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Ethnographies of critique:
Critical judgement as cultural practice

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Introduction

This paper sketches out some preliminary thoughts about what it might mean to conceptualise critique as a textured and variegated cultural practice, and whether it is possible and desirable to study it as we do other cultural practices, ethnographically. I would like to begin by posing three questions, taking as a point of departure Nikolas Kompridis' statement that in modern capitalist societies there is nothing 'more urgent today than to resist the sense that our possibilities are contracting or that they are exhausted' (2006: 280). First, then, is this statement true, in the broadest sense of the term? Second, if this were the case, what kind of cultural practices, what kinds of knowledge, and what ways of being with others have the effect of opening futures up rather than closing them down—and should we necessarily accept the ones that critical theorists recommend as positive goods? Finally, if we can recognise these practices in theoretical or philosophical terms, should we also try to study them in more 'empirical' or interpretive ways?

The rest of this paper offers some tentative responses to each of these questions, with the conclusions as follows. First, I will argue that despite a plethora of diagnoses by some of the most eminent critical theorists of our time that we are experiencing a generalised 'crisis of hope' in modern capitalist societies, it is difficult to establish this in either empirical or grand theoretical terms (Bourdieu 1999; Habermas 1989; Kompridis 2006), or to argue that such a 'crisis' could be either evenly distributed in material terms or pervasive in cultural ones. In the first instance, the experience of 'crisis' is principally a subjective and affective one

(Kompridis 2006: 21). Secondly, however, there are also numerous examples that a certain number of regressive and repressive 'hopes' and utopian visions enjoy near-hegemonic status as global political imaginaries; I am thinking here not only of the fantasy spaces built outside of all ethical and regulatory constraints in order to enable obscene levels of consumption and exclusion (Davis and Monk 2006), but also what Pierre Bourdieu once referred to as the neoliberal 'utopia of endless exploitation' (1998). If so many of our 'cultural traditions...social practices and political institutions' are 'breaking down or challenged in such a way as to preclude going on as before' (Kompridis 2006: 1); if there is 'no such thing as normal anymore' (Kompridis 2006: 247), then how do we explain the great cultural consolidation of capitalist modernisation? How do we solve the puzzle that, contrary in fact to recent evidence of its internal contradictions, its 'processes appear inexorable [and] capture almost all the available logical space...bewitch...[and] captivate'? If there is a 'crisis of hope'—and I will argue that the phrase does have some analytical value—it must be more specifically located than this.

Fortunately, it *is* possible to locate it. There is a multitude of sites, in both public and private spheres across a number of postmodern capitalist societies, where political discourses have become saturated with a nebulous but often nearly visceral 'sense' or 'feel' of contracting possibilities, of cultural and intellectual repression, and of political and economic powerlessness; a sense that the nature and exercise of power is changing, and a disorientation about how to name it. In education, party politics, the arts, social care, environmental movements, medicine, intimate relationships and emotional labour, we can thus see both shifts in the 'forms of life' and calls for the renewal of critique, utopianism and cultural practice. I believe it is significant that within some of these spaces, we see the rise of small but tenacious movements to resist not just the 'sense' of despair in a psychological interpretation, but more importantly to re-theorise the meanings of power, of critique and of utopia and to articulate them as integral parts of new struggles against both neoliberal and neoconservative practices.

Axel Honneth has recently argued that in order for critical theory to be more than elite philosophical platitudes, it must develop in response to what he called 'pre-theoretical' desires for emancipation in society itself (2007: 64). For some, it is precisely these

indications that appear to be missing, evidenced by the absence of widespread and overt resistance to exploitation and collective depression. On the contrary, I think that the sort of 'consciousness of crisis' which characterises critical theory is indeed emerging from direct experiences of contradiction and disorientation in everyday life within neoliberal capitalist societies, and perhaps not from the most predictable speakers (Barthes 1977; Benhabib 1986; Habermas 1987; Honneth 2007; Kompridis 2006: 18). It is thus possible that lived moments of crisis or disorientation, or indeed practices of outright resistance and rebellion against domination, are often missed or misrecognised not simply because they have become less frequent *but because the time and practice of power has itself changed*. In diagnosing the contemporary crisis of hope theoretically, critical philosophers too often ignore the dialectical possibilities opened up by this materiality of human practice. The call for the expansion of critical cultural practice is happening from the ground up as well as from the top down, and resistance to the contraction of possibility—even if only *as* unarticulated resistance at times—has kept open, or pried open, new spaces in which people can, as Kompridis suggests is necessary, develop new 'vocabularies of possibility' and 'awaken new social types and new normative expectations' (Kompridis 2006: 137). Having said this, we must remain conscious of the productive tension between these noises— admittedly, often audible only from the political margins of any of these fields, and not en masse—and the more general theories of the 'exhaustion of utopian energies' in society (Habermas 1989; Kompridis 2006: 129). The starting position is this: that while it is difficult to argue that the contraction of existential possibility is the *most* urgent social problem that any particular person faces today, I think it is fair to argue that in certain contexts it is a pressing, perhaps even foundational one, which calls for interdisciplinary analysis and critical intervention.

This brings us to the second question, of what might qualify as possibility-enabling practices, or 'cultural practices of hope'. This is relatively easy to answer from within the confines of the critical tradition, as critical theorists and activists alike have already identified particular ideas and practices which are understood to expand human possibility, given the appropriate conditions. Immediate examples are Nikolas Kompridis' Heideggerian concept of 'disclosure'; the idea of bringing experiences and ideas 'to crisis' (Spivak 1988; Barthes 1977); a range of more traditional notions of critique and utopian imagination; and various

forms of 'cultural resistance' in radical political, educational and environmental movements. What this means in practice, however, remains ill-defined. Hence, a great deal of recent theoretical work has focused on which of these general *forms* of critique are most appropriate, whether critique in general requires a particular kind of normative foundation and how to establish one without being moralistically proscriptive, whether productive forms of critique actually depend on people having certain predispositions to being 'unsettled', and whether the act of evaluation and judgement on the whole offends and can co-exist with postmodern understandings of truth. There is one general point of consensus, however, and that is that critique—whatever it is—is an 'indispensible medium of historical interpretation and explanation', and that it is threatened (Kompridis 2006: 130, 8).

However, particularly given Adorno's maxim that 'it goes without saying that nothing that concerns critical theory goes without saying, let alone without thinking' (cited in Kompridis 2006: 17), we must also consider situate these claims and debates in dialogue with the *critique of critique*. Here I refer to the antithetical claims that are made, now increasingly, *in opposition to* critique, critical judgment and utopian imagination, particularly in the framework of the 'new cultural sociology' of neo-functionalist and ethnomethodological theorists such as Jeffrey Alexander and his colleagues at Yale University (Alexander and Smith 2004). As I and Nancy Hanrahan have argued elsewhere (2010),

> [w]ithin this perspective, normative approaches to culture are often interpreted as both intellectually and politically regressive. Frankfurt School critical theory has also come to play a 'traditional role in cultural studies [...] as a kind of negative or naive moment' which 'has to be overcome for cultural studies to properly exist at all' (Nealon and Irr 2002: 3; see also Kellner 2002; Szeman 2002).

Critical theorists have responded to this representation, working to defend the democratic and scientific credentials of critique and normativity, illustrating their anti-authoritarian character, offering examples of how being in and remaking the world demands the reflexive mastery of cultural practices such as normative evaluation and critical judgement. However, these responses also make clear that despite enormous faith in the transformative power of disclosure, imagination and dialogue as alternatives to enclosure, realism and hierarchy, there is little coherent analysis of how theories of critique and imagination get articulated by people in everyday life, or what work they actually do there. How are these practices

transformed when they are situated within the cultural, institutional and discursive frameworks that they aim to subvert and/or revolutionise? Do the terms refer to multiple practices which are contextual and contingent? What conditions—intellectual, institutional, political, affective and economic—make them possible in the first place, and which may it be within our power to create? Perhaps most importantly, upon which cultural resources may we rely when, according to the theoretical accounts of the 'crisis of hope', it is these very generative resources that have been damaged, depleted or transformed by the material reorganisation of social life under neoliberal capitalism? (Kompridis 2006: 76) Does focusing on the forms of critical practice which are 'known' to be connected with hope and social change obscure the quieter, but perhaps no less revolutionary, practices of freedom which are embedded in what Kompridis refers to as the 'extraordinary ordinary' activities of everyday life?[1]

I would suggest that it is precisely the more *taken-for-granted* and *less-fully-theorised* understandings of critique within critical theory, radical politics and everyday life that both require and lend themselves to reflective and robust ethnographic examination. Kompridis knows this; in fact, *Critique and Disclosure* is in certain senses the outline of a new research agenda precisely to this effect.[2] However, this position raises the serious question of whether it is sociologically plausible or responsible to imagine that we could actually *study* or *understand* the cultural practices of hope. Possibility—and even more so the conditions

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[1] His points of reference for this are Hannah Arendt's conception of 'natality' and—in what I find to be a frankly remarkable move for a critical philosopher—a parent's experience of the birth of a child. I think that we should also add Ernst Bloch's notion of the 'not-yet' to the debate, as well as the practices of judgment that make critical practice meaningful in the first place.

[2] Kompridis asks the same question in various ways. 'If we are to regenerate our confidence and hope', he writes, 'we need to understand much better than we currently do just how practices that disclose the world anew facilitate "both forms of life and more reflective forms of life"' (2006: 199). What sort of practices expand the cultural conditions of meaning and allow it to become primary? (2006: 170). 'What new or refashioned ideals, norms and practices might re-inspire confidence in the possibility, the hope for, a future different from the past?' (2006: 253) 'What accountable practice of social and cultural change, change we can attribute to our own agency, can take the place of revolution?' (2006: 279) 'Rather than steering the phenomena and practices of world disclosure into a sphere remote from everyday life, critical theorists need to conceive of everyday life and practice differently' (2006: 113). 'Articulating more persuasively, and illuminating more powerfully the goods which motivate and underwrite our critical activity, does more to generate utopian energies than does an overreaching and overburdened universalism' (2006: 27). 'What needs to be added to the defense of democratic forms of life is a richer account of the everyday practices that constitute (or are needed to constitute) them' (2006: 76). 'Must we not identify, as well as foster, the bundled set of reflective, critical, and innovative capacities through which human beings self-critically transform the social practices, cultural traditions, and political institutions which they inherit and pass on?' (2006: 30)

of possibility for possibility—is neither a 'subject' nor an 'object', and therefore it cannot be predicted, 'surveyed' or 'demarcated' (Kompridis 2006: 198). Far more than the already slippery concept of 'culture', it can't even really be pinned down. Disclosure, by its very nature of existing partly in the time and space of the *not-yet*, is not a discernable 'skill' that can be interpreted systematically (Kompridis 2006: 140), and while we may accumulate knowledge about critical practices, this will not necessarily translate into progressive understanding. And if critique is to be understood as a complex and situated cultural practice which contributes to the creation of that which does not yet exist, as well as to the exposure of that which is lacking or undesirable in existence; as a force for closing down one set of possibilities and opening others, then in order to understand how it works we need methodologies that can accommodate such political ontologies.

Kompridis recognises the difficulty of the problem he poses, for when we become interested in things such as cracks and disruptions, ontological presuppositions, the 'unsaid' and 'unheard' and 'unfelt', and the creation of genuinely new ideas and practices—none of which are empirically demonstrable or 'assimilable to conventional social science'—we must also take leave of the familiar boundaries of scientific inquiry, and quite probably of its institutional rewards of recognition (Kompridis 2006: 130). In other words, the very methodology requires a willingness to be thrown into an unpleasant crisis, for unguaranteed intellectual and political returns. Interestingly, it is the very philosophies of knowledge and science which ground this tradition of critique that provide us with the necessary tools to do this. Critical ethnography, as a way of coming to know the world which Thomas claims 'expands our horizons for choice and widens our experiential capacity to see, hear and feel' (Thomas 1993: 2), may be, along with critical philosophy, one of the few methods that can enable us to see the invisible, hear the inaudible and imagine the non-existent.

Conceptualising such a project, though, is difficult. Although Kompridis speaks prolifically about 'cultural practices' and dedicates an entire chapter of *Critique and Disclosure* to 'recovering the everyday', he gives very little guidance as to what either of these terms refer to or how they are grounded experientially. He defines critique as a way to 'renew' social life (2006: 2, 78), 'disclose' the world (2006: 199), 'facilitate forms of life' (2006: 199), 'orient action' (2006: 137), provide 'intelligibility' (2006: 74), and solve problems (2006: 111, 113)—

although in practice, some of these activities will be contradictory. Additionally, critique is defined as a reflective practice that is both semantic and normative (2006: 31, 252); affective, cognitive and ethical-existential in scope (2006: 15); able to develop 'new normative vocabularies and expectations' (2006: 137); discerning and evaluative (2006: 14, 75); a learning process (2006: 8); an activity of decentring of self (2006: 35); and a means of keeping the future unclosed (2006: 140, 254). Despite this unclarity, however, the overarching argument is relatively straightforward: we need to stop looking for the sources of social change only in moments of large-scale collective revolution or deliberate movements for political transformation, and start paying more attention to the building blocks of possibility which are embedded in the 'ordinary-extraordinary practices of everyday life' (Kompridis 2006: 78, 116); in the permanent probability of epistemological crisis which can be created by the breakdown of ordinary meaning and the denial of hope.

Critical theory and critical ethnography

In my view, this means getting ethnographic—which, depending on one's position about the relationship between ethnography and critical theory, will either be self-evident or constitute a fatal category error.[3] A friend once told me she thought it was too bad Theodor Adorno had not been a better ethnographer; that perhaps had he grounded his critical philosophy of freedom more deeply in the gritty affairs of everyday life, the balance between cultural despair and political hope in his work might have tipped slightly further in the direction of the latter.[4] Having some understanding of Adorno's work, and a great deal of respect for his refusal to be optimistic in unwarranted situations, I don't necessarily agree. But I do believe that the future of critical theory will depend on our ability to rehabilitate, both methodologically and politically, the passion for researching everyday life which underlay the rich materiality of Walter Benjamin's *Arcades* (1999), Ernst Bloch's *Principle of Hope* (1959/1995), Henri Lefebvre's *Critique of Everyday Life* (1958/1991), and more recently Jeffrey Goldfarb's *Politics of Small Things* (2006). The last once even argued

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[3] See also Willis and Trondman (2002).

[4] I am grateful to Dr Heidi Seetzen for this thought, shared almost in passing over lunch in the spring of 2008 in a Kingston cafe. Neither she nor I knew then that it would linger in the back of my mind and attach itself to the various other fleeing ideas which together constitute the framework for this essay.

that a truly authentic Marxist theory would take the form of a 'critical knowledge of everyday life' (Trebitsh 2008: xv), and that 'everyday life is the supreme court where wisdom, knowledge and power are brought to judgment' (Lefebvre 2008: 6).[5] For if it is true, as Kompridis has argued, that everyday life is 'where crisis is most deeply felt, and where the responses necessary for its solutions are most endangered' (2006: 167), and therefore that 'rather than steering the phenomena and practices of world disclosure into a sphere remote from everyday life, critical theorists need to conceive of everyday life and practice differently' (Kompridis 2006: 113), critical theorists may have no other choice.

There is already solid ground for building a more ethnographic critical theory, or forms of critical ethnography which combine the actual *content* of critical philosophy (rather than simply its principles or intentions) to ethnographic analysis of cultural practice. Kompridis has argued that 'what needs to be added to the defense of democratic forms of life is a richer account of the everyday practices that constitute (or are needed to constitute) them' (2006: 76), and that we must identify and foster 'the bundled set of reflective, critical, and innovative capacities through which human beings self-critically transform the social practices, cultural traditions, and political institutions which they inherit and pass on' (2006: 30). Indeed, it is the lack of this more detailed understanding of how critique works as a cultural practice which most disables critical theorists from articulating its importance in a convincing way, particularly in the face of detailed ethnographic (and at times even ethnomethodological) accounts produced by cultural sociologists which seem to illustrate its damaging effects.

One of the reasons we have not been able to adequately respond to the critique of critique is that the theorisation of critical practice still happens most often in spaces isolated from practice itself. I do not mean that social theory is not a social practice or that critical theorists are uniquely detached. Some are, some aren't. I rather mean that social practice is not sufficiently theoretical; that we must be producing critical theories not only *about* cultural practice but *through* cultural practice; that the critical ethnography of cultural

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[5] However, to take up this line of thought would not necessitate returning to its original meaning, where the *Alltaglichkeit* that Lukács wrote about were understood as inauthentic forms of 'mystification' (Trebitsh 2008: xvii).

power and transformation should be recognised as a *method for living in the world* rather than merely as a method for studying it. Rather than seeking out places where we think particular kinds of critical practices *should* emerge, perhaps we should rather be introducing them in places where breakdowns of intelligibility seem to be preventing their articulation, and where people are floundering to put them in place. I would argue that rather than signifying the death of criticality, experiences of confusion, apathy and even despair be the very situations in which it may be found. These are the calls for critical ethnography, which is 'grounded empirically in explicit prior evidence of a variety of debilitating social conditions that provide the departure point for research' of cultural forces (Thomas 1993: 33).

Ethnographies of critique in education

Honneth has recommended that we look for such experiences in the ranks—now growing—of people who are unemployed; of unpaid house-workers (i.e., mothers); and generally of anyone denied 'the opportunity to pursue an economically rewarding and thus socially regulated occupation' (2007: 75). In their massive study published as *The Weight of the World*, Bourdieu's team (2000) illustrated that they can exist for almost anyone working under neoliberal state welfare reforms. In line with both, I suggest that state-driven reforms in knowledge production, education and science have created one of the richest fields of evidence for critical debilitation in British society today. The general theory that the logic of neoliberal capitalism is imposing new ways of being—indeed, the very ways of being which are thought to be the *end of critical being* in critical theory—is manifested in a particularly acute way in many British universities today. It has become commonplace for academics and students alike to use the phrase 'neoliberalisation of education' to refer to a range of cultural and political practices which close down intellectual and political possibility through standardising, commercialising and 'managing' knowledge, teaching, learning and research.[6] In this sphere, it seems clear that the experience of contracting possibilities *is* real, that this is happening in extraordinarily small and ordinary increments which register only as ephemeral blips on the radar of political repression, and that this particular form of change is what gives it so much substantive political power. I say 'seems' here because

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[6] As Paul Trowler has put it, this is the 'New Higher Education' in which managerialist discourses and practices that, 'like all ideologies...it simultaneously simplifies and occludes' (2001: 187).

although the contraction of critical possibility is difficult to deny, it is hard to say that this is *new*. Adorno once remarked, for example, that his own work was made possible because he existed outside of formal institutional structures; that he was able to 'dare to think unguarded thoughts, which people are usually "cured" of by the all-powerful control mechanism, known as "the university"' (Adorno and Becker 1999: 23).

In any case, presently, the dominant interpretation of this situation in practice is that it is an imposition from without, and the priority has therefore been on registering discontent, confusion, despair and disbelief. Indeed, the more the situation is theorised without a clear vision of what is actually happening in practice, the more hopelessness seems to set in. This is where critical theory and critical ethnographies become important as *interventions* in social process, for as Thomas points out, 'viewing a given behaviour as a pathology in which the actor is *acted upon*...gives us a dramatically different focus than viewing the behaviour as a meaningful *action* upon the world in which these behaviours might symbolise resistance' (1993: 19). This emphasis on resistance—with *no assumptions* that it is always present or possible—can distinguish critical ethnography from more traditional approaches, which define cultural practices as '*ritualised* patterns of social action and discourse grounded in the labor of groups and individuals' (Kurasawa 2007: 150) or as 'deep discursive *structures* and their *institutionalisation* (Reed 2007: 12). For the critical theorist–ethnographer, the main question is not to understand the institutionalisation of social life *in actuality*, but to understand how, under certain circumstances, actuality comes to obtain a higher ontological status than possibility, and to understand how the limits of possibility are enforced and conserved through cultural practice.

The field of higher education is an obvious field for undertaking Kompridis' recommendations to develop a 'richer account of the everyday practices that constitute (or are needed to constitute) [democratic forms of life]' (2006: 76) precisely because it manifests both the main elements of what critical theorists have defined as the 'crisis of hope', and a multitude of cultural practices (both ordinary and extraordinary) to resist its causes and resolve the crisis in a new direction. For many in the profession, and particularly for critical educators, the past decade has been one of explicit discontinuity, confusion and frustration as the meaning and purpose of higher education have been rapidly redefined by

both market and state, with the encounter of the 'old' and 'new' making front-page news on a regular basis. There are a variety of examples, but an obvious one is a recent trade journal report of a statement made by a university vice-chancellor. In a meeting to discuss the future of higher education, she argued that to succeed in the new market economy, universities should 'emulate the US coffee chain Starbucks'. While this might optimistically be misinterpreted as a contribution to Pierre Bourdieu and Louic Wacquant's critique of the 'McDonaldisation of thought', of course, it was rather the obverse (1999: 45). In the same meeting, a leading member of the government's funding council for higher education asserted that universities would need to embrace 'speed, changing operating models, brand, mission and reputation'; another executive on the same body said that they would need to become less 'hermetic' and more willing to 'partner with Government and policymakers in a rich way'.[7] Indeed, Basil Bernstein once said the same thing, but upside down: that knowledge is increasingly being 'separated from inwardness, from commitments, from personal dedication, from the deep structures of the self'—and that this could have catastrophic consequences (cited in Beck 1999: 227). Resistance to this discourse therefore extends well beyond critical theorists and philosophers, as indicated by a public 'revolt' of the UK's most eminent natural scientists against what they describe as practices to destroy science itself. As one remarked, in a comment where empirical science and critical utopia seen to collide, 'you cannot command developments at the frontier'.[8] Kompridis himself has noted this in passing, and not only about British society; that 'the legitimacy and validity of the humanities and the arts are undermined...by the insidious commercialisation of the university, totally accepted by neoliberal and neoconservative regimes, themselves willing agents of market forces' (2006: 171).

What the abovementioned 'Starbucks' article does not make explicit, however, are the bedrock of practices and the rich cultural context—tacitly known, but almost nowhere articulated—which reveal the comment as one of many innumerable 'minor' assaults on

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[7] John Gill, 'The future? Wish upon a Starbucks', *Times Higher Education*, 5 March 2009, available online at: http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=405634 (accessed 15 March 2009).

[8] Zoe Corbyn, 'Scientists call for a revolt against grant rule they claim will end blue-skies research', *Times Higher Education*, 12 February 2009, available online at: http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storycode=405350 (accessed 15 March 2009).

criticality, autonomy and radical democracy. Indeed, while it is difficult to identify the actual practices that *create possibilities and the conditions for possibility*, it has been possible for people to identify the sorts of cultural practices that *constrict or deny* it in their everyday lives. Where plans for international cooperation must be justified through an institutionally approved 'risk assessment'; where proposals for research must be supported by policy-centred and economically focused 'impact statements'; where the form and content of university courses must be decided months in advance of their offering, and approved on grounds of financial efficiency and market popularity by a board of educational managers; where lecturers must provide detailed documentation their planning and presentation and of students' participation and evaluation, written in a proscribed language of liberal-conservative 'learning and teaching';[9] where students are required to meet 'learning outcomes' that are predefined not only by teachers but by vast machineries of 'benchmarking'; where researchers are required to set and achieve 'performance targets' for their work, and can be individually disciplined for failing to do so; where critical debate about issues of common concern to members of the institution is not only frowned upon as disruptive and difficult but repressed through the creation of layers of hierarchical bureaucracy which cannot logistically communicate with one another and by the progressive erosion of space and time for informal dialogue; where spontaneity in teaching or administration is punished as insubordination or incompetence—in such institutional conditions, the forces mitigating against critique and utopian practice can seem indomitable (Canaan and Amsler 2009; Trowler 2001). If it is true that a critical orientation in the world 'places possibility ontologically higher than actuality' (Heidegger in Kompridis 2006: 15), and if the 'new arouses fear and anxiety because it is not something whose effects we can predict and control', it is clear to see why this orientation is maligned in neoliberal institutions. 'What cannot be tolerated' in such conditions, argues Allen, 'are the unknowables' (1998). As a result, critique—and hope, if they are indeed connected—is suffocating in the very spaces where it might be expected to flourish most.

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[9] Matthew Allen (1998) has pointed out that 'the discourse of teaching and learning is of course not the same thing as the actual practices, experiences and so on of being a student or teacher at a university. These activities go on within the discourse, even in opposition to it.'

Kompridis offers only a few short lines, buried in the midst of other text, to explain the relationship between critique and hope. First, he argues that critical theory must be 'called'. In other words, there must first be a reason for critical theory to be needed in the first place, which in most cases would be a breakdown or collapse of meaning-making in everyday life. Further to this, the breakdown of meaning would have to be experienced by someone who is *not* invested in the dominant sources of meaning and recognition; who lives or has the emotional fortitude and social support to live 'in contradiction to one's time' or even in contradiction with one's own self (Kompridis 2006: 5, 267). Her response to the 'calling' would be to create discourses and practices which would 'facilitate the enlargement of meaning and possibility', which in turn leads to the availability of confidence and hope (Kompridis 2006: 136). The ability to do this freely, then, enables the 'injection of new beginnings in public', and this is what makes freedom and possibility possible (Kompridis 2006: 136).

This theory of the relationship between critique, hope and social transformation seems to include everything, from the cognitive to the affective, the philosophical to the practical. What is missing, however, is a sense that the affective and moral foundations of critique— the personal fortitude required to overcome the messiness, awkwardness, alienation, exclusion, and mockery that can come from being in an 'adversarial relation' to one's own self, time, colleagues and profession—is itself forged or broken through cultural practice. What seems to be understated is attention to the argument that our relationship to the will to critique and to responsibility is itself contingent. Classed. Gendered. Raced. Within critical philosophy, 'crisis thinkers' are represented as *types of people*, and frankly, these types often look very much like white, male, bourgeois, dissident philosophers, for whom it is possible to live in contradiction to everything and everyone else and to make one's own suffering into a sustaining virtue. Adorno, for example, has suggested elsewhere that the characteristics of intellectual and moral 'maturity' are in fact rooted in the 'ego-bonding, as it is developed in the model of the middle-class individual' (1999: 29). This is changing. But the question is, if critical hope depends not just on procedural practices but also on personal and emotional ones, how are *these* made possible in everyday life? I would argue that ethnographies of critique—critical, feminist, queer—can help us to understand what it means to accept responsibility for being in an 'almost unbearable' position of outsider

13

within, from the perspective of the extraordinary ordinary. They can help make visible the 'semantic struggle to uncover and transform the meanings unavoidably shaping one's identity and self-understanding' (Kompridis 2006: 73). And to understand the force of the dialectical relationship between pain and ecstasy that this can engender.

Take an example from a recent study of neoliberal discourse within the European academy; a woman's account of a meeting in which people had been informed that raising research funding, rather than writing, would be the only legitimate criterion for professional recognition, and where a colleague refrained from raising critical questions about the change.

> 'Her jaw was clenched tight. She would hold firm, she thought. Her shoulders were hunched as she dropped into her chair to look at her e-mail. She felt tired thinking about the energy that the resistance would take. And she was tired because she knew they would get to her through her sense of collegial responsibility – she would feel the moral pressure to bring he money in so that they could all survive.
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> The moment of silence is brief. It depletes her. Yet the thought of how much energy resistance would take makes her think it is easier to engage in the new form of work—to succumb. She rapidly finds a moral position with which to rationalize her compliance—it will be in defence of her colleagues. [...]
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> [It is the] "mundanely familiar" [which] enables intellectual workers to slide into the new ways of speaking and writing about what they do, performing themselves appropriately in a global discourse that apparently brooks no dissent. [...]
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> It is a "ruse of authority that seeks to close itself off from contest" and it the interrogation of such authority that lies "at the heart of any radical political project"' (Davies and Petersen 2005: 84).

Here, the experience of epistemological and moral crisis is not necessarily wrought at the level of political revolution, but also in the choices we make about what practices to legitimise or arrest, in word or deed. *When these choices are problematised*, critique can flourish. When they are naturalised or predetermined, it, and the space for alternative futures, is denied.

Kompridis argues that in situations where institutions constrain the emergence of new possibilities, two responses are possible: people can either reform the institutions to

accommodate new needs, or in a more critical way 'break existing forms' in an ongoing learning process (2006: 137). The extraordinary everyday lives of educators caught up in these reforms, however, suggest that the experience of crisis in this particular context is that neither of these are options, within the bounds of what might be considered recognisable cultural forms. They suggest that it is entirely possible for institutions to constrain possibilities in a third and more fundamental way by *aborting natality* itself. In other words, if the breaking of existing forms is accomplished by 'calling something into being which did not exist before', we must consider the consequences of forms of power which do not simply prevent such beginnings from influencing existing institutional forms or becoming new ones (in a Gramscian sense), but which define newness itself as deviant and dangerous, and which can make it a legitimate criterion for exclusion from everyday life itself. Totalitarian forms of power. This has implications for Kompridis' theory that anyone working against the grain of everyday foreclosure must understand the possibility that 'the validity of her critique can be established only under the altered historical and cultural conditions it normatively prefigures' (2006: 5), for this ultimately requires the existence of spaces in which even such invalid critiques can be spoken and heard. It requires, as Arendt once argued, the *possibility* to 'inject new beginnings in public' (cited in Kompridis 2006: 254).

It is thus the dislocated, fragmented and not-yet-articulated struggles against this kind of power, this repression of practices of disclosure, which I think are most urgent spaces of critical intervention. They are also the most promising locations for developing finely textured, critical understandings of the complex of economic and political processes and cultural practices that critical theorists call in more general terms the contemporary 'crisis of hope'. The framing of the questions in practice mirrors the framing of the problems in theory: 'are academics faced with a set of discursive practices that are antithetical to the kind of critique and open questioning that lie at the heart of intellectual work?' (Davies and Petersen 2005: 78). And if so, what might their practices of critique be able to teach us about critical practice in everyday life? It is even more significant that those involved in these struggles, particularly those who accept the maxim that 'teaching is a creative act, a critical act, and not a mechanical one' (Freire 2002: 81), deliberately articulate critique as a

radical practice of hope, and are attempting to develop 'new vocabularies of reasoning' that make this an organising principle of practice.

Their work thus combines critical resistance to the closing down of meaning, space and time with the institutionalisation of collective dialogue and reflection. In their own work, there is a first of all a consistent effort to resist the new *vocabularies* that aim to fix meaning, not only in a particular way, but *totally*. There is an awareness here that 'possibility is a function of vocabulary', as well as a consciousness that it must be very much more than this (Kompridis 2006: 137). As noted above, these spaces of criticality are not simply 'there' because the university is a polyvocal place of competing discourses; rather, they are *created*, often at the expense of disproportionate emotional and intellectual energies. Foucault's maxim that wherever there is power, there is resistance does not necessarily translate into *practices of resistance*. This discursive work is therefore coupled with efforts to carve out *autonomous spaces* which allow and value spontaneity in educational practice—sometimes in the classroom, but increasingly outside through informal associations and groups (Ainley and Canaan 2005). These spaces are deliberately organised in ways that prioritise *dialogue* over efficiency and cooperation over individual responsibility. They are also *temporally* reflexive, in so far as individuals must work reorder and reinterpret their everyday priorities to justify devoting additional time to reflection, dialogue and disclosure. And finally, there is an increasing attempt to produce collective accounts of individual experiences and personal practices, 'adopt critical theoretical positions which locate discourse in relation to power and resources and identify social inequalities in terms of their effects to do whatever we can to render challengeable any one way of seeing the world' (Trowler 2001: 197). There is already a movement, in other words, towards collective ethnography.

Here, however, is where critical theory is most necessary, for this is not yet an ethnography of critique where critique is understood as a means for epistemological and social transformation. The academics I speak of presently engage primarily in what Thomas calls 'existential rebellion', or the creation of meaning through resistance (1993: 48). Thomas argues that the concept describes 'forms of social existence in which the potential to act is obstructed and social actors remain powerless relative to their potential to engage and

transcend their circumstances' (1993: 50). It is only through 'acts of resistance' that they become avoid being defined by them—a term which is also used by the late Pierre Bourdieu to describe the everyday practices of refusal in language which deny the neoliberal worldview total hegemony. However, while it is comforting to believe that these practices are spaces of hope simply because they temporarily arrest processes of contraction, we cannot ignore that these acts are made *within* the political and economic conditions of their possibility. People who struggle to 'go on' when the intelligibility of their already-known alternatives breaks down or is denied possibility are *pre-utopian*. They are 'between past and future', not between present and future. Indeed, if the bulk of critical energy within everyday practice is directed towards resisting the closed-ness and contraction of possibilities within that space, then the proliferation of possibilities *outside* of it can be both chaotic and disorienting. Additionally, though it perhaps need not be spelled out, 'inequities, tensions, and oppressions that permeate mainstream society appear in "alternative" spaces as well' (Cote *et al*. 2007: 204). And, as Kompridis points out, practices to expand the cultural conditions of meaning can only be meaning*ful* when engaged cooperatively and collectively, rather than as 'heroic creations of new disclosure and new beginnings', and can only be relevant for practice when they are 'intimate' rather than 'detached' (2006: 170, 191, 274). Hence, the critical practices necessary to create the cultural conditions for the liberation of possibility are themselves deeply affected by social and material contingencies.

The ethnography of critique as a cultural practice thus begins where traditional ethnographies of cultural resistance end. The study of the practice of possibility, of hope, begins above all at the point at which possibilities have become impossible, and where individuals and collectivities nevertheless attempt to go on 'cooperatively displacing the world anew' (Kompridis 2006: 280). To quote Adorno (1999: 32), we must consider the possibility that

> 'any serious attempts to intervene in order to alter our world in any specific area immediately come up against the overwhelming force of inertia in the prevailing situation, and seem condemned to impotence. Anyone who wishes to bring about change can probably do so at all, by turning that very impotence, and their own impotence, into an active ingredient in their thinking and maybe in their actions too'.

We must therefore theorise critique and hope *as* cultural practices, rather than simply as the foundation for cultural practices, understanding the 'cultural labour' that makes them possible (e.g., Kurasawa 2007). For Lefebvre, the critique of everyday life *was* the path to revolution—a path back not to the 'empirical' but to the concrete; not forward to science, but into life (Trebitsh 2008: xx).

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