

The Problem of Critique and its Inherent Standards (of Truth). A cursory response to Markus Wrbuschek

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Markus Wrbuschek's (2009) paper overall and mainly revolves around a single problem: the problem of profound critique. The different approaches discussed by Wrbuschek are methodically close. They diverge in the central question whether critics are able or supposed to either criticize discourses from the outside or take part in the discursive battle with their critique.

I advance the position that critics themselves can only move about within discourse. If they take their own model of interpretation serious they cannot criticize discourses from without, i.e., from a position outside of discourse. A Foucauldian theory of discourse does not assume such an outside at all.

This position needs to be discussed in detail, and I propose to start off such a discussion with the Foucauldian concept of *dispositive*. A dispositive in a Foucauldian sense consists of three elements that are tightly interwoven: discourses, practices, and material objects. These three 'levels' share something that may be called knowledge¹ (or not-knowledge/ignorance):

- Discourses 'transport' knowledge,
- action is knowledge-based,
- material objects are infiltrated with knowledge that can be interpreted or reinterpreted by the analyst (Foucault 1978, Jäger 2001, Link 2007, Bührmann and Schneider 2008).

Knowledge always resides on the part of the interpreting ('knowing') persons, not *within* discourses, *within* practice, or *within* material objects. Knowledge can only be captured as discursive knowledge, i.e., as human interpretation.² As is commonly known, these interpretations vary substantially. They are, in blunt words, as pluralistic as science itself?, not to mention different regions, 'cultures,' times, genders, generations, ages, etc., or however one may call it. If this is right, and it seems right to me—but what is right?—, then there is no social or natural reality in a strict sense. Unfortunately, all we have at our disposal as analysts are interpretations of interpretations of interpretations... (I will not address the fruitless dispute about the wounded who *does* feel pain, because pain is an interpretation, too).

¹ The English word 'knowledge' stands for both, the German *Wissen* as well as *Erkenntnis*. There are specific differences in connotation between the two German expressions. Throughout this text 'knowledge' stands for *Wissen*. Where it denotes *Erkenntnis* the German expression is given in brackets.

² I slide over the problematic relation between discourse and subject on purpose.

There is no objective truth we could refer to but only cultural-historical 'truths' that are (reasonably) *valid, respectively*, and that are constantly struggled for (In this respect, Foucault does not always seem to agree with himself: After all, in some passage he writes—I cite from memory: “Those who think I am not concerned with truth are only ghosts who make it easy for themselves.” I will return to this).

Foucault has thus suggested that critique can only be practiced—mainly and maybe ultimately—on the basis of an *attitude*, i.e., on the basis of a subjective 'truth' one has to *profess to*. He coins such an attitude “virtue” (Foucault, 1997, p. 28). Subsequently, he also calls it a “form of art,” i.e., an ethical and political attitude he describes as “the art of not being governed or, better, the art of not being governed like that and at that cost.” As a general characterization he proposes “the art of not being governed like that” (Foucault, 1997, p.29).³

The critic who enters into discourse with his/her critique can invoke the violation of (more or less) consensual and rather normative postulates like the constitution, international law, or human rights, even more so if their defense comes along with their violation. Jacques Derrida has ceaselessly called attention to this point. At the same time, what should always be at stake is the critical interrogation and deconstruction of these very concepts. It is also important to reflect on their interculturality and historically contingent groundings and conditions. Such critique of course, takes place within discourse and in return exposes itself to the possibility of critique.

It is understood that evidently wrong statistics, persistent narrow-minded common places, sensationalizing news reports, claiming a lack of alternatives, legitimizing crime, war, racism, sexism, etc., need to be subject to critique (within discourse). But, as we know, this critique also bespeaks an attitude that is not shared by everyone.

Even Derrida's attempt of posing a non-deconstructable 'justice,' the only just foundation for a true (future) democracy that really deserves its name, as the standard of critique is in my view ultimately an *attitude*.

Such an attitude invokes a 'truth' one honestly and openly advances as a *parrhesiastes* in a Foucauldian sense, i.e., as a truth-teller, sometimes as a fool or an artist, e.g., as a comedian. The fool invokes his *own* truth, which he courageously advances as *the* truth, i.e., as an objectively advanced truth Foucault refers to in calling all those who think he was not concerned with truth are minds who make it all too easy for themselves (Foucault 2005a, p. 825).

Of course, Foucault said all this with laughter or at least with a wink, like Grimmelshausen's *Simplizius Simplizissimus*, the motto of this baroque novel. Reading the novel, however, one soon discovers how serious Grimmelshausen was about the matter and how soon laughter freezes in our throats.

In fact, the question is also about the meaning of interpretation: Of course, discourse analysis as an analysis of statements (*énoncés*) is not an end in itself.⁴ It is not content

³ He then refers affirmatively to Kant but also accuses him of burdening us with the knowledge (*Erkenntnis*) of knowledge (*Erkenntnis*). On governmentality see the works of Thomas Lemke.

⁴ See for the distinction between utterance (*énonciation*) and statement (*énoncé*) Foucault 1988. Statements can be understood as the atoms of discourse. Linguistics deals with utterances, i.e.,

with the cheerful positivism Foucault with laughter admitted. It also claims to be an *interpretation*. It can only do justice to this claim, however, when its results are interpreted in the light of the presumed theory,⁵ i.e., when they are judged or, in other words, *criticized*. Interpretation can be understood as an analysis (and critique) of analyses.

The standards of critique would be worth further discussion (Foucault, 2005c). Do they imply normative standards, i.e., positive or intended positive foundations of human shared existence, maybe only in the future; certain ideals of society; ethical principles as advanced by Foucault, Derrida, and earlier Walter Benjamin (Benjamin, 1972): Benjamin's principle of taking responsibility for the past, e.g., past revolutions, or Derrida's principle of a non-deconstructable justice (Derrida, 1995; 1996)? Alternatively, do such standards require a "messianicity without messianism," i.e., a messianicity without religion, the arrival of which we can and must only await (Derrida 1999, p. 250)?⁶

I can only interpret Foucault's claim and maintaining of being concerned with *the* truth as a struggle for a truth that could be understood as an ethical virtue. This virtue cannot be conceived of as a law to be carved in stone but as an illimitable aim.

These terse reflections activated in me—again—by Markus' text do not claim to have taken up and discussed all problems tapped by him. I want to address a few, though:

Ruth Wodak's and the Duisburg approach are in my view very close. Differences are only manifest in diverging notions of discourse. The political aims of both approaches are identical.

Hakan Gürses' philosophical reflections, as summed up by Markus, are very interesting to my mind and can fertilize the discussion about possibilities of critique.

The phrasing "relative relativity," quoted from an interview Rainer Diaz-Bone has conducted with me is admittedly rather 'blunt.' In my view, however, it is justly directed against the accusations of relativism sometimes still brought up against Foucaultian theory of discourse.⁷

performances. It can also provide important instruments (for the Foucauldian 'toolbox') in order to support the analysis of statements. It cannot claim to conduct discourse analyses, however, if clinging to these instruments only (Jäger, 2008).

⁵ This point is of crucial importance to me. Methods are not free floating; they presuppose the theories that generate them. The act of interpretation draws upon methodologically analysed empirical results as well as upon the presumed theory in the 'light' of which the interpretation is conducted (Jäger and Jäger, 2007).

⁶ Derrida, in opposition to Walter Benjamin's conception, claims that the messianic has no fundamental relation to what we usually understand as messianism: our memory of a specific historical experience (Jewish or Christian-Jewish), or a rather concrete figure Jesus. In Derrida's sense, the pure structure of messianicity *without* messianism excludes these two forms. Derrida does not want to vilify or destruct these two forms but maintains, however, that their universal and quasi-transcendental ground is exactly the structure of 'without messianism.'

⁷ Compare for a renunciation of this critique Zimmermann, 2008.

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