dedicated to theorizing revolutionary practice within the space of critical theory, thereby forging meaningful relationships between academic Marxism and political praxis. Following the exceptional theorization of decolonization struggles and revolutionary feminism by thinkers like Frantz Fanon and Silvia Fererici, this is a newly militant expression of critical theory. Signal writing in this field includes Nancy Armstrong’s work on looting, Joshua Clover’s work on riots and strikes, Mike Davis’ work on urban revolt, and Jodi Dean’s work on crowds and parties, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s ongoing collaborations, as well as the semi-anonymous output of groups like the Endnotes collective. While all of this, by contrast to the Invisible Committee, is a form of academic criticism, what marks it as distinct from the critical theory of Horkheimer and the Frankfurt School is its real investment in immediate and revolutionary social change, both within the texts and in the lived commitment of their authors. What might therefore be called the New Marxism, a militant materialism for the here and now, has become increasingly invested in the concrete methods of anti-capitalism, the practical forms of struggle, or what Clover refers to as shared tactics “in the repertoire of collective action.”³² It is in this way that self-criticism and critical theory, anti-capitalist praxis and institutionalized knowledge production, are once again converging to deliver a “ruthless criticism of all that exists,” which is now willing to pursue its convictions beyond the academy and into the realm of material combat.

³⁰ Comité invisible, *The Coming Insurrection* (c. 2007), *The Anarchist Library*, <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/comite-invisible-the-coming-insurrection>, accessed on 2 October 2018.

³¹ Comité invisible, *The Coming Insurrection*.

³² Joshua Clover, *Riot. Strike. Riot: The New Era of Uprisings* (London and New York: Verso, 2016). Ebook.

Though much has been omitted from this brief genealogy, not least being a century's worth of militant groups from the Zapatista through the Black Panthers and beyond, we are now in a position from which it is possible to sketch the fissiparous evolution of criticism as a semiotic system, which will help triangulate intersections between the different forms of criticism and also frame up a major question about criticism in the present:



In the historical mitosis of criticism, revolutionary praxis and academic philosophy decouple to produce two distinct lines of thought, which share original DNA whilst nevertheless retaining their contrary positions. These two lines imply and have evolved into the revolutionary praxis of groups like the Invisible Committee and into the historical materialism of academic thinkers increasingly preoccupied with actual struggle. While the 1920s marked the decomposition of “ruthless criticism” into these constitutive forms, the 2010s announce its re-composition into something newly energized. What we will therefore want to discover is the form of criticism that inhabits the lowermost point of this system: a criticism that makes good on all that Marx stipulated as a young man in 1843, which the critical tradition has been trying to make good on ever since, and which collocates with a renewed emphasis on the revolutionary break and a fundamental transformation of all human life. The answer I intend to pursue into this essay’s second half is once again to do with the weaponization

of criticism and once again it was proposed by the young Marx during that same year, 1843, but this time in his introduction to Hegel. “The weapon of criticism cannot, of course, replace criticism of the weapon, material force must be overthrown by material force; but theory also becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses.”³³ The criticism of the weapon, material force as criticism, or—perversely, standing Marx on his head—that which the masses grip as its own theory: what would that look like?

3. *Critical Weaponry*

Returning to the moment when Althusser contemplated the weaponization of criticism, May '68 yielded few fragments more memorable than a single phrase scrawled in black spray-paint and presented here with its translation:

Sous les pavés, la plage!
[Under the pavement, the beach!]

While these words are often mistranslated as “beneath the streets, the beach,” or into some syntactical variation thereupon with those nouns, if we want to understand the practical applications of Marx’s proposal for ruthless criticism it will be worth pausing to consider the layered polysemy of this slogan in as close to its original form as possible, for here the interplay between concrete and symbolic meaning is loaded. Pavés, or pavers, not only refers metonymically to a generalized urban topography, the social space of modern capitalism; it also refers to the actual cobblestones from which that topography is constructed. The beach is a new world, a site of exhilarating pleasure concealed by the everyday, but it is also the sand beneath the pavers, revealed when they are torn up and remade as projectiles to either hurl at police or construct barricades. The beach, that new world, is obtained here in the moment we tear up concrete and weaponize it, either offensively or defensively, against our oppressors. The beach is a new social relation forged in the collective joy of revolutionary praxis. It is in this way that the pavement, détourned and weaponized, is a canonical iteration not just of “ruthless criticism” but also and more specifically it embodies “criticism of the weapon.”

³³ Marx, *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*.

The question to be asked, then, is what counts as criticism of the weapon and what is mere weaponry: was Mary Antoinette criticized by the Jacobins, the Romanovs by the Ural Executive Committee, the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building by Timothy McVeigh, and what about 9-11, was that a critical act? Do we draw a line between criticism and terrorism, and if so where do we draw it? That the answer to these questions does not come easy is not to endorse liberal pacifism with its hand-washing civility. “Pacifism,” caution the Invisible Committee, “without being able to fire bullets is just theorizing on powerlessness.”³⁴ It is tantamount, for them, to “a kind of preventive disarmament, a pure police operation,” against which they propose the threat of armed violence. “There’s no such thing as a peaceful insurrection,” they are right to clarify. “Weapons are necessary: it’s a question of doing everything possible to make their use superfluous. An insurrection is more just about taking up arms and maintaining an ‘armed presence,’ than it is about entering an armed struggle.”³⁵ This is a hard-won lesson that finds its clearest articulation nowhere more remarkably than in full-blooded decolonization struggles. Frantz Fanon formulated it in biblical terms. “For if the last shall be first, this will only come to pass after a murderous and decisive struggle between the two protagonists,” central to which is violence: “colonialism is not a thinking machine, nor a body endowed with reasoning faculties. It is violence in its natural state, and it will only yield when confronted with greater violence.”³⁶ Or, to put this in more practical language, it will be worth recalling C. L. R. James’ strategic insight drawn from Toussaint L’Ouverture and the Haitian Revolution: “The rich are only defeated when running for their lives.”³⁷ If Fanon and James can be taken to affirm the strategic value of direct action, we see them proven correct most recently in the case of Richard Spencer, a bed-wetting Nazi who was punched in the face on camera and turned into a meme, and who is now afraid to appear in public. On the other side of the Atlantic, in the UK, similar things can be said about the Milkshake Spring of 2019, when far-right ideologues Nigel Farage,

³⁴ Comité invisible, *The Coming Insurrection*.

³⁵ Comité invisible, *The Coming Insurrection*.

³⁶ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 61.

³⁷ C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (c. 1938; London: Penguin, 2001). Ebook.

Tommy Robinson, and Carl Benjamin were forced out of public appearances by the threat of weaponized milkshakes. Rather than abandon our weaponry, then, it might be useful to sharpen an understanding of what it means for a weapon to criticize. At a minimum, critical weaponry aims to embody resistance in the precise way that Ulrike Meinhof theorized it as distinct from protest. “Protest is when I say I don’t like this,” she claimed. “Resistance is when I put an end to what I don’t like. Protest is when I say I refuse to go along with this anymore. Resistance is when I make sure everybody else stops going along too.”³⁸

It is tempting to delineate between critical weaponry and weaponry in general with reference to the central lesson of the Paris Commune, that “the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes.”³⁹ A potentially obvious example, however, will show how complicated this is because of how acquisitive the state can be when it comes to subsuming weapons: the Molotov cocktail. The Molotov cocktail was given its name in another act of détournement, this time by Finnish combatants during the Winter War of 1939. They named the anti-tank weapon after Vyacheslav Molotov, an architect of the Nazi-Soviet Pact who commanded Soviet bombing runs over Finland. While Molotov denied these attacks, claiming instead to be dropping humanitarian food supplies, the Finns’ dubbed the cluster-bomb dispensers “Molotov’s bread basket,” to which their flaming cocktails would be a suitable culinary accompaniment. Historically favored by insurgents and in riots the world over, primarily because of their availability and relative ease of use, the improvised petrol bomb has all the connotations of guerrilla as opposed to professionally militarized warfare. Che Guevara, for instance, described it as “an arm of extraordinary value,” as “the arm of terrible defence,” and as “a weapon of extraordinary effectiveness.” He even jerry-rigged a launcher for hurling them “a hundred meters or more with a fairly high degree of accuracy,” which made for “an ideal weapon for entrenchments when the enemy has many wooden or inflammable material constructions—also for firing against tanks in

³⁸ Ulrike Meinhof, *Everybody Talks About the Weather... We Don't: The Writings of Ulrike Meinhof*, ed. Karen Bauer (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2008). Ebook.

³⁹ Marx, *The Civil War in France* (c. 1871), *Marxists Online Archive*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/civil-war-france/ch05.htm>, accessed on 2 October 2018.

hilly country.”⁴⁰ And yet, despite this revolutionary pedigree, the petrol bomb has been equally useful to fascist and imperial forces—perhaps most infamously by the Marines during Operation Phantom Fury—and that would still neglect its industrialized form, as napalm, deployed primarily against communist guerrillas in Vietnam.

Contemporary literature apprehends this dynamic with remarkable clarity. The challenge of weaponized fire’s subsumption into capital is central to *Wildfire*, Andrea Brady’s 2010 “verse essay” concerning the history of incendiary devices, ranging from the ancient ignition of the pre-Socratics and Aristotle’s fashioning of pyrotechnics through the state-sanctioned deployment of napalm in U Minh Thuong and of white phosphorus in Fallujah. In similar fashion to our reading of weapons as criticism, Brady’s verse reworks a cultural history of manufactured fire into a critical excoriation of the political present:

So open the texts, the source code a closely-guarded
state secret punishable immediate thunder.
Find what was keeping in the Bihac pocket,
the fighting compartment, abandoned
Andorinhas burned houses in the mountains
and the mountain itself. Find ourselves

in a coin war, primed to consume
the burnt, the wood, the stones, the dust,
lick up the water in the trench, to pay
whatever it costs in broken vessels
drive the point away.

All things are an equal exchange
for fire and fire for all things,
as goods are for gold and gold for goods
If that is true, if money is sterile
and blood in exchange carries congenital defect,
all life on fire going out

⁴⁰ Che Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare* (Lanham: Scholarly Resources, 1997), 88.

and rekindling in a circuit:
 then destruction the rule of measure in change
 for moderns like me, to circum
 vent the law through a change of terms⁴¹

In a different formal register, though pursuing a similar theme, Joshua Clover's 2015 poem, "My Life in the New Millennium," transposes the previous year's Ferguson Riots into lyric verse:

It was true that the more I hated people the more I loved cats.
 Then people started to surprise me.
 Often this involved fire or coca-cola
 bottles with petrol which amounts to the same thing.
 Once fire is the form of the spectacle the problem
 becomes how to set fire to fire.⁴²

The problem this poem suggests, I think, is that weapons—from the exploding petrol bomb through the fist that cracked Richard Spencer's jaw and the banana-flavored milk running down Nigel Farage's suit—too easily become yet another stupefying commodity, morphing back into something like a brand name, a visual fetish that ultimately draws energy away from street fighting only to inject it back into an online culture of reciprocal alienation. It is, in this view, a problem of opting out of actual danger to instead cultivate a cool aesthetic.

Returning to Paris and our previous example, however, it will be necessary to insist on reclamation and repurposing as the obverse counterweight to co-option and subsumption. What makes the pavers different from the Molotov cocktail is not the extent of harm they might inflict on a target or how well they might incapacitate the adversary but their embodiment of a uniquely transformative negation; extracted pavers are not just the means of assault, like a gun or a drone or a warhead; their extraction from the ground also disrupts the flow of capital through the streets precisely by tearing up the street itself whilst simultaneously

⁴¹ Andrea Brady, *Wildfire: A Verse Essay on Obscurity and Illumination* (San Francisco: Krupskaya Books, 2010), <http://www.krupskayabooks.com/wildfire/pyrotechne.html>, accessed on 2 October 2018.

⁴² Joshua Clover, *Red Epic* (Oakland: Commune Editions, 2015), 3.

defending those reclaimed streets from capital's paramilitary henchmen. It is in this way that the pavers are the revolutionary form of what Henri Lefebvre once called "spatial practice." In other words, while any old weaponry might annihilate fixed capital in the form of buildings, machines, or objects, what we encounter here is the transfiguration of the space of capital and its social dispensation. The pavers send the rich running for their lives, which is the correct and primary function of all weaponry, but they also do something to the topography from which they have been created. As weapons made from a concrete social sphere, these projectiles necessitate the interruption of capital in ways that cannot be recuperated or utilized by the adversary. If, as Lefebvre famously argued, the "state uses space in such a way that it ensures its control of places, its strict hierarchy, the homogeneity of the whole, and the segregation of the parts," even before weaponization, the construction of barricades or the hurling of projectiles, the pavers serve as a counterforce to state power.⁴³ With a precondition of transformative vandalism that goes beyond mere "property damage," they disrupt as much as they destroy; and, in their disruption, they cause harm to capitalist social relations. The pavers are, then, an instance of what Kristin Ross describes as the "creative subversion" of remediation: "if new forms of contact and solidary existed in May between people previously separated, it was not, of course, thanks to the media but rather the result of active destruction of forms of mediation that had kept people up until then in enforced segregation."⁴⁴ This is how the pavers figure a new sociality out of the critical reconversion of an old one. Guy Debord might be the best fitting theorist on this point. "In the revolutionary organization's struggle with class society," he wrote in 1967, "the weapons are nothing less than the essence of the antagonists themselves: the revolutionary organization cannot allow the conditions of division and hierarchy that obtain in the dominant society to be reproduced within itself."⁴⁵ That is why the pavers are unique: not only do they refuse the conditions of dominant society; in their egalitarian status as readymade weapons,

⁴³ Henri Lefebvre, "Space: Social Product and Use Value," in J. W. Freiberg, ed., *Critical Sociology: European Perspectives* (New York: Irvington Publishers, 1979), 288.

⁴⁴ Kristin Ross, *May '68 and its Afterlives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 187.

⁴⁵ Guy Debord, *Society of The Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (c. 1967), *Marxists Online Archive*, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/debord/society.htm>, accessed on 2 October 2018.

as equal-opportunity armaments seized from the space of capital, they are remade into a collective good that defines itself in opposition to private property.

The idea of mobilizations that affirm a new, different social order in their violent negation of the old one has currency in the long history of class struggle, and is especially pronounced in moments of embattlement—from the partisan fighters in Franco’s Spain, Black Panthers in the United States, striking miners in Thatcher’s England, right down to today’s skirmishes against resurgent fascism. This idea also takes form in the deployment of specific weaponry. Here black bloc, the name given to the uniformly monochrome paramilitary of the left, will serve as a contemporary iteration of this tendency. Originating in West Germany, the first successful deployment of a black bloc was in Kreuzberg on May Day 1987, when police were forced to withdraw from the district when attacked by the anonymous multitude. While the uniform—combining scarves and glasses with helmets and padding—is optimal for obscuring combatants’ identities and as a protective measure in combat, there is another communitarian aspect to black bloc, which is consonant with the ideology of those who wear it. In an anonymous testimonial published as a zine, a member of an American black bloc describes it as “an aesthetic development in the art of street confrontation,” and one that has a social as well as practical function. “We learn new sensations of love, friendship, and death through the matrix of collective confrontation,” the author reflects. “In the obscurity of the black mask, I am most present in the world. This unfamiliar way of being compels me to focus and intensify my senses, to be radically present in my body and my environment.”⁴⁶ In a world of doxing and harassment and targeted violence that is covered absolutely by surveillance cameras, both stationary and on every single smart device, black bloc is a strategic inevitability; but, more than that, it means a temporary escape from the social form of the spectacle and, in that way, it is—like the beach beneath the pavement—a critical negation of capitalism’s ideological atmosphere.

Here we can approach a conclusion by way of anecdote. Mike Davis once told the story about his decision to enroll in grad school after working as a driver:

⁴⁶ Anon, “Black Bloc Confidential” (c. 2012), *CrimethInc*, <https://crimethinc.com/2012-/02/21/black-bloc-confidential>, accessed on 2 October 2018.

I had this job with a bus-tour company when suddenly this insanely violent strike broke out. A strikebreaker ran a bus over one of our guys, and next thing I knew I was in a room with forty guys voting on whether each of us is gonna put up \$400 to hire a hit man to kill the head of the strikebreakers. I said, “Hey, guys, this is just crazy,” and made the best speech of my life. I was outvoted thirty-nine to one. I thought to myself, “Typical American workers”; I think I said “pussies.” Instead of coming up with a political strategy, they reach for their guns as soon as they see a scab driving their bus. And here I am about to become a freshman at UCLA, and I’m going to get arrested for criminal conspiracy.⁴⁷

This story returns us to the two poles of criticism that were seen to separate out during the twentieth century—one of academic theory, the other of revolutionary practice—but in a moment of reversal. The workers’ union is characterized as weak-willed not because its members are unwilling to engage in violent conflict, but because they outsource the violence and in so doing neglect political strategy. While this is beginning to approach a caricature of Antonio Gramsci—in which the war of manoeuvre is subordinate to war of position—the point that needs clarifying is that, unless the weapon serves some critical function, it will not open up an alternative to capitalism; it will only, as is the case with the hitmen, perpetuate the standing social order but with slight variation. This is not to dismiss defensive violence, to moralize about the weapon taken up spontaneously and out of necessity, but to differentiate between it and a critical weapon, which serves another function in addition to its practical usage, namely revolution. What is so typically American about the union in this story, and which is typical of all unions, is that even in its armed violence it is ultimately reformist. It is, in the sense of being economic and partial, a continuation of the Althusserianism critiqued by Rancière. That too is a structural antipode to the critical weaponry about which Davis would soon come to write, most infamously in the form of the car bomb, or what he calls the “poor man’s air force,” a WMD for the age of post-Fordist dispossession.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Quoted in Adam Shatz, “The American Earthquake: Mike Davis and the Politics of Disaster,” *Lingua Franca* 7.7. (September 1997): n.p., <http://linguafranca.mirror.theinfo.org/9709/davis.html>, accessed on 2 October 2018.

⁴⁸ Mike Davis, *Buda’s Wagon: A Brief History of the Car Bombs* (London: Verso, 2008).