

Critique without ontology

Genealogy, collective subjects and the deadlocks of evidence

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In the past few years, the number of migrant deaths in the Mediterranean Sea has dramatically increased due to the strengthening of border controls and a deliberate politics of migration containment put into place by the EU in cooperation with third countries. In 2018, according to UN Refugee Agency [UNHCR] estimations, an average of six migrants died at sea every day, trying to cross the Mediterranean from Libya.¹ These figures do not take into account the so-called ‘ghost shipwrecks’, that is, the number of people who died in ships that simply sank without being detected by the authorities. During these years, the Mediterranean Sea as a space of governmentality has been the object of multiple readjustments. Back in 2013 and 2014, within the context of the military-humanitarian operation *Mare Nostrum*, Italian Navy vessels used to patrol the Mediterranean close to Libyan waters; since then, the EU has shifted towards a more pervasive and blatant politics of containment. Thus, the ‘good scene of rescue’² has been replaced by a generalised retreat of European vessels from the Mediterranean Sea, and since the signing of the *Memorandum of Understanding* between Italy and Libya in March 2017, the work of rescuing, capturing and sending migrants back to Libya has been left to the Libyan coast guard alone.

In the face of this dramatic situation, important civic mobilisations have been organised and many journalistic investigations have been carried out to demonstrate and denounce the states’ responsibility, the violation of international law, and to downplay – by providing more informative statistics – the alarmist analyses that constantly warn EU citizens against a ‘migrant invasion’ and a ‘refugee crisis’. Researchers have also convincingly

shown that NGOs conducting search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean do not constitute a pull-factor for migrants.³ More broadly, many scholars have become more and more engaged in producing ‘public truth’ about states’ violations of human rights and the international law, and in providing the kinds of evidence that can help prove such truths. This goal has been pursued by mobilising diverse epistemic approaches. One of these is the forensic method, which consists in ‘a mode of public address and a means of articulating political claims using evidence grounded in the built world.’⁴ In this case, the production of evidence is mainly conceived in legal terms, even though, as Eyal Weizman aptly contends, it is not limited to law and it also possesses an eminently political significance. By contrast, in mainstream migration scholarship, the production of evidence is mostly oriented towards generating knowledge with a view to governing migration ‘better’ and more fairly.⁵ Within a general migration policy framework, evidence is generated and exposed as part of a problem-solving strategy. By contrast, in what follows we will consider ‘evidence’ not only in its legal dimension: we will also address its production in terms of both the unveiling and crafting of the truth of (border) violence and numbers (of migrant deaths).

Evidence of migrant deaths at sea has been incessantly produced through circulation in the media of pictures and videos of migrants’ bodies ashore, and of migrants detained and tortured in Libyan prisons. To some extent, the sheer exposure of violence perpetrated on migrants mirrors states’ blatant violation of international law and human rights. Nevertheless, this *accumulation*

of evidence, which is a consequence of the attempt to prove (and expose) the reality of brutal violence against migrants as well as the deadly effects of EU politics of migration containment, is neither limiting nor disrupting the constant rise of racism and xenophobia in Europe.⁶ Europe is confronted with a situation that is properly *intolerable*, on both ethical and political grounds, yet most Europeans, with varying levels of regret or distaste, continue tacitly to tolerate it. We will return to Foucault's pertinent emphasis on 'the intolerable' in the penultimate section of this article.

The main aim of this article is to address this theoretical and practical impasse, and to ask, in the context that it continues to define: What is the role of critique today? What does it mean to produce critical knowledge about the aforementioned situation, and many others? Recent literature on post-truth and post-critique avoids finding the answer to these questions in a (new) normative definition of critique. Yet this scholarship generally conceives of the act of bringing evidence – not as something just to discover, but in the constructive sense of 'crafting' and 'building' – as the main ground on which to rely in order to elaborate effective 'critical' practices. More precisely, while it questions the accumulation of evidence as a theoretical and political goal, this literature nevertheless defends an epistemology that aims to augment reality and 'compose' as a way to go beyond a purely negative or debunking critique.

Although we do not want to deny the usefulness of evidence and of epistemic moves to bring evidence in certain contexts, we contend that this strategy alone is clearly insufficient and that it relies on an ontological and genealogical anxiety deriving from a fundamental misunderstanding of the operations of critique – and more specifically of critique as a debunking activity as it is conceived of by Nietzsche and Foucault. Our aim in this paper is to defend, develop and redeploy this specific, Nietzschean-Foucauldian mode of critique.⁷ In fact, the idea that (debunking) critique is pointless and that it should be replaced by the task of bringing evidence, with a view to describing (and possibly denouncing) things as they are, risks, we argue, obscuring the crucial role that critique can still play in contemporary society as a movement of contestation of the regimes of truth that govern us – and of transformation of the truth-power-subjects nexus on which they rely.

To better define such a role, we address in turn three fundamental dimensions of what we call the 'laborious work of critique': history, desubjugation and the creation of new collective subjects. Our argument proceeds as follows. First, we emphasise the problematic elision, in post-critical approaches, of the *history* of what is produced and presented as a 'truth' or a 'fact', and we question the way in which certain phenomena and subjects are transformed into 'problems' to be 'solved'. Second, we claim that, far from unveiling hidden truths, critique crucially entails disengaging from and refusing the effects of power in terms of subjection that stem from a given regime of truth – in other words, critique is conceived of here as a 'politics of desubjugation'. Third, we argue that critique is to be addressed specifically in its capacity to create new collective subjects and, at the same time, to problematise the production of a given category of subjects as the 'others' of critique. We conclude by gesturing towards two further points to be addressed in future inquiries: on the one hand, we contend that we should strive to attune critical interventions to the current movements of collective refusal; on the other, that building transversal alliances between EU citizens and those labelled as 'migrants' might prove to be crucial in the years to come.

Ontological anxiety and genealogical critique

In recent years, critique has been widely questioned for its purely negative, debunking or deconstructive nature. Indeed, instead of unmaking and subtracting, the role of humanities and social sciences – we are told – should be to provide us with tools to craft and build, or better, to *compose*. Commenting on Bruno Latour's 'Compositionist Manifesto',⁸ Rita Felski argues that 'the idea of composition ... speaks to the possibility of trying to compose a common world, even if this world can only be built out of many different parts.'⁹ Focusing on composition instead of critique means evacuating 'the uninteresting question of what is constructed or not constructed' in order to raise 'the key question of whether something is well made or badly made.'¹⁰ Similarly, Jonathan Luke Austin gestures towards composition as an epistemic and methodological move that allows one to retain the complexity of reality against critique conceived as sus-

picion and subtraction.¹¹ More generally, partisans of post-critique such as Felski and Austin have convincingly challenged both a normative understanding of critique and a neo-positivist conception of evidence – understood as a move from secrecy to transparency, or as a way to ‘unveil’ what is hidden.

Nevertheless, these attacks on critique rely on what we could call an ‘ontological anxiety’: the fear that critique, by ‘deconstructing and demystifying’, will end up making things ‘less real by underscoring their social constructedness’ – thus leaving us with no solid ground on which to stand, ‘however temporarily or tentatively’.¹² This ontological anxiety, we argue, is the correlate of what Amia Srinivasan calls ‘genealogical anxiety’.¹³ Indeed, in the past three or four decades, and drawing mostly from Nietzsche and Foucault, genealogy has been posited as a basis for social and political critique precisely insofar as it fosters anxiety as to the validity of our shared beliefs and practices.¹⁴ In other words, genealogy has been used for debunking critical aims because it allows us to show that if a belief or practice emerged in a contingent, historical way – and which one did not? – we are justified in criticising or even abandoning it.¹⁵

In a time that so many are eager to define as one of ‘post-truth’,¹⁶ ontological and genealogical anxieties end up mutually fostering and reinforcing each other. Post-modernism, we are told, miserably failed – or it brilliantly succeeded, depending on the point of view. The idea that there is no objective truth, that every truth or fact can (and should) be debunked and criticised, has brought us straight to a situation in which it is no longer possible to distinguish truths from lies, in which populism is on the rise everywhere in the world, and nationalism and racism with it.¹⁷ Thus, Latour’s claim that ‘critique has run out of steam’, and his argument about the conundrums of critical theory,¹⁸ have nurtured a wide interdisciplinary scholarship which includes anthropology, sociology, philosophy of science, international relations and critical security studies, among others. Critique, the argument goes, has been conceived as a move away from facts and a perpetual debunking of truths with a view to emphasising the historical and epistemological conditions that contributed to their production. However, ‘the question was never to get away from facts but closer to them.’¹⁹ Consequently, Latour argues, we should now turn our attention towards ‘matters of concern’ and ‘transform

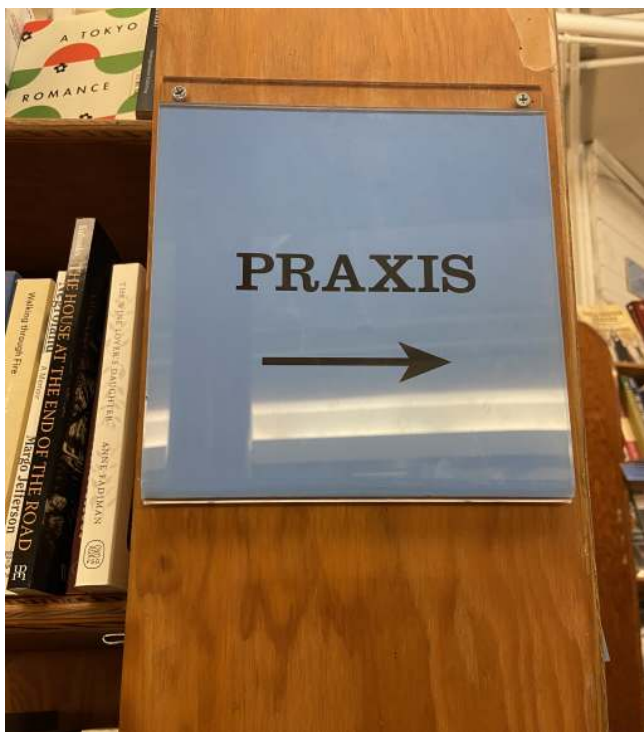
the critical urge in the ethos of someone who adds reality to matters of fact and not subtract reality from it.’²⁰

In order to get out of this vicious circle of (ontological and genealogical) anxieties and be able to concretely intervene in reality, humanities and social sciences – we are told – should concentrate on (and limit themselves to) the task of bringing evidence. Indeed, the injunction to ‘get closer to facts’ and ‘add reality to matters of fact’ is generally taken to mean that evidence is the only solid ground on which to rely in order to elaborate effective socio-political practices and fight against the proliferation of rhetorical speech and fake news. Politics has been defined as a struggle ‘identifying the creation of new assemblies, or gathering empirical evidence for causal arguments.’²¹ This idea has become so widespread that ‘fact-checking’ is often presented as the most effective (and sometimes the only) critical intervention that scholars and journalists should aspire to make. For instance, in both the Italian press and the scholarly literature, the ‘truth of numbers’ and the ‘reality of facts’ have been largely mobilised to undermine the claims by the ex-Minister of the Interior, Matteo Salvini, about a supposed ‘migrant invasion’ taking place in Europe and to counter the widespread perception of a ‘migrant threat’.²²

Problematizing ‘post-critique’

To a certain extent, all of the above is correct. Critique should not limit itself to negative, debunking or deconstructive tasks. Indeed, if, on the one hand, unpacking, undoing and problematising are the verbs of what we define here as the ‘operations of critique’, on the other hand, critique, as a practice, should also consist in enacting and opening up. In other words, critique should also be able to build and produce. Why then should we continue to call it ‘critique’? Some prefer to herald the twenty-first century as an era of ‘post-critique’.²³ After an epistemological critique preoccupied with defining the limits of our knowledge, as Kant defined it in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, and a genealogical critique occupied in debunking operations, as Nietzsche first conceived of it, the time has come – or so we are told – to do away with critique altogether and replace it with ontology. Indeed, although one can argue that ‘the goal of post-critique is not to do away with critique, but to treat it simply as one language game among others’,²⁴ in this recent post-

critical literature a critical attitude is de facto dismissed and reduced to a hermeneutics of suspicion and a series of acts of denunciation. We already conceded that the questioning of critique in this scholarship deserves to be taken seriously, as it exposes the limitations of critical analyses and interventions – as the Mediterranean migration context demonstrates – and helps to reconceive the very meaning and function of critique today. However, the debunking and productive aspects of critique should never be separated. We should thus reject the binary opposition between subtracting and adding reality, as well as the idea that we should do away with critique altogether. Critique and the production of subjectivity and new political spaces should be thought *together*.



Clearly, the act of bringing evidence alone is not enough to prove a case, let alone to make a political difference. Despite the well-intentioned efforts to gather evidence about Europe's scandalous treatment of migrants that we evoked above, according to the polls, Salvini has been gaining more and more support in the past year, and his party, the League, is now the most popular party in Italy. More generally, an increase in the supply of evidence does not seem to be able, in itself, to counter the rise of populism, nationalism and racism in Europe and all over the world. It is not even so sure that the problem is that we (supposedly) live in a 'post-truth' era. As Bernard Harcourt argues, there is no 'reliable evidence, one way

or the other, as to whether the strategic use of the post-truth and fake news arguments are effective political weapons.²⁵ In this respect, it is also worth mentioning Jacques Derrida's poignant 'History of the Lie'. Critically engaging with lies, he argues, actually pushes us to re-visit our notion of truth as an object which is not given in advance, and to reconceive of it by opposing testimony to proof: 'The opposition veracity/lie is homogeneous with a testimonial problematic, and not at all with an epistemological one of true/false or of proof.'²⁶

In other words, the problem is not to try to restore a utopian situation in which the truth would be able to impose its law on everybody solely because it is the truth.²⁷ The 'regime of truth' characterising the socio-political context, differently from the one characterising, for instance, logic or science, does not (and will never) function on the basis of the idea that it is enough to bring convincing evidence supporting a given conclusion in order for everybody to accept it as true.²⁸ The problem is rather to be aware that there is a multiplicity of different regimes of truth, that is, of ways in which the relations between the manifestation of the truth, the exercise of power in the form of the 'government' of human beings and the constitution of the subject are organised in our society.²⁹ It is therefore crucial to produce critical knowledge of these regimes of truth – such as the regime of truth associated to the government of migration – which not only tells us how they function, but also opens up the possibility to transform the nexus truth-power-subjects that supports them. These three dimensions being separable only in theory, and never in practice, a critical intervention limiting itself only to one of them – in the hope, to take the case discussed here, that bringing facts and truths would be enough to change the relations of power in place, and the ways in which the subjects are constituted (and subjugated) – is inevitably condemned to fail.

To argue with Foucault that no truth can be manifested independent of a given regime of truth, and therefore independent of a given set of power relations and forms of subjection/subjectivation does not entail, however, the conclusion that truth does not exist. On the contrary, truth is literally everywhere and plays a crucial role in almost every aspect of our life. But truth is always *situated* – that is, it has no intrinsic 'force' allowing it to impose itself to everybody or in every possible

circumstance.³⁰ Donna Haraway has notably proposed a feminist account of objectivity in terms of situatedness and partiality, adding that, however, partiality as such is not enough: it should be coupled with constant critical investigation.³¹ Bringing evidence, stating the facts, demonstrating the truth – all these moves can, and should, be part of a critical intervention. But the idea that they are enough in and of themselves is an illusion: truth is not the Truth of critique.

The laborious work of critique

Critique is questioned today for both theoretical and political reasons. We should add to this the appropriation (and capitalisation) of critique by the neoliberal academy – which, despite appearances, contributes to making any genuine practice of critique even harder. Being critical, producing critical knowledge, elaborating critical analyses, far from being presented and perceived by Western universities as uncomfortable and potentially threatening tasks, have become both a sort of (neoliberal) injunction and a ‘brand’. From this perspective, the impact-driven approach that dominates today’s academy is not far from the quest for evidence and the resulting neutralisation of critique that aims to augment and intervene in, or impact upon, reality. Impact, we are told, ‘remains the ultimate test of the usefulness of the critical approach.’³² Does this mean that any possible space for critique, and for its desubjugating and transformative effects, has been irremediably closed off?

Here, we would like to echo Wendy Brown’s considerations on the supposedly anachronistic character of critique. In contemporary society, she argues, we witness ‘a common conservative and moralising rejection of critique as untimely’: ‘It is not the time’, we are told.³³ However, it is precisely this untimeliness that renders critique a crucial epistemological and political task. Indeed, critique does not consist in

making flamboyant interventions, or staging irreverent protests, but rather [in] contest[ing] the very senses of time invoked to declare critique untimely. If the charge of untimeliness inevitably also fixes time, then disrupting this fixity is crucial to keeping the times from closing in on us. It is a way of reclaiming the present from the conservative hold on it that is borne by the charge of untimeliness.³⁴

To defend the untimeliness of critique both from those who want to do away with critique, or who treat it as a mere ‘language game’,³⁵ and from those who conceive of critique as nothing more than a brand, we will address in turn the three main dimensions that lie at the heart of what we call the ‘laborious work of critique’: history, desubjugation and the creation of new collective subjects. Our aim is to show that critique rarely stems from an isolated act or the simple gesture of bringing evidence to support the truth of a charge or claim. On the contrary, it almost always requires work over an unspecified period of time and an acceptance of the lack of stable epistemological and political grounds. In this specific sense, we argue, critique has not yet run out of steam.

Let us consider again the case of migration. From what we argued above, it follows that it is paramount to pay attention to the simultaneous processes of redefinition and recrafting of violence as well as of infringement of the law. If, by letting migrants die, states have overtly violated the international law of the sea on many occasions, they have also enacted legal artifices in order not to be held responsible. For instance, instead of undertaking push-back operations on the high seas, EU member states paid the Libyan coast guard to bring the migrants back to Libya. Indeed, conflicting jurisdictional regimes enable states ‘to simultaneously extend their sovereign privileges through forms of mobile government and elude the responsibilities that come with it.’³⁶ Consequently, as Judith Butler points out,

when law becomes the instrument of violence and administrative power becomes its own form of quasi-legal or extra-legal violence, then the problem is not just the death-dealing power of the sovereign. ... In the Mediterranean, it is precisely through the invocation of sovereignty that international obligations are abandoned and calls for assistance refused.³⁷

The blatant exposure of violence and its justification through sovereignty and law are not in contradiction: they take place jointly and reinforce each other. Reconciling of critique today requires taking into account the problematic nature of the indefinite accumulation of evidence vis-à-vis the growing exposure of violence in the absence of an impartial third party that could bring justice. What kind of critical knowledge would be able to disrupt the normalisation and the threshold of accept-

ance of migrants' deaths? What forms of critical practice would succeed in countering the saturation of the political space and discourse generated by the proliferation of images of migrants' suffering? While we do not want to dismiss nor downplay the theoretical and political deadlocks of critique, we would like to embrace this disquiet and think through it. Our goal is not to 'rescue' critique as such, nor to advance a normative definition of critique that would be valid once and for all. Instead, we aim to emphasise a series of *practices of critique* as interventions in the present driven by moves of desubjugation resulting in the creation of new collective subjects, as well as by the questioning of accepted conceptual frameworks through which objects and problems are crafted.

Bringing in history

In discussing the current impasses of critique, the first question to ask is: What do we mean by intervening in the present? What does 'intervention' stand for here? This question is inextricably linked to the first crucial dimension of the laborious work of critique – history – but remains almost completely unaddressed in much of the existing scholarship.

Feminist historian Joan Wallach Scott can help us think the pitfalls of evidence and of equating critical intervention with the simple move of bringing evidence to support a claim. When discussing historical approaches that promote the subjects' experience as the ultimate, solid ground on which historical knowledge should rely, Scott criticises the claims to transparency and visibility underpinning this methodological move: the 'metaphor of visibility as literal transparency',³⁸ she argues, fails to account for the 'constructed nature of experience' and 'precludes critical examination of the workings of the ideological system itself, its categories of representation (homosexual/heterosexual, man/woman, black/white as fixed immutable identities), its premises about what these categories mean and how they operate, and of its notions of subjects, origin, and cause.'³⁹ Similarly, Carlo Ginzburg's seminal work allows us to problematise the quest for evidence by showing that the production of truth cannot be detached from the obstacles encountered by the historian in the research process, nor from the way in which she chooses to narrate 'facts'.⁴⁰

Building on Scott and Ginzburg, it is possible to em-

phasise the problematic elision of the *history* of what is produced and presented as a 'truth' or a 'fact' which sustains post-critical approaches focusing exclusively on the quest for evidence. By contrast, bringing history into critical practices allows us to avoid the 'trap of presentism'⁴¹ which is at the core of problem-solving analyses and imposes on us a specific and monolithic temporality – one that is often conceived in terms of 'crisis'. As Janet Roitman aptly remarks, drawing on the work of Reinhart Koselleck, the notion of crisis 'is always in articulation with the notion of critique', and 'conversely, this involves that critique itself is framed according to the political grammar of the crisis and of crisis moments.'⁴² Indeed, if we think about migration, the current practices of critique are structured around and against the taken-for-granted background of the so-called 'refugee crisis' – either by asking how to 'solve' such a crisis or by denouncing the way states address it. By contrast, we argue that it is paramount to develop practices of critique that are detached from the crisis-script, and to avoid the reproduction of the crisis-narrative through our critical knowledge production, thus opening the analysis to multiple and fragmented temporalities.⁴³ This also allows us to do justice to the 'precarious and fragile history', characterised by a 'confluence of encounters and chances', in the course of which 'the things which seem most evident to us are ... formed.'⁴⁴

Thus, instead of engaging in a normative understanding of critique and providing a new definition of it, we suggest focusing on a questioning of the ways in which certain phenomena and subjects are transformed into 'problems' to be 'solved'. For instance, the crafting of migration as an object of government, even by those who aim to challenge repressive state policies and border closures, necessarily entails a very specific – and problematic – framing of critique: critical interventions de facto end up relying on and taking for granted the nexus between migration and governmentality, instead of questioning it as their first move. By bringing history into critical practices, we aim to problematise not only what is presented as a 'truth' or a 'fact', but also (and in the first place) what is presented as a 'problem' with a view to addressing it according to a problem-solving logic. This obviously entails unsettling and refusing the current modes of defining and crafting 'problems'. Yet the job of critique does not stop there. Indeed, critique should also elab-

orate new strategies to address specific phenomena and events by reverberating them into the realm of politics with a view to problematising its boundaries, its grammar and its exclusionary mechanisms. Here, we echo Foucault's definition of *problematization* as the

development of a domain of acts, practices and thoughts that seem ... to pose problem for politics. For example, I don't think that in regard to madness and mental illness there is any 'politics' that can contain the just and definitive solution. But I think that in madness, in derangement, in behaviour problems, there are reasons for questioning politics.⁴⁵

However, as mentioned above, problematisation should also be extended towards a questioning of what we mean by 'problems' and used to resist the collapse of 'problems' into problem-solving strategies.⁴⁶ Indeed, when these two overlap, critique ends up being equated to the mere gesture of bringing evidence and thus turned into a neo-positivist approach. By contrast, problematisation, as we conceive of it drawing on Foucault, consists in constantly questioning the acceptability of current regimes of truth and engaging in *transformative* – and not solution-based – practices. It entails the epistemological-political task of unpacking what is deemed to be a 'problem', and it mobilises specific subjects and events in order to question the mechanisms of subjugation at play in our society. Thus, problematising critique rejects all the approaches that focus solely on the act of bringing evidence while leaving untouched the framing of – and the objectivation of phenomena and subjects as – 'problems'. Without a prior work of problematisation, we argue, any augmentation of reality risks doing nothing but intensifying the existing power relations.

In *Reassembling the Social*, Latour argues for 'deployment' against critique,⁴⁷ claiming that 'sticking to the description protects against the transmission of explanations' and that 'to deploy simply means that ... the number of actors might be increased; the range of agencies making the actors act might be expanded; the number of objects active in stabilising groups and agencies might be multiplied.'⁴⁸ Hence, deployment and description are presented by Latour as weapons in the struggle against what he calls a 'deficit in reality'.⁴⁹ Yet augmenting reality and multiplying connections do not, in and of themselves, equip us with analytical, political and ethical tools for refusing and disengaging from mechanisms of dom-

ination and forms of subjection. As Foucault argues, a genuine critical intervention in the present 'does not consist in a simple characterisation of what we are but, instead – by following lines of fragility in the present – in managing to grasp why and how that which is might no longer be that which is.'⁵⁰ Consequently, he concludes, 'any description must always be made in accordance with these kinds of virtual fracture which open up the space of freedom understood as a space of concrete freedom, that is, of possible transformation.'⁵¹

As we show below, this becomes even more glaring when addressing phenomena that add a further layer to critique and problematisation, namely, what we call the 'others' of critique (in our case, those labelled and racialised as 'migrants'), thus pushing us to reconceive of the collective subjects of critical interventions. In particular, claims for an 'applied critique' aiming at '*designing, crafting, building and distributing* concrete things'⁵² risk leading to a mere problem-solving approach, as they consider the 'deficit in reality' as the main or even the only obstacle to overcome, while disregarding the question of desubjugation. Hence, if we cannot but approve of the fact that Foucault's non-normative definition of critique is widely mobilised in current post-critical approaches, we argue that their fundamental methodological move – reassembling critique and critical interventions as 'action' – ultimately risks neutralising the political purchase of his analyses by getting rid of the crucial nexus between critique, desubjugation and the politics of truth.

Politics of desubjugation

Latour's famous 'critique of critique', or better, as he corrects himself, his claim for a 'critique acquired second-hand – so to speak – and put to a different use',⁵³ hints at a concept of critique as a movement of unveiling and making visible what is hidden. Critique would thus enable us to see the true reality obfuscated by ideology: 'With critique, you may debunk, reveal, unveil, but only as long as you establish ... a privileged access to the world of reality behind the veils of appearances.'⁵⁴ Such a concept of critique is actually very different from Foucault's definition of critique, or of 'critical attitude' as 'the art of not being governed like that and at that cost ... the art of not being governed quite so much.'⁵⁵ More precisely, for Foucault, critique can never be detached from a movement of de-

subjugation: ‘the movement by which the subject gives himself the right to question truth on its effects of power and question power on its discourses of truth’, thus attempting to produce his or her own desubjugation ‘in the context of what we could call ... the politics of truth.’⁵⁶ Far from unveiling hidden truths, the critical attitude entails, then, disengaging from and refusing the subjugating effects of power which stem from a given regime of truth.⁵⁷ This constitutes the second main dimension of what we call here the laborious work of critique.

What we want to emphasise and put at the heart of our analysis is precisely the fundamental connection between critique and practices of desubjugation. In addition to informing critique in political terms, this connection qualifies the political relevance of critique in specific ways, as Linda Zerilli has recently observed, arguing that critique as a ‘*politics* of desubjugation’ should not conceive of the latter as a purely individual act of the will, but (also) as a collective experience.⁵⁸ Indeed, desubjugation does not mean negative subtraction. In recent years, some feminist writers have foregrounded the centrality of desubjugation as a mode of *active refusal* that defines and enacts critique.⁵⁹ In this literature, following Foucault, critique is thus conceived as an activity that involves transformative practices: ‘The critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them.’⁶⁰ If the core of critique is constituted by a series of practices of desubjugation, the subjects themselves cannot but be incessantly transformed through the critical activity.

This element of desubjugation is crucial for genealogical critique as well. Indeed, for both Nietzsche and Foucault, debunking beliefs and values is, first and foremost, a debunking of the subject.⁶¹ In other words, genealogy is relevant for our account of critique insofar as it focuses on ‘the emergence and transformations of forms of subjectivity related to power’, with a view to questioning the latter and open up the possibility of future transformations.⁶² By contrast, in coming to grips with the limitations of critique, post-critical approaches have generally elided the question of the subject(s) of critique and expunged desubjugation, refusal and resistance from the politics of truth. While questioning a normative understanding of critique, these approaches ultimately re-propose an a-historicised conception of subjectivity.

Moreover, they seem more interested in freeing ‘the matters of fact from their reduction by “Nature”’ and in liberating ‘objects and things from their “explanation” by society’⁶³ than in creating new possibilities for *subjects’* practices of freedom.



Consequently, it is crucial, we argue, to resist this move and, instead of refusing the debunking aspects of critique (as suggested by post-critical scholars), emphasise – with Nietzsche and Foucault – that debunking operations should concern first and foremost subjects themselves. Critique can be effective only if it does *not* leave its subjects untouched: far from removing the solid ground under the feet of given and fixed subjects, critique proceeds by transforming the subjects themselves and their way of thinking and being. Thus, the laborious work of critique cannot be reduced to moments of pure debunking, of simple desubjugation and refusal. As mentioned above, its effects are transformative in a *positive* sense: critique, as we conceive of it, is creative of new modes of subjectivation. However, moving beyond Foucault, who never systematically conceptualised notions of collective action and resistance, we contend that these effects of critique should be explored specifically in relation to their capacity to create new *collective* subjects.

The ‘we’s and the ‘others’ of critique

Critique is always situated and requires an analysis of the specificities of the present, of what makes it different from the past. Therefore, the current social and political situation pushes us to ask: How should we reconceive of critical knowledge and practices in order to address the features of the present in which we live? In order to answer this question, not only do we have to take seriously

the conundrums of critique emphasised in the scholarly debate discussed above. We must also deal with the new power dynamics and forms of violence currently at play. Thus, when mobilising authors such as Foucault, Scott or Butler, we do not want to suggest that their ideas could or should be directly ‘transposed’ into our present to legitimise and defend the use of critique. On the contrary, these authors are helpful precisely because they insist on the need to constantly reconceive of critique in the light of specific configurations of power relations, new modes of subjection and, we contend, different *subjects of critique*. If we think of the Mediterranean context, it is clear – albeit rarely remarked – that the production of critical knowledge and the elaboration of critical practices should not be detached from the question of the ‘we’ or the collective subjects of critique: Who are the subjects of critique in this case? And how does the ‘we’ engaged in a critical intervention relate to what we call here the ‘others’ of critique, that is, the migrants who are left dying at sea?

As Butler points out, the question “what are we to do?” presupposes that the “we” has been formed and that it is known, that its action is possible, and the field in which it might act is delimited.⁶⁴ By contrast, the ‘we’, or, better, the ‘we’s that critique should contribute to the creation of are not predetermined nor stable; they are never defined once and for all, but fluid, heterogeneous, multiple and structurally open. Foucault famously claims that the main (political) problem is ‘to make the *future* formation of a “we” possible’ (a ‘we’ that ‘would also be likely to form a community of action’), because ‘the “we” must not be previous to the question; it can only be the result – and the necessarily temporary result – of the question.’⁶⁵ Thus, far from being a purely negative or debunking endeavour, critique necessarily entails a creative process of ‘we-making’.⁶⁶ This is the third main dimension that lie at the heart of the laborious work of critique.

Our focus on the Mediterranean scene of death pushes us to further problematise the nexus between critique, desubjugation and we-making. Indeed, the subjects of critique, that is, those who elaborate critical interventions, are not in this case directly affected by the deadly politics of migration containment. ‘We’ – EU citizens, scholars, human rights activists or journalists – criticise state policies and police measures, the violations

of international law, as well as the unjust laws through which individuals labelled and racialised as ‘migrants’ are left dying in the Mediterranean and at other borders of Europe.⁶⁷ As we argued above, desubjugation might in fact be conceived as a refusal of the policies that states implement (a refusal to be complicit with them), or it might take the form of a radical questioning and ultimate non-acceptance of the narratives about the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ and of the ‘minimalistic biopolitics’⁶⁸ centred on migrants as ‘black’ bodies to be rescued. Yet this does not exempt us from asking: What about the ‘others’ of critique? What about those in whose name ‘we’ give voice to *our* critique of the EU’s politics?⁶⁹

In this case, as in many others, one cannot raise the question of critique without addressing at the same time the issue of the desubjugation of the subjects of critique *and* of the ‘others’ of critique – the migrants. Ultimately, we concur with Judith Revel in thinking that the ‘questioning of the present state of things which can produce an interruption concerns not only our knowledges and our practices; it also immediately includes the question of the subject-form itself in its collective inflection (“we”), namely, also in its political dimension.’⁷⁰ However, the focus on migration highlights that the question of the constitution of a ‘we’ as the outcome of the practices of critique is inextricably connected to that of the ‘subjects-objects’ of critique who, in this case, do not speak. By this, we do not mean to deny migrants’ agency or the reality (and strategic importance) of their multiple struggles constantly forcing state authorities to invent new strategies of capture. But since we are specifically addressing the production of critical discourses on and contestations of migration policies, as well as the analyses currently developed about migrants’ deaths at sea, we find it necessary and urgent to ask: How would it be possible to craft a ‘we’ (of critique) without foreclosing other potential ‘we’s and, at the same time, without transforming migrants into mere objects of ‘our’ critical discourse on border violence?⁷¹

Our tentative answer is that the current problematisation of critique should be taken as an invaluable occasion to problematise and recraft the ‘we’s of critique as well. For instance, when questioning deadly migration policies, the ‘we’ that is implicitly assumed echoes the ‘we, citizens of Europe’,⁷² and thus de facto corroborates a Euro-centric and Euro-driven approach to migration

– which is too often presented as a strictly ‘European question’.⁷³ Instead, we argue that critique should be conceived and practiced as an experimental terrain for the creation of *other* collective subjects, of different and plural ‘we’s’⁷⁴ More concretely, it is crucial to emphasise that, in the European public debate, opposition to the EU’s deadly politics of migration containment is often shaped in a way that ignores the presence of active citizen mobilisations on the Southern and Eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea. However, while in Europe grassroots organisations were actively trying to counter the states’ retreat from search and rescue operations, in Tunisia fishermen were saving migrants who were about to drown in their attempt to reach Italy. Tunisian fishermen, much like many EU citizens who provided infrastructure to support migrants across Europe, have been systematically criminalised and accused by state authorities of smuggling migrants to Italy.⁷⁵ This is why we argue that building Mediterranean transversal connections is a crucial aspect of the laborious work of critique.

The question of how and for which purposes one is to produce a critical discourse on existing mechanisms of domination and, at the same time, of how to connect this discourse to concrete political practices, was at the heart of the activities of the *Groupe d’information sur les prisons* (GIP) at the beginning of the 1970s.⁷⁶ In that case, the elaboration of a critical intervention (questioning the institution of the prison) was tightly linked to what Foucault calls ‘the intolerable’ and the will not to accept it anymore. The intolerable stands at the crossroads of ethics and politics. It entails a movement of refusal, and emphasises the unacceptability of the mechanisms of domination:

The prison should no longer be left in peace, nowhere. ... Let what is intolerable – imposed, as it is, by force and by silence – cease to be accepted. We do not develop our inquiry in order to accumulate knowledge, but to intensify our intolerance and make it an active intolerance.⁷⁷

Yet it is important to emphasise the *collective* dimension of the intolerable that Foucault and the GIP gesture towards, claiming that ‘we have to transform individual experience into collective knowledge; that is to say, into political knowledge.’⁷⁸ Hence, the production of the intolerable and its unacceptability should be clearly distinguished from (political) emotions such as resentment or indignation. Indeed, far from being purely negative,

the intolerable is essentially connected to the positive triggering of practices of resistance. In this sense, the emergence of a (temporary) ‘we’ of critique is always linked to the production of a *common* intolerable, and the will to challenge the asymmetries between the subjects of critique and the ‘others’ of critique.

Conclusion

In ‘History-Writing as Critique’, Scott claims that critique should not be confused with ‘an endorsement of objectivity’.⁷⁹ Critique, she argues, building on Foucault, entails destabilising accepted norms and retracing the historical and political conditions through which specific power dynamics became naturalised, with a view to engaging in transformative socio-political practices. Indeed, according to Scott, critique is predicated upon an ethical commitment which, far from defining in advance the political outcomes of one’s actions and the evidence one has to bring, consists in ‘staying open to the future.’⁸⁰ However, this structural openness should be combined with discursive and non-discursive practices actively oriented at de-objectifying and de-racialising the ‘others’ of critique, and at creating new ‘we’s – different from the taken-for-granted subjects of critique. As Claudia Aradau contends, critique ‘builds upon an understanding of what produces differences and inequalities, power asymmetries, violence and injustice.’⁸¹ In this sense, it ‘can be a site of politics’ – at least so long as it challenges the production of degrees and ‘categories of being human and non-human’,⁸² subject and object.

By warning against the quest for evidence in the humanities and social sciences, and arguing for the need to reconceive of critique, its subjects and its ‘others’, we have taken seriously the conundrums of critique that post-critical scholars have recently emphasised. But instead of advancing a new normative definition of critique, we insist on the crucial role that practices of de-subjugation play in relation to any critical intervention within the context of what Foucault calls a politics of truth. Moreover, we have sought to draw attention to the current practices of knowledge-production and questioned the ways in which these craft ‘critical’ discourses or present themselves as ‘critical’. In a time during which, when dealing with sheer border violence, there seem to be ‘no tribunals to address’,⁸³ critique is not an anachron-

istic intellectual practice detached from reality, nor a task to be confined to problem-solving endeavours. This is particularly evident when we consider the states' overt violations of international law, on the one hand, and their ability to play with the law, on the other. In the face of this situation, conflating critique with a mere accumulation of evidence has generated a saturation of the political space without being able to produce any 'common intolerable'. Thus, the laborious work of critique aiming to unmake the effects of power associated with any given regime of truth should not be replaced with a series of claims for more reality, more facts or more truths.

By focusing on the Mediterranean scene of death, we hope to have shown the urgent need to refuse the terms in which this 'problem' is currently framed and to question the very fact of thinking of migration as a 'problem'. Instead, it is paramount to shift our attention to the constant, albeit often invisible, racialisation of migrant lives as 'black' bodies to be saved. Indeed, the differential labelling and the racialisation of lives which sustain the government of a category of subjects called 'migrants' should be taken not only as a fundamental target of critique, but also as the starting point for a new problematisation of the subjects of critique. If 'immanent critique' can be defined as a 'kind of critique that does not involve the adoption of a privileged position with respect to the object of critique',⁸⁴ the concept of critique that we defend here is *doubly immanent*, since it also strives to problematise its own position with respect to the subjects of critique.

To conclude, we would like to mention two further issues as possible orientations for future inquiries.

First, the current (theoretical and political) conjuncture of the conundrums of critique clearly indicates the impossibility of detaching critical interventions from 'the fabric of social struggles',⁸⁵ and the intellectual and practical necessity to ground critique in those contestations. The appropriate response to critical practices that turn out to be ineffective is not an impact-driven or problem-solving approach. On the contrary, we should strive to attune critical interventions to the movements of collective refusal that are currently in place. One of the main methodological principles that one can draw from Foucault's work is that 'where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is

never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.'⁸⁶ To be consistent with this principle, when revealing the role of historically constituted power/knowledge formations in the shaping of our current beliefs, practices, institutions and of our own selves, critique must also reveal the multiplicity of points of resistance that played 'the role of adversary, target, support or handle' for the emergence and concrete functioning of those formations.⁸⁷ Thus, critique should never be separated from concrete movements of desubjugation and resistance. In other words, 'the historical and theoretical analysis of power relations, institutions and knowledge' should always be coupled with 'the movements, critiques and experiences that call them into question in reality.'⁸⁸

Second, as our analysis of the Mediterranean context has shown, raising and problematising the issue of critique, of its subjects and objects, also entails questioning its main hinge: the (re)production of racialised mechanisms of capture and asymmetries of lives, as well as of the 'others' of critique, might make it necessary, within migration studies itself, eventually to reorient critique away from an exclusive focus on migration as such, or from a 'containerisation of critique'.⁸⁹ Striving to build transversal alliances between EU citizens and those labelled as 'migrants' to fight against current rights destitution strategies and deadly politics of precarisation is a route worth exploring.

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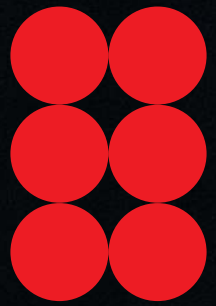
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