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Mika, Kasia; Diamanti, Jeff; Nesbitt, Nick; Valdivia, Pablo

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Critique Under Duress

What Is the Role of Critique and Radical Critical Theory in the Present of Pathos?

*Kasia Mika, Jeff Diamanti, Nick Nesbitt,
and Pablo Valdivia*

Abstract This section looks at critique in times of crisis, taking pathos, knowledge, and duress as the anchors for this consideration. With this scaled up view in mind we ask: what is the role of critique and radical critical theory in the present of pathos?

Building on the analysis of the 2010 Haiti earthquake and Spinoza's distinction between true/false judgments versus adequate and inadequate knowledge, this chapter proposes 'super-knowledge' and 'super-learning' as a more nuanced approach to understanding crises: 'super-' in the sense

K. Mika (✉)
Queen Mary University of London, London, UK
e-mail: k.mika@qmul.ac.uk

J. Diamanti
University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
e-mail: J.Diamanti@uva.nl

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of supersession or sublation, to critique not the falsity but the inherent *inadequacy* and insufficiency of imagination-based thought, to encompass as well general and singular modes of understanding. ‘Super-learning’ defamiliarizes the ways of ‘knowing time,’ working against the dominant ways in which time and temporality of crises are understood, measured, or approached. Super-learning allows us to situate the historical, material, and social constitution of the body at the same time that it names the collective affordances made available by disentangling the temporalities constitutive of and exposed by crisis. In so doing, super-learning helps us to conceptualize what can critique *be* and *do* across shared, yet asynchronous, crises, and to see the causes of events and processes, asking: what do crises reveal?

Keywords Critique • Pathos • Spinoza • Knowledge • Time • Idea • Super-learning

PATHOS

Pablo Valdivia

According to Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* there were three preponderant modes in the discursive argumentative typologies: *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*. These devices were conceived to articulate discursive practices which could orientate the attachments, beliefs, and worldviews of the audience. In this regard, *logos* focused on the logico-discursive rationalization of events, *pathos* appealed to the psycho-emotional configuration of the audience, and *ethos* discursively brought attention toward the importance of the speaker or subject(s). As noted by Veronica Gago in *Neoliberalism from Below* (2017), the triumph of neo-extractivist economic modes has been

N. Nesbitt
Princeton University, Princeton, NJ, USA

Czech Academy of Sciences, Prague, Czechia
e-mail: fnesbitt@princeton.edu

P. Valdivia
University of Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands
e-mail: p.valdivia.martin@rug.nl

sustained by psycho-emotional narratives rooted in popular subjectivities. Such popular subjectivities emerge from the “encounter with forces at work and [are] embodied in various ways by the ... tactics of everyday life, as a variety of ways of doing, being, and thinking that organize the social machinery’s calculations and affects” (Gago 2017, 2).

In the same vein, it can be argued that we need to revitalize Aristotle’s division to better understand how capitalist and neoliberal social engineerings have been especially successful at articulating cultural narratives centered in one of these modes: *pathos*. Why *pathos*? Cultural narratives dominated by modes of *pathos* have as the main node for semantic configuration the qualities of an event and its enacting capacity to trigger psycho-emotional reactions. In other words, while *ethos*, for instance, articulated a discursive mode where the configuration of a given event was orientated by the defining capacity of an external agent and the related moral imperatives of a pre-settled corpus of sanctioning values, in cultural narratives systematized around the notion of *pathos* the spectacle of the tragedy becomes a commercial commodity subjected to the laws of the market that must be delivered to a target audience. Therefore, in a ‘pathos society,’ political realizations become conceptual habits and rituals of tragic consumption which does not seek, as the main goal, to understand the intertwined layers of complex factors that unfolded as a conjuncture of crisis but actually to experience it as celebratory commercialization and consumption of tragedy under the mass production of cultural narratives of fear and urgency.

The transition from social imaginaries articulated around *ethos* to those systematized under the gravitational discursive force field of *pathos* has been enabled by historical processes that have displaced and neglected, under the capitalist and neoliberal logics, the agency and accountability of political realizations in favor of a discursive typology pivoting around the alleged unaccountable force of so-called natural disorders and the experience of crisis. A good example of this can be found in the metaphors which dominated the *pathos* mode of the 2008 financial crisis. This conjuncture of disruption was overwhelmingly represented as the unavoidable effect of a financial ‘tsunami,’ ‘earthquake,’ ‘storm,’ among other common metaphors that were used to persuade global audiences of the non-political/economic accountability of those who actually were responsible for triggering the financial crunch.

The politics of fear engendered by *pathos* modes are difficult to challenge and/or disrupt as they enact psycho-emotional responses which

tend to confirm pre-established differences and temporalities: they act as echo-chambers that urge cognitive shortcuts under complex multi-faceted realities. Since *pathos* appeals directly to the realm of individual/collective affects and persuades the audience of the existence of a common unidimensional time unit and unidirectional configuration of feelings, it has been especially fruitful at resisting critique by means of deactivating modalities of defamiliarization. In this regard, it is urgent to co-create new genealogies of critique or modes of knowledge which can disrupt pathos-based modes of becoming in the public and enhance the convergence of asymmetrical temporalities.

MODES OF KNOWLEDGE

Nick Nesbitt

The predominance in contemporary society of a pathos-based understanding of the phenomenon of any given crisis calls for a critique of ideological overdetermination. Pathos names an affective experience of ideology, in which the subject's overwhelming sensuous perception of an event obstructs more adequate understanding of the causality governing its manifestation.

The Haitian earthquake of 12 January 2010 exemplifies this overdetermination. What were the causes that led to the death of some 200,000–300,000 people in the flash of a moment? The catastrophic event is reflexively reduced in common, media-based presentation to a 'natural catastrophe' occurring in the "poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere,"¹ a process that systematically displaces the possibility of a more adequate understanding of this event in terms of the politico-historical process of imperialist dispossession and ongoing 'primitive' accumulation in Haiti. In this moment, in the chaos of collapsing buildings and horrific deaths, more adequate, political understanding is rendered mute before such terrifying, sublime immediacy. Critical thought demands that we extract the event from the fallacious immediacy of this moment, to more adequately grasp its necessity.

A genealogy of the catastrophic event (or crisis more generally) can begin, following Spinoza's famous typology of knowledge in Book II of *The Ethics* (1677), via a fundamental distinction between (at least) three modes of apprehension:

First, an imagination-based knowledge of an object (such as a given crisis or catastrophe) that reasons from the sensuous perception of effects (such as the shaking earth, falling buildings, and dead bodies in an earthquake) to the imagined causes of those effects. Such imaginary causes can range from the simplistic apocalyptic eschatology of Pat Robertson (Haitians, through their historical pact with the devil, have brought the wrath of God upon themselves; Pulliam Bailey 2010),² to the persistence of racist stereotypes or the resignation of an unthinking fatalism, what Spinoza called the refuge, “the sanctuary of ignorance” (Spinoza 2002 [1677], 241).³ Such thinking from effects to causes defines the operational modality of the ideological imagination, in which the mystery of unknown causes finds relief in the spurious causality of a big other: God or miracles, fate or destiny, the nature of things.

The human intellect can however move beyond such an inadequate mode of understanding to grasp an object in its necessary adherence to universal or general laws. For Spinoza, this meant for example that, after Galileo, we can grasp the necessity governing any physical body in its adherence to the universal laws of motion. Such an adherence to general laws, however, can be thought in relation to any thing or object of knowledge. In the case of the Haitian earthquake, for example, we can understand the necessity of this catastrophe within the general dynamic governing capitalist accumulation and the place of a colonized object (such as Haiti) in that process. In this case, we might say that insofar as capitalist accumulation requires the subsumption of precapitalist sites within an operational logic that demands the ever-renewed valorization of value, we witness in consequence (as a necessary effect) the general extension of an ongoing, global process of ‘primitive’ accumulation that violently strips autonomous populations of their means of production and reproduction, as well as the juridical right to own those means, and thus renders those populations dependent upon market commodities. For their very survival then, these subjects of dispossession are forced either to accept wage labor (if and when it exists in a place like Haiti) or simply to survive under the experience of marginal, day-to-day survival without wealth.

We can furthermore grasp an object in the *singularity* of its necessary causes. This would imply, in this same example, grasping the historico-political process of precaritization via dispossession in Haiti—via the forced destruction of the Haitian pig population in the 1980s and the imposition of rice quotas under the Clinton administration (Hallward

2007)—which rendered long-autonomous rural populations newly dependent upon market commodities. This novel dependency, an eminently political imperialist process that developed in singular form in Haiti, drove hundreds of thousands into the slums of Port-au-Prince, where, massed in precarious living conditions, the shock of a minor earthquake (one of much greater strength a month later in Chile resulted in less than a thousand deaths)⁴ caused horrific human suffering on an unprecedented scale.

Such a typology implies drawing a fundamental distinction between merely true/false judgments versus adequate and inadequate knowledge. It cannot be a matter of the abstract negation of imagination-based thought as putatively ‘false’; our knowledge of the world can only begin through such experience, and, moreover, lived experience remains necessarily constitutive of the adequate knowledge of an object. We cannot adequately think the Haitian earthquake (or any other crisis) without taking into account the immediate experience of violence, destruction, suffering, dispossession, and death.

We can, however, extend and emend our knowledge to encompass as well more adequate forms, in a process we wish to call super-knowledge: super—in the sense of supersession or sublation, to critique not the falsity but the inherent *inadequacy* and insufficiency of imagination-based thought, to encompass both general and singular modes of understanding. Axiomatically, we must continue to affirm with Spinoza that absolutely anyone, anywhere, always already has a true Idea.⁵ Against all possible epistemological elitism, the absolute truth of a concept can be recognized, deployed, and further articulated by any subject whatsoever.

In the case of Haiti, while its history can be grasped in its consonance with the *general* or common logic of neocolonialism, racism, systematic underdevelopment, and decolonization that governs various cases across the history of the global South and colonialism in general, we can also, in addition, come to grasp the case of Haiti in its singularity. This is analogous, for example, to the psychoanalytic treatment of an individual analysand, in which the analyst must not only analyze the coherence of that case within the framework of an analytical apparatus (such as Freud’s or Lacan’s), but furthermore, and necessarily, come to grasp and *treat*, in full conjunction with and working through of symptoms by the patient. The transformation of both understanding and the real political contradictions of the Haitian situation requires an active exploration and working through at every level, by subjects both within and outside of Haiti, to interrogate

a *global* process, including transnational and local dynamics of political and cultural inquiry and insight.

This would tend as well to draw our understanding of an event toward what Alain Badiou, following Spinoza, terms the eternity of the concept, and that we might render more neutrally as the *atemporality of the concept* (Badiou 2018). Such a process implies, paradoxically, the *rejection of idealism* and the articulation of a fully adequate *materialist analysis*. Here again, the Haitian case renders this process of materialist analysis explicit: it was precisely a more adequate understanding of the eternal concept of justice as universal equality—in its *absolute abstraction*—that allowed Louverture to deploy that notion in the singular situation of continued slavery in St. Domingue after 1789, to move beyond mere slave revolt to the concrete, material articulation of universal emancipation. Precisely in this sense, the mass social movement to which Louverture gave theoretical voice and orientation achieved a more adequate understanding, *in the singularity of that situation*, than that of the French revolutionaries who sought to limit the axiom of the 1789 Declaration to white, male, adult, French citizens.

In Haiti, *slavery was universally and immediately abolished for all human beings* (this universal emancipation necessarily limited to the territorial space of a political deployment (Haiti) of a universal precept).⁶ The result of this singularization of an atemporal concept was not only the radicalization of a situated political sequence; the very concept of justice as universal equality was itself reconfigured, insofar as the Haitian case transformed the very norms of what constituted an adequate understanding of justice as universal equality.

SUPER-LEARNING

Kasia Mika

If critique allows to “relate what is perceived in everyday life with a deeper, more rational knowledge [of] that world” (Thompson 2017, 2), *super-learning* does not limit the conceptualization of these relations to a given philosophical tradition and genealogy (deemed as ‘critical’) and seeks to provide a more adequate vocabulary and ways of attending to and being in relation to the temporality of others as well as the atemporality of Idea. It does so by defamiliarizing the ways of ‘knowing time,’ working against the dominant ways in which time and temporality of crises are understood,

measured, or approached. ‘Super’ is used here in the sense of supersession or sublation [*Aufhebung*] of an inadequate genre of knowledge with a more adequate understanding, still preserving the initial mode in the totality.

On the one hand, ‘super-learning,’ rather than simply being a process of *unlearning* of the dominant, over-determined narratives of time and crisis, is a *démarche* (fr.)—an attempt, a gesture, and a move toward: it is an analytic of approaching time, the politics, the materiality, and the experience of time, in a more extensive and less individually based manner. This includes moving beyond an understanding and practice of analysis, in its institutionally established and ideologically hierarchical sense, as a primarily lone individual attempt to ‘unpack’ and ‘explain’ the world to others. Put differently, super-learning, if it is to provide such more adequate vocabulary and mode of relationality, entails a practice of awakening defamiliarization; a refusal of tired narrative and visual tropes of certain places as at once ‘stuck in (backward) time’ and irredeemably living (fast forward) in the ‘end times.’ Such tropes serve as both a cause and effect, as well as proof, of a crisis situation and of crisis becoming permanent (cf. Wainaina 2005; Herz 2010).

On the other hand, super-learning as an analytic, as well as a possible nexus of theory and practice, is not concerned with ‘value judgments’ of knowledge (‘good’ vs. ‘bad’ knowledge) or dismissing individual knowledge and experience of time (e.g., as suffering). Rather, it is anchored in this key differentiation between adequate and inadequate knowledge (i.e., ‘we understand that, but we can say this is inadequate’) for our understanding of time and crisis and the present of pathos. As such, “super-learning” is committed to the dual sense of possibility and duty of understanding, otherwise than through normative narratives of times of crisis. Super-learning is thus rooted in the temporality and situatedness of a given situation (e.g., recovery processes following the 2010 Haiti earthquake) and is oriented toward the atemporality of an Idea (such as justice as universal equality). In a practical translation of this dual anchoring, super-learning might turn to emerging forms of scholarly engagement—including, among others, artistic research, co-creation and/or science-activism—which seek to challenge received, unitary narratives of crisis wherein crisis (of education; of politics; of environment, etc.) is seen, in a binary mode, as ‘a permanent state’ or ‘opportunity.’ In such a predetermined reading of an object, of crisis, there is one response: to re-cast the given situation within a neoliberal mold. Within such mold a disaster

becomes an opportunity to ‘build back better,’ which, in real terms, means a reinforcement of racialized disaster capitalism, “foundationally a form of racio-colonial capitalism” (Bonilla 2020, 2).

In this context, super-learning takes up the task of trying to “think otherwise” (Stoler 2016, 9), *penser autrement*, as Ann Laura Stoler following Foucault sets out to do in relation to imperial histories, challenging, in the process, some of the “ready-made concepts on which we rely and [the] work we call on them to do” (Stoler 2016, 8). As such, “super-learning” as a mode of critique is equally interested, in Veena Das’ words, “in the way concepts become or are vulnerable to experience” (Das 2020, 8). It aims to work across meanings and experiences of duress (Stoler 2016, 7)—as “a relation to a condition, a pressure exerted, a troubled condition borne in the body, a force exercised on muscles and mind” (Stoler 2016, 7)—and conceptualize what critique can *be* and *do* across shared, yet asynchronous, crises.

Part of this endeavor includes a necessary reflection on voice, visibility, and positionality—who is adopting a crisis-narrative? Who is doing the talking about a crisis situation?—and the stakes in the different categories mobilized to provide structure and impose meaning on a crisis. Even productive analytical categories, such as vulnerability, can prove to be inadequate or insufficient if they are used as a mode of critical foreclosure, deeming, for example, places such as Haiti as inherently and permanently vulnerable, robbed of humanity and agency. Nadège Clitandre reminds us how, in the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake, “the media maintained its focus on the narrative of Haiti as impoverished country through images of naked and wounded black bodies” (Clitandre 2011, 146). In such an *inadequate* mode, vulnerability becomes normative and forecloses both the understanding of its necessary adherence to universal or general laws and the *singularity* of its necessary causes. So, rather than enabling an understanding of the disaster within the dynamic of exploitative accumulation, co-dependence of race and capitalism, and sustained disempowerment, vulnerability as a predetermined narrative of crisis-scapes, a mode of silencing, can also function as a form of “Western [d]iscourse,” classifying certain regions “no less than the previous concepts of tropicality or development ... as more dangerous than others” (Bankoff 2003, 18, 22). In stark contrast, super-learning challenges such analytical foreclosure, enables us to see the causes of events and processes, and, by encompassing the more adequate forms of knowledge, allows us to ask: “what do crises reveal”?

TIME IS KNOTTED

Jeff Diamanti

Crises both happen in time and unfold through space and it is in the unfolding of their consequences that the different temporalities exposed by crisis converge on the body. We might think of the relationship between the event and the rupture it opens up as a clearing of temporalities—a concept of crisis as clean slate—but this would take the event out of the historical conditions that configured those drawn into it in particular ways, and the hinged temporalities exposed to its unfolding in space. Financial crises take and make precedent; an earthquake shakes the given, but it does not dispense with it. The opposite is true. The event exposes the given to the contingency of its chronotope. An event temporarily puts pressure on the structures that hold multiple temporalities together in the first place. Infrastructures crumble, revenue flows dry up, communities seek out a new sense of ground, and it is in the shakiness of that ground that critique eventuates in a praxis of alternative temporalities. The critique of pathos through the labor of collective forms of knowledge production both disentangles the nested temporalities that shake amidst crisis, and seeks out adequate ones blocked or suffocated by those structures responsible for the crisis in the first place.

A sense of panic strikes when we are confronted with the lapse between the temporality of theorization and the temporality of the crisis-associated event. The intrinsic immediacy of the latter at a glimpse disqualifies the former that requires a significantly longer period of academic effort. The matter is further complicated by the event named by some as ‘climate change’ with its weird temporality that throws the very ontology of time into question. The event manifests itself simultaneously as the ‘doom’ that lies far in the unnameable future, as a series of local, disastrous events that could erupt one after another at any time, and as a slow violence that pervades each and every ongoing second. At the time of understanding an event, these ongoing events are readily following suit, producing consequently a snowballing of panic.

Yet regardless of the panic, regardless of the chaotic temporalities in which we are situated, the need to understand these events in the light of the *Idea* remains crucial. Super-learning is apt to make critique that traverses the three modes of knowledge, the very working of which associates events—regardless of their respective temporalities, be them linear or

nested, layered or seemingly dislodged, privileged or blocked—in critical relations with each other that defy simplified assumptions of ‘how does time(s) look like’ or ‘how does a crisis feel like.’ In other words, super-learning moves away from the panic that ensues from the confusion over time’s ontology to ‘play’ on the ground of that confusion, teasing out and retrieving *temporalities* from (confused) *time*.

Importantly, neither the time of crisis nor the knowledge of singularity solicited by it bypasses embodied knowledge because the *long durée*, slow violence, workday, and ecological entanglement materialize on and through the body. This means that critical knowledge needs out of necessity to emerge from lived experience. So while a critical disposition attends to the concepts and ideas that promise impossible demands—universal inclusion, equity, or even equality—this does not mean that super-learning relegates the body to the realm of stupid first impressions. The body focalizes multiple temporalities as a singular experience, at the same time that it grounds a form of knowledge that relates the body to supra-individual structures and processes.

Super-learning thus situates the historical, material, and social constitution of the body at the same time that it names the collective affordances made available by disentangling the temporalities constitutive of and exposed by crisis. Critique under duress begins with the thickness of that duress.

NOTES

1. One example of an objectifying approach reiterated after the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, which uncritically mirrors colonial and neoliberal discourses, is David Brooks’ article “The Underlying Tragedy.” In it, Brooks emphasizes inefficacy of international aid and its lack of real impact, asserting that “Haiti, like most of the world’s poorest nations, suffers from a complex web of progress-resistant cultural influences. There is the influence of the voodoo religion which spreads the message that life is capricious and planning futile. There are high levels of social mistrust. Responsibility is often not internalized. Child-rearing practices often involve neglect in the early years and harsh retribution when kids hit 9 or 10” (Brooks 2010, n.pag.).
2. Here, Pat Robertson, in his now infamous comments made soon after the earthquake, is probably referring to the Bois Caïman ceremony, often presented as a dark Vodou ritual which set off the bloody revolt. These racialized and romanticized depictions are highly inaccurate. As Jeremy D. Popkin makes clear: “The secret meeting in the woods at a site known as Bois

- Caïman, which probably took place on the night of 21 August, may have included a *vodou* ceremony, and perhaps an inspirational speech like the one attributed to Boukman. ... Probably the main purpose of the meeting, however, was to decide how to react to the danger that the whites might have discovered the slaves' plan" (Popkin 2012, 37–38).
3. The contemporary paradigm of such racist, ideological causation is undoubtedly Trump's infamous description of Haiti as a "shithole country." (Vitali et al. 2018, n.pag.). Available at: <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/white-house/trump-referred-haiti-african-countries-shithole-nations-n836946>.
 4. The 2010 Chile earthquake, which struck the country on February 27, despite having a magnitude of 8.8, and estimated depth of 22.9 km, killed only 723 people with a further 25 going missing (Duputel et al. 2012). The disparity between the scale of the loss and the ensuing devastation could not be more striking and instructive. Even though tremors 500 times more powerful shook Chile, Chile's earthquake claimed 723 lives. "True, Chile's earthquake was farther away from a major city. An earthquake of the same magnitude as Haiti's struck just outside the major city of Canterbury, New Zealand, in September 2010. No deaths were recorded" (Schuller and Morales 2012, 12).
 5. "We do have a true idea" Spinoza famously affirms a priori and without the intercession of teachers, masters, or doctrine in his "Treatise for the Emendation of the Intellect" (Spinoza 2002 [1677], 10).
 6. See the text of the recently discovered (Gaffield 2014) *1804 Declaration of Haitian Independence*. Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haitian_Declaration_of_Independence#/media/File:Deklarasyon_Endependans_Ayiti.jpg.

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