



# The endurance of critique

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## Abstract

Critique in the humanities and the social sciences has recently been under attack and even declared lifeless. Considering the report of its death to be an exaggeration but acknowledging that one should never let a good crisis go to waste, I propose a reflection on the challenges faced by the practice of critical thinking in anthropology based on my own research on AIDS in South Africa, trauma among Palestinians, and policing and punishment in France, while resituating the questions it raises in a broader history of the discipline. More specifically, I discuss two major strands, genealogical critique and critical theory, suggesting how they may be combined, and two opposed views, critical sociology and the sociology of critique, showing that ethnography can surmount their supposed irreconcilability. Affirming that critique, under its multiple forms, is inherent to the anthropological project, I contend that it is more than ever needed in times laden with worrying spectres.

## Keywords

critique, critique of critique, ethnography, genealogy, critical sociology, critical theory, history of anthropology, sociology of critique

The will to truth requires a critique.  
Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*

Critique seems to be under attack these days, and the critique of critique has become common practice among intellectuals and scientists as well as commentators and politicians. Considering current external pressures along with internal offensives to which the human sciences are subjected, and reckoning equally the disaffection towards and defections of critics within academic institutions, one could even wonder whether critique has not entered a critical situation. In other words, critique might not only be criticized but also be in crisis. It is certainly

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neither the first nor the last time that it is the case – we may designate such historical episodes as times of reaction, to paraphrase Albert Hirschman – but it is worth wondering how singular the present moment is and what particular meaning it has: why the criticism of critique, and why now?

However, as the quote apocryphally attributed to Winston Churchill goes, one should never let a good crisis go to waste. Definite contest and possible decline of critique can be seized as an opportunity for a fertile debate leading to new openings within the human sciences as well as within the public sphere. And referring to a phrase this time correctly credited to John Locke, the motive to change is always some uneasiness. Let us then use the discomfort around critique as an occasion for its reassessment. This is the spirit that animates my reflection: critique is not a fortress under siege one would have to defend but a land in fallow one needs constantly to reseed. If properly understood, answered and countered, criticisms directed at critique can clarify its function and strengthen its legitimacy. Indeed, the polysemic term ‘endurance’ of my title simultaneously means that critique repeatedly undergoes ordeals, that it bears them with patience and that it continues to exist beyond them. This state of affairs is true for the humanities and the social sciences at large, but it has certain idiosyncratic expressions in anthropology. I will examine these expressions in more detail while not losing sight of the fact that they pertain to a broader picture. It is the very status, role and form of critique that are at stake in these disputes, hence the need to ponder them thoroughly.

Analysing critique and its contemporary fate, I will first identify some of the arguments frequently opposed to it, using as a starting point an influential intervention written in the form of an obituary notice; second, try to clarify its concept and distinguish two major strands, critical theory and genealogy, suggesting that they can be combined in anthropological work; third, contrast two conflicting views, critical sociology and sociology of critique, showing how ethnography needs to go beyond this dispute. To develop these points I will mostly use my own research for the simple reason that it illustrates in a concrete manner the questions and issues I have faced while endeavouring to undertake a critical approach to the various topics on which I have worked. My general argument is that we must resist both the facile disqualification of critique as a practice passé and the hyperbolic use of critique as a mere mantra, and that anthropology in general and ethnography in particular can help us succeed in this endeavour. Against the unbearable lightness of being that paradoxically characterizes certain forms of alleged radicalism as well as certain retreats in an ivory tower, I will attempt to give some weight to critique, as I believe it does matter for the times we live in.

## **The critique of critique**

Hoping that this will not be regarded as intellectual chauvinism or national score-settling, I will begin with the discussion of a text by a French social scientist which has received a lot of attention in academia and beyond, especially in the United States where its author exerts a lasting influence: the 2004 article published by

Bruno Latour in *Critical Inquiry* and titled ‘Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?’ – a recent manifestation of this influence, which reaches far beyond his domain of the social studies of science, being a special issue of the journal *New Literary History* edited by Rita Felski (2016) and modestly titled: ‘Recomposing the Humanities – with Bruno Latour’, with contributions by philosopher Graham Harman (2016) and historian Dipesh Chakraborty (2016), among others.

What ‘if intellectuals were one war late, one critique late?’ writes Latour (2004: 226) in his seminal text, adding: ‘especially French intellectuals, especially now’. In a flourishing time of reaction, this resembles very much shooting an ambulance, as the French saying goes, or perhaps more intelligibly: kicking a man when he is down, which Latour himself humorously concedes: ‘it has been a long time since the very notion of avant-garde passed away, pushed aside by other forces, moved to the rear guard, or maybe lumped with the baggage train’. Why such a severe diagnosis? In a seeming confession, the French scholar affirms that these depressing reflections stemmed from a series of epiphanies, in particular while reading an editorial of *The New York Times* that evoked the contesting of climate change by Republican pundits and conversing in his Bourbonnais village with a neighbour inclined to conspiracy theories when it came to the destruction of the Twin Towers. Could it be, he anxiously wonders, that the challenging of a scientifically established fact in the first case and of an empirically validated event in the second be the consequence of critics having gone too far or been heard too literally? After all, did he not insistently try to instil doubt in the mind of his contemporaries? ‘I myself have spent some time in the past trying to show “the lack of scientific certainty” inherent in the construction of facts.’ (2004: 227). And more generally is it not the social scientists who have tried ‘to detect the real prejudices hidden behind the appearance of objective statements’ and affirmed that ‘there is no such thing as natural, unmediated, unbiased access to truth’?

Going further, and moving beyond the field of the social studies of science, can we not see that, between the discourses of denialists or conspiracists and the theories of Foucault or Bourdieu, there is ‘something troublingly similar in the structure of the explanation, in the first movement of disbelief and, then, in the wheeling of causal explanations coming out of the deep dark below’ (2004: 229)? In fact, according to Latour, not only have Foucault’s archaeological method and Bourdieu’s concept of doxa inserted doubts in the minds of suggestible laypeople, but also the way of thinking of these suspicious bogeymen has a family resemblance, in Wittgenstein’s terms, with the philosopher’s and sociologist’s intellectual enterprise: they share the same sceptical perspective on the world. Those who reject scientific truths and imagine political plots use ‘our weapons’ on which ‘it is easy to recognize, still burnt in the steel, our trademark: *Made in Criticalland*’ (2004: 230). How can we react to the announced intellectual disaster, as critique has been absorbed, appropriated and recycled by those who, disingenuously or not, use it to serve their cause, be it denialism or capitalism? How can we cure the ailment of critique? Undoubtedly, before considering a treatment, we have to make a diagnosis. The causes of the problem are clear: what critique suffers from is the belief in the

existence of entities such as structure, power and, ultimately, society. 'It is probably the whole notion of social and society that is responsible for the weakening of critique.' This is the unfortunate legacy of Durkheim's sociology. So, what should we do? As 'the lights of Enlightenment have been slowly turned off, and some sort of darkness appears to have fallen on campuses', Latour proposes one radical remedy to avoid further defeats of reason: a 'stubbornly realist attitude' focusing on 'matters of concerns, not matters of fact'. This 'second empiricism' should be 'the next task for the critically minded' (2004: 231–2). Ironic twist: the author of *We Have Never Been Modern* is now insisting that we eventually become modern.

It is certainly remarkable that a social scientist – and moreover a social student of science – would hold accountable his entire profession for the existence of denialist mind-sets and conspiracy theories as if historians had not supplied multiple examples of such heretic beliefs as far in the past as archives can go (in any case long before the social sciences were invented) and as if anthropologists had not provided ample evidence of not so different worldviews sometimes interpreted as witchcraft or sorcery in various remote societies (undoubtedly before the natives could read their work). Should we blame Ockham's nominalism for the blossoming of medieval heresies or Kant's praise of emancipation from intellectual authority for the dissemination of plot-related rumours during the 1830 cholera epidemic? Is it not too hastily putting the guilt on and simultaneously giving credit to social scientists for the treacherous influence of their knowledge? Is it not complacently granting them too much indignity as well as too much honour? One could assuredly find more rigorous engagement with the variety of reasons behind denialist attitudes in Stanley Cohen's *States of Denial* (2001) and Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway's *Merchants of Doubt* (2010), and one can definitely read richer discussions about the complexity of conspiracy theories in the series of case studies collected in George Marcus's *Paranoia within Reason* (1999) and Harry West and Todd Sanders's *Transparency and Conspiracy* (2003). But even if we were to accept Latour's confidence in the impact of social sciences on people, in other words, even if it were the case that social scientists had such an influence on people's worldviews, should they infer from an alleged misunderstanding or a dishonest appropriation of their work the necessity to relinquish their critical position? Have prejudices and interests disappeared, or has their study become less relevant, because some would precisely hide economic and political interests behind their denial of climate change while others would revealingly express prejudices about global power relations through their conspiracy theories regarding terrorist attacks? Should we throw the baby of critique out with the bathwater of denialist and conspiratorial ideas?

In contrast with this disavowal, one can think of how another scholar who has also written about the fate of the intellectuals but apparently in a more positive way, Edward Said, responds, in the 1995 'Afterword' of *Orientalism*, to critics who accuse him of representing 'the entire West as an enemy of the Arab and Islamic or for that matter the Iranian, Chinese, Indian and many other non European peoples who suffered Western colonialism and prejudice', and contend that 'to criticize Orientalism is in effect to be a supporter of Islamism or Muslim fundamentalism'

(Said, 1995: 331). Instead of accepting that his critical reading of Western prejudices regarding the Middle Eastern and Asian world could fuel animosity between peoples and even nourish religious extremism, and rather than renouncing his decisive critique of Orientalism, Said maintains and even expands his analysis. He insists that all societies develop the 'same interpretive process which involves the identities of different "others", whether they be outsiders and refugees, or apostates and infidels', and that his book 'can only be read as a defence of Islam by suppressing half of the argument', according to which 'even the primitive community we belong to natively is not immune from the interpretive contest, and what appears in the West to be an emergence, return to, or resurgence of Islam is in fact a struggle in Islamic societies over the definition of Islam' (Said, 1995: 332–3). Two decades later, as distorted representations of Muslims and Islamic societies have overwhelmed the public sphere in Western countries, this analysis could not be more pertinent. Thus, contrary to his French colleague, the Palestinian scholar did not disown his critique because he considered it to be misunderstood or misappropriated. He explicated it again and reaffirmed it. Critique needs openness, but it also requires consistency.

Denialist attitudes and conspiracy theories have certainly been my lot during the six years I worked on the South African AIDS crisis (Fassin, 2007). In this country most severely struck by the epidemic, with chilling statistics indicating in the early 2000s that one adult out of four was infected, amounting to almost five million persons, and that life expectancy might decrease by 20 years in the following decade, mostly among the black population, the president and part of his government, including two successive health ministers, contested the reality of the epidemic, its aetiology and its treatment. More accurately, they disputed both the fact that a virus could explain the expansion of the disease, privileging instead the causal role of poverty, and the fact that antiretroviral drugs could improve patients, rather than produce deadly side-effects. Furthermore, they alternatively attributed to the pharmaceutical industry, the white elite and the Western world the malicious intention to ignore the actual cause of the epidemic and its links with apartheid, to stigmatize black people by blaming their sexual behaviour rather than their social condition, and to use them as guinea pigs to test drugs whose efficacy and innocuousness were not established, often using the most perplexing and embarrassing pseudo-scientific language. In brief, denial and conspiracy at their highest. But these representations were not limited to allegedly disturbed or cynical politicians: polls repeatedly showed that they were shared by a majority of the black population in the country; this was also what I observed in the townships where I was doing fieldwork as well as in the academic meetings which I attended.

So, what should be the role of the anthropologist confronted with such a situation? Would he have to choose between constructivism and realism? Can he examine comprehensively the way in which the disease has been constructed by both orthodox and heterodox approaches, or must he proclaim forcefully that the virus is real, the drugs effective, the social aetiology a chimera, the historical legacy a mirage? This is not an illusory alternative. In the first years of the research, I realized that each time I presented my analysis of the South African AIDS

crisis I was suspected or overtly accused of being a cryptic denialist or conspiracist, as if to interpret was to justify – a common argument among the critics of critique. This incomprehension then led me to systematically start my lectures with a cautionary statement asserting my belief in the existence and significance of HIV, just as one declares to have no conflict of interest when publishing a scientific article, a remarkable novelty for me since even when I was studying witchcraft in Senegal I would never have to say whether I believed or not in supernatural forces. After having articulated this scientific profession of faith, I could at last begin developing my analysis with a slight chance of being heard. But as I was trying to make sense of the medical as well as social crisis, I did not have to decide whether AIDS was a construction or a reality, whether it should be understood as a matter of fact or a matter of concern. It was intricately both – a real construction and a constructed reality. Exerting a critical thinking was precisely relating the two, without having to fall into the nihilist constructivism mocked by Ian Hacking (1999) in *The Social Construction of What?* or the naïve realism debunked long before by Ludwik Fleck (1979) in *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact*.

To do so, I had to take seriously both the official version and the dissenting position about the epidemic so as to understand what they meant, implied and revealed. For the controversy was not just scientific: it was political and ethical, and it had historical and sociological ramifications. Even more than the black box that the social studies of science rightly explore, the dark matter in which it is embedded, or perhaps more properly which surrounds and underlies it, appears to be, albeit much less investigated, of major relevance. In the case of AIDS, the official theory had established a biological link between the virus and the infection and a behavioural connection between individual risk and potential contamination, but it did not account for the rapid expansion of the disease and the socioracial differentiation of its distribution within the population except in the implicit or too often explicit blaming of the victims. Indeed, the exclusive emphasis on the biological cause and the individual behaviour eclipsed the structural dimension of the epidemic and did not explain the dramatic overrepresentation of black poor from the townships among the persons affected, while the insistent focus on behaviour ignored the frequent lack of correlation between sexual activity and infectious contamination and encouraged the trivialization of racist discourses about sexual promiscuity and racialized representations of Africans as rapists. Leaving out the social conditions underlying the transmission of the virus and the actualization of the risk, the orthodox view disregarded the political economy of the disease, as has so often been the case with medical theories. Yet the extremely high prevalence rates observed in mining areas were related to the organization of this industry characterized by the concentration of half a million male workers living in single-sex barracks and the installation on site of bars and so-called hot spots attracting impoverished young women from the countryside. Similarly, the pauperization of rural regions and the high unemployment in urban areas left many females who had migrated to the city little alternative to what was known as survival sex. In both these cases, one could think of a socially organized production of the

epidemic. The shortcomings of the orthodox theory, which ignored such social logics, facilitated the reception of heterodox theses that viewed biological and behavioural explanations as deceptive screens eluding deeper causes, and focused instead on poverty at the risk of jeopardizing curative and preventive interventions. Moreover, the reasons for the success of dissident interpretations in the African community were to be found in the distrust accumulated over a century toward public health, which had repeatedly served as an instrument to stigmatize its members and a justification for segregating them, starting with the plague epidemic, which at the beginning of the 20th century served as a justification for the creation of so-called native locations to segregate Africans. These issues surfaced in my conversations with black intellectuals as well as township dwellers who were steadily evoking secret schemes to eliminate the surplus poor population.

Political economy and medical history thus provided clues to apprehend the AIDS controversy. The allegedly irrational beliefs, so often ridiculed, could be interpreted. In doing so, the anthropologist was definitely not contesting the scientific truth of the biologists and the physicians (virus and behaviours, antiretroviral drugs and educational campaigns), even if it illuminated its blind spots (neglect of the social, ignorance of disparities), but it was giving existence to another sort of truth, not scientific but political and ethical, that of the black population and its historical experience of inequality and violence. Denial and conspiracy were not out of intellectual reach: understanding them could even prove helpful for action. Indeed, making sense of what seems peculiar and providing intelligibility to what appears to be incomprehensible – ‘looking into dragons, not domesticating or abominating them’, as Clifford Geertz (1984: 275) puts it – is one of the most thrilling tasks anthropologists can accomplish, especially in our time of Manichean interpretations of the world.

In discussing at some length this influential and provocative article, I have tried to unravel certain rhetorical features that are frequently found in the criticism of critique: the irreconcilable opposition between reality and its representation; the rejection of the social construction of facts and the nostalgic return to positivism; the overarching tirades against heterogeneous and sometimes contradictory social theories; the elusion or even dismissal of history and politics in accounting for states of the world; the insinuation that critical thinking might dangerously infiltrate society; sometimes, the *mea culpa* typical of converts who reject their former faith; finally, the claim that the criticism of critique is actually the ultimate form of critical thinking. In the present article, all these features are associated, but two other elements should be added. First, critique is never clearly defined, and confusing Foucault, Bourdieu, and Latour himself among others, when these authors are so different from and often opposed to each other, does not contribute to clarify the target of the criticism of critique, especially when one does not know ultimately whether critique is dead, bygone, outdated, or misguided, and consequently whether it should be definitively abandoned for an entirely new project, resuscitated, rejuvenated or fixed. Second, critique is deemed problematic not only for what it says but also for what it does, and more specifically for its dangerous

involuntary side-effects, as it has been hijacked by ideological enemies and political adversaries, thus ending up being used as a weapon against itself.

An interesting counterpoint to this criticism of critique is offered by Jacques Rancière (2009), who has been for several decades a critic of both modern and postmodern thinking in art and aesthetics as well as philosophy and politics. Reflecting on the 'misadventures of critical thought', he discusses the impasse of contemporary social critique as it has shifted from the exposure of 'the dark, solid reality concealed behind the brilliance of appearances' to the rejection of the very idea of 'any reality to counter-pose to the reign of appearances', with thinkers like Guy Debord or more recently Peter Sloterdijk explaining that there is no more difference between life and spectacle, between truth and falsehood (Rancière, 2009: 28). As a consequence, emancipation is not possible any more: there is no hope that critique will uncover something that was concealed since nothing is concealed. In this new intellectual landscape, which is definitely French-centred, 'left-wing melancholy' of those who affirm, with Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, that critique is permanently disarmed by neoliberalism and absorbed by capitalism, and the 'right-wing frenzy' of those, such as Alain Finkielkraut and Jean-Claude Milner, who assert that critique has turned into a deleterious exaltation of individualism, are 'two sides of the same coin'. Both have reversed the neo-Marxist paradigm, which consisted in the unveiling of the relationships of exploitation and domination. 'Left-wing melancholy invites us to recognize that there is no alternative to the power of the beast and to admit that we are satisfied with it. Right-wing frenzy warns us that the more we try to break the power of the beast, the more we contribute to its triumph' (Rancière, 2009: 40). The cycle is thus complete: Forty years ago, critical science made us laugh at the imbeciles who took images for realities and let themselves be seduced by their hidden messages. In the interim, the 'imbeciles' have been educated in the art of recognizing the reality behind appearances and the messages concealed in images. And now, naturally enough, recycled critical science makes us smile at the imbeciles who still think that such things as concealed messages in images and a reality distinct from appearances exist. (Rancière, 2009: 48) But what comes next is not clear yet.

A well-oiled exercise, the criticism of critique is, however, not limited to the humanities. It takes diverse forms and adopts different styles depending on the social domain where it deploys its artillery. Among economists, political scientists, quantitative sociologists or cognitive scientists, critique is less attacked than it is marginalized or sometimes repudiated. Contemporary positivism, which relies heavily on quantitative techniques or experimental models borrowed from the natural sciences and aims at establishing laws or at least evidence-based facts, leaves little space to epistemological and even less social critique within these fields. But its undisputed success in scientific institutions, the public sphere and the political realm does not leave much space either to such critique outside these fields. Thus, according to one of its leading experts, Gary King (2014), the rise of big data inaugurates 'a dramatic transformation' in the social sciences: from studying problems to solving them; from making do with a small number of sparse data sets to analysing



increasing quantities of diverse, highly informative data; from isolated scholars toiling away on their own to larger scale, collaborative, interdisciplinary, lab-style research teams; and from a purely academic pursuit focused inward to having a major impact on public policy, commerce and industry, other academic fields, and some of the major problems that affect individuals and societies.

This perspective eclipses critique rather than denounces it. As reminded by George Steinmetz (2005), this is not the first time social scientists have celebrated the glory of positivism, and as has been the case earlier, there exist signs of rebellion against its hegemony with, for instance, the ‘perestroika’ movement in political science in the United States or the mobilization in favour of a ‘post-autistic’ economics in France.

Among politicians, criticizing critics involves both a disqualification of the content of their arguments and a demagogic appeal to anti-intellectualism, studied long ago by Richard Hofstadter (1962), a variation of which is anti-sociologism, recently challenged by Bernard Lahire (2016). Such an attitude is readily associated with right-wing politicians as part of a populist trend that has gained momentum in recent decades. However, it does not spare their left-wing counterparts. In France, two Socialist prime ministers – Lionel Jospin in 1999, in reference to crime reduction, and Manuel Valls in 2015, after the terrorist attacks – have infamously denounced what they called ‘a culture of the excuse’ among social scientists, by which they meant social interpretations of social facts: ‘as long as we will accept sociological excuses instead of invoking individual responsibility, we will not solve these problems’, asserted the former; ‘to explain is already to be willing to excuse’, declared the latter – a rhetoric that is not without reminding us of Margaret Thatcher’s often-cited phrase: ‘There is no such thing as society’. In fact, more than the obscurantist statements they seem to be, these attacks on the social sciences are a criticism of their critical thinking, of their endeavour to comprehend instead of merely condemning, and of their effort to inscribe crime or terrorism in broader structural frameworks. They are all the more remarkable since the voices of social scientists have barely been heard on these topics in recent years as they have been essentially replaced in the public sphere by self-designated pundits.

The manifestations of the disqualification of critique are thus diverse, from refutation to ignorance, from contesting to bullying. But is there even an agreement among its critics about what critique is? In fact, for many, it seems to be more an epistemological and political annoyance than a method or a state of mind. Some explanation for this hostility may be found in the history of the word.

## Variations on critique

The word ‘critique’ is of relatively late introduction in English, at the beginning of the 18th century. It means ‘the art of criticism’, a slightly older term itself derived from critic, ‘the one who passes judgement’, all these substantives stemming from Middle French *critique* and, beyond, Greek *kritikos*, ‘able to make judgement’, from *krinein* ‘to separate, to distinguish’. As noted by Raymond

Williams in his *Keywords* (1983: 47–9), ‘criticism’ has a ‘predominant general sense of fault-finding’ as well as a ‘specialized sense, in relation to art and literature’. There is thus a dual connotation of the word: it suggests negative evaluation (normative aspect) and authoritative judgement (social dimension). One should therefore not only try to avoid the reduction of criticism to fault-finding, but also beware of the use of authority under the appearance of neutral abstractions and generalizations. The noun ‘critique’ has inherited this ambiguous meaning, although it has perhaps retained more of the second sense as suggested by the translation into English of the titles of Kant’s major works. French, Spanish and German do not have such subtle differences, since they only have one word: *critique*, *crítica* and *Kritik*, respectively. But in all of these languages, the common sense of depreciation and the social background of authority coexist. It is not, however, a mere linguistic problem: it is an actual issue for the social sciences. On the one hand, critique tends to imply a questioning of a certain state of the world that is underlain by a dissatisfaction of what it is, whether from a political or moral viewpoint or from an epistemological or theoretical viewpoint. On the other hand, critique attempts to elevate the assessment beyond a mere normative reaction, which involves a certain distancing through intellectual operations. So, how to deal with this tension?

In his 1978 lecture before the French Society of Philosophy titled ‘What Is Critique?’ Foucault (2003), rather than directly answering the question, chose to substitute the idea of ‘critical attitude’ for a strict definition of critique. And to characterize this attitude, he found his inspiration in Kant’s famous text ‘What Is Enlightenment?’ (1996), which thus begins: Enlightenment is the human being’s emergence from his self-incurred minority. Minority is inability to make use of one’s own understanding without direction from another. This minority is self-incurred when its cause lies not in lack of understanding but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another.

In other words, the critical attitude is presented as an emancipation of the subject that is ethical before being political since the liberation from oneself is a precondition for the questioning of domination – what Foucault names ‘self-government’. But is there only one way to achieve this emancipation? Is there a homogeneous mode of thinking that can be called critique? It would certainly be difficult to contend that Marx and Nietzsche, or Freud and Wittgenstein, had similar conceptions of what critique is. As a matter of fact their respective legacies have generated quite different strands in the social sciences with, for instance, the title of ‘critical anthropology’ being claimed by various authors who have a hard time recognizing each other as legitimate critics.

To account for these differences and settle the disputes, David Owen (2002: 216) undertakes to establish a fundamental distinction: There are (at least) two logically distinct forms of self-imposed, non-physical constraint on our capacity for self-government: being held captive by an ideology (i.e. false consciousness) and being held captive by a picture or perspective (i.e. what one might call ‘restricted consciousness’).

There are therefore two corresponding forms of critique. The first critique is ‘directed to freeing us from captivity to an ideology’. However distant they may seem, the Marxist and Freudian approaches share this same project, and the Frankfurt School, founded in 1923, combined the two traditions in what was coined ‘critical theory’ by Max Horkheimer and was developed most notably by Theodor Adorno. The second critique is ‘directed to freeing us from captivity to a picture or a perspective’. However remote their theories are, Nietzsche’s and Wittgenstein’s endeavour to apprehend how people see the world and make sense of it from particular perspectives, for the former, or via common pictures, for the latter, and their approaches, which imply that these perspectives are historically determined and that these pictures are culturally inherited, can be designated as ‘genealogies’. Of these approaches, and actually much more the former than the latter, Foucault is the most prominent contemporary representative.

A major difference, for Owen, between critical theory and genealogy – as well as a major source of disagreement between their respective upholders regarding what critique should do – is that critical theory considers it possible to separate what is true from what is false (ideology being precisely what deceives human beings by blurring this separation and thus allowing the reproduction of domination), while genealogy is interested in identifying what counts for true and false in a given world at a given moment (both concepts of perspective and picture not presupposing the existence of truth and falsehood but emphasizing power and language games between the two). Emancipation therefore consists, for critical theorists, in removing the ideological veil imposed on people so as to allow them to realize the deception that renders their domination possible, and for genealogists, in contesting the self-evident representations of the world they hold true while acknowledging the possibility of other representations. In the first case, the subjects are supposed to move from falsehood to truth, whereas in the second, they are expected to understand that there exist other potential arrangements between true and false. Although both approaches are analytical, critical theory is normative while genealogy tries not to be. Hence the misunderstandings between them.

The distinction between critical theory and genealogy can serve to analyse how critique works in anthropology, although I will suggest that the ethnographic approach somewhat complicates and enriches this model. The research I conducted on urban policing thus falls for the most part within the ‘critical theory’ tradition (Fassin, 2014). The 15 months of my fieldwork in the outskirts of Paris corresponded to a period when successive right-wing governments developed law-and-order policies that often resulted in violent interactions with low-income young men from North African or sub-Saharan origin. The death of two of them gave rise to the 2005 so-called riots across the country. My interest was, however, focused on the ordinariness of law enforcement rather than on these urban disorders. The study revealed the contradiction with which the police were confronted since their performance, assessed on the basis of quota of arrests, was supposed to demonstrate the efficacy of the policy while statistics showed a long-term decrease in crime. In order to attain their improbable objectives, officers had therefore to focus on immigration

law and drug law violations, and they mostly arrested undocumented persons and cannabis users deemed easy prey. The former were identified and checked on the basis of their physical appearance in train and metro stations or simply in the street. The latter were found on the occasion of arbitrary stops and frisks in housing projects, while students of the prestigious local business school who were ostensibly smoking marijuana in public spaces were ignored. Based on racial profiling, these practices were illegal and acknowledged as such by the officers and their superiors. Often associated with humiliating comments and rough treatment, they led to permanent harassment of youths mostly belonging to minorities.

In fact, while expected to enforce the law, the police were enforcing a social order. Through their unlawful and debasing rituals that were known, condoned and sometimes encouraged by their institution and the government, they inculcated these young men and by extension their families with the sense of the inferior position they occupied within society. These populations being also affected by high rates of poverty and unemployment as well as subjected to discrimination at work and segregation in housing, the repressive policy implemented via the discretionary power of the police was a way to govern inequality instead of combatting crime. In sum, the research led to uncovering – even more so because it was the first ethnography of urban policing in France at the time – mechanisms of domination operating in the name of an ideology of law and order. It contributed to a major change that occurred during that period in the representation of the interactions between the officers and the inhabitants: long denied, racial discrimination began to be acknowledged and even became the object of court cases; until then disregarded, police violence turned into an object of public debate.

A significant difference of my analysis with classical critical theory as recently defended by Steven Lukes (2011), nonetheless, is that I found little trace of false consciousness among the dominated minorities, who were well aware of these mechanisms and would occasionally tell me their frustration about the injustice they endured. Ignorance was instead to be found among the majority, which participated in the domination without necessarily being dominant. If one considers with Raymond Geuss (1981: 55) that ‘critical theories aim at emancipation and enlightenment, at making agents aware of hidden coercion’, it was paradoxically on the side of the majority that these processes occurred. Indeed, after the publication of my work, while testimonies from people belonging to minorities expressed a sentiment that Charles Taylor (1994: 25) calls ‘recognition’ (‘when we say these things, no one wants to believe us, but now people will’, they would comment), on the contrary, reactions from the majority, when they were not of pure denial and dismissal, including among French criminologists who disqualified my ethnographic findings as reflecting an exceptional rather than common situation, manifested a sort of ‘revelation’ (for instance, a judge writing to me: ‘I had always had doubts about youths accused of insulting the police and resisting arrest, now I understand’). Analysed by James Scott (1985: 39–43) in the case of the Asian peasants and rediscovered in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement, this reversal of consciousness may be a not-so-unusual twist.

By contrast, the study I carried out on trauma and the condition of victimhood pertains principally to the 'genealogy' tradition of critique (Fassin and Rechtman, 2009). In recent years, trauma has become a familiar trope that serves to account for the consequence of violent events, either collective or individual, and covers a wide spectrum of situations, from genocide to rape, from earthquakes to plane crashes. The term is used in a clinical sense, validated by psychological tests, as well as in a metaphoric sense, referring to generic suffering, always in relation to a tragic experience. The identification of traumatic situations such as war, terrorist attacks, mass shootings, train accidents or natural disasters, has recently given rise to mental health interventions as well as financial compensations. Closely linked to the status of victim, trauma is thus a legitimate category as well as a legitimizing instrument. We tend to consider it as cognitively and morally self-evident. Today, a soldier coming back from the front with psychic symptoms is entitled to be provided diagnosis, treatment and indemnity. Yet, it has not always been the case and the recognition of trauma is fairly recent. Until the 1970s, neither the scientific entity nor its moral connotation were stabilized. During the first half of the 20th century, traumatic neurosis was associated with simulation or hysteria and those affected were therefore suspected of deliberate or unconscious duplicity. The alleged cure sometimes consisted in electrotherapy actually used as deterrent or punishment. It is the mobilization of Vietnam veterans and feminist activists in search for the acknowledgment of, respectively, the after-effects of war and the impact of sexual abuse that led to the invention of PTSD, posttraumatic stress disorder, in 1980. With the cognitive consolidation came a moral inversion: the deceitful patient became an unfortunate victim.

This is what I explored ethnographically through an inquiry into the issues raised by the introduction of trauma in humanitarian intervention and in asylum seeking, as the new nosological category served as justification for psychological assistance and evidence for the persecution endured, respectively. In the first case, the invocation of trauma in Palestine became a major issue during the second Intifada, as both Palestinian and French psychiatrists used this diagnosis to account for the suffering of the population in the occupied territories under the pressure of the Israeli army and to translate to an international audience the everyday experience of youth and their families in this context. With this new language, humanitarian organizations faced two challenges, which generated heated debates within their ranks: first, the question of interpretation was raised since clinical histories often revealed that trauma had other causes than war, as evidenced in the testimonies published by Doctors without Borders; second, the principle of impartiality led some to call for a symmetrical analysis and denunciation of the trauma experienced by Israelis as the result of Palestinian attacks, which was eventually undertaken by Doctors of the World, creating profound divisions within the organization. In the second case, the introduction of psychological expertise in the assessment of asylum applications in France came at a moment of rapid decline in admission rates due to a growing mistrust of claimants. Certification by mental health professionals became increasingly required by the administration and

requested by the asylum seekers' legal counsels to attest to the persecution endured. The new situation created by what human rights activists designated as a torture bonus had two important consequences: the focus on the document contributed to discredit even more the word of the applicants; the quest for psychic evidence led to exclude those who had no such symptoms or did not want to expose them. Thus, the recognition of the suffering of victims of oppression or persecution was far from having the virtues that could have been expected or hoped.

Critique as genealogy thus relies on an intellectual work of distancing from common sense and de-familiarization from what we take for granted. In Raymond Geuss's words (2002: 212), 'to offer a genealogy is to provide a historical dissolution of self-evident identities'. Thus, using history and myths as well as biology and psychoanalysis, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (2011) dissolves gender identities by de-essentializing the hierarchical distinction between men and women. In the case of trauma, this dissolution operates on at two levels: cognitive, as the doubtful category becomes a stable entity; moral, as the suspect patient becomes a legitimate victim. Acknowledging that the trauma is thus a cognitively and morally constructed reality does not abolish the experience of suffering, nor does it diminish the value of being recognized as a victim. Once the historical dissolution is achieved, the question becomes: what does it change to have the current configuration (the event, the trauma, the victim) rather than any other possible? There are at least two possible empirical tests to answer it, as can be illustrated in situations of war and oppression. First, one can wonder what was the relation between trauma and victim before they came to be viewed as trauma and victim: we have seen that the former generated doubt and the latter aroused suspicion. Second, one can ask what was the relation between the event and the victim before they came to be viewed as event and victim: the former was called violence or persecution and the latter was described as enemy or minority. In other words, the creation of the triptych event-trauma-victim has had two major consequences: providing legitimacy to victims in general (independently of the cause, since any event can be involved) with possible medical, economic and statutory benefits; eluding the political dimension of the relation (the diagnosis by the psychiatrist eludes the experience of the Shebab and the account of the asylum seeker vanishes behind the expectation of certificates) with a significant lexical shift from resistance to resilience. Thus, critique as genealogy proceeds in two steps. The first one dissolves self-evidence to reveal what Foucault (1984: 45) describes as 'singular, contingent, and the product of arbitrary constraints' (there was no absolute necessity to the configuration event-trauma-victim). The second one goes further by reassessing the situation after this dissolution by asking what are the 'stakes' of this transformation as well as what is gained, what is lost and what is transformed in the new configuration (the legitimacy of the victims at the cost of the loss of politics). This latter step is the specific contribution of the social sciences and more particularly their empirical work, here ethnography, to the genealogical critique. It does not provide an ultimate judgement but rather a critical analysis of the complex consequences of the production of distinct truths.

The distinction between social critique and genealogical critique should not, however, be opposed too radically. Whereas the two approaches seem philosophically incompatible, since one is in search of a hidden truth when the other is interested in regimes of truth, Judith Butler (2002: 213, 221) has argued that it is possible to reduce their difference, as Adorno considers that critique must 'apprehend the ways in which categories are themselves instituted, how the field of knowledge is ordered, and how what is suppressed returns, as it were, as its own constitutive occlusion', which implies a form of genealogy, while Foucault shows that 'knowledge and power are not finally separable, but work together to establish a set of subtle and explicit criteria for thinking the world', which implies a critical theory. Based on my own experience, I would argue similarly that the two approaches can be combined, if not reconciled. Thus, in my study of the police, I traced the genealogy of the treatment of ethnic minorities, which mostly hail from former French colonies in Northern or sub-Saharan African, back to the treatment of colonial subjects, in particular in mainland France, with the creation of the North African Brigades in 1925 and of the Brigades Against Assault and Violence in 1953 to discipline and control these potentially rebellious populations: in reference to Georges Balandier's colonial situation, I analysed the tensions with law enforcement agents in the housing projects as a postcolonial situation (Fassin, 2015). Symmetrically, in my research on trauma in the context of the Second Intifada from 2000 on, I proposed a critical theory to account for the implications of the use of psychological categories as, on the one hand, such interpretation led to the qualification of Palestinians as victims, thus undermining their will to be represented as resistant rather than resilient, and, on the other hand, it contributed to the legitimization of the idea of an equivalence between the conditions of victimhood on both sides of the conflict: using Reinhart Koselleck's theoretical framework, I concluded that blurring the historical and political dimensions of the conflict amounted to a disavowal of the version of the vanquished and to the imposition of a symbolic domination (Fassin, 2012). In sum, the genealogical perspective illuminated the critical theory of policing, while the critical theory approach enriched the genealogy of trauma.

Following Owen's delineation of the two traditions of critique, we could certainly envisage narrating the history of anthropology, and more specifically that of its moments of critical engagement along these lines – although I will not engage in such an enterprise in detail. In fact, although they are hardly ever referred to as critical, Franz Boas's, Bronislaw Malinowski's and Marcel Mauss's intellectual projects proceed from a critique of categories and prejudices regarding race, crime or economic exchange, respectively, that can be read as genealogical in the sense that they reveal that there are other ways to make sense of the world than ours, with the obvious consequence that ours is only one out of many. This is more than mere relativism, whether cultural or moral. It is an effort to free ourselves from pictures and perspectives that we take for granted.

What came to be known as critical anthropology emerges, however, much later, in the 1960s, in a context of general critique of Western societies, their values, their

wars, and their imperial domination, both material and symbolic. It had been preceded by a significant displacement of the focus of the anthropological lenses in Britain, with Max Gluckman and the Manchester School. In the colonial context soon to become a context of decolonization, these scholars were shifting their gaze from traditional societies to rapidly changing ones in which identities, power, and domination were at stake. But critical anthropology took on its most typical expression in the United States, with the Marxist anthropology epitomized by the figures of Eric Wolf and Sidney Mintz, professed in Dell Hymes's manifesto (1969), and later expressed in the journal *Critique of Anthropology*. It was simultaneously a critique of the unequal world order and of anthropology, the latter being accused of accompanying and even giving scientific backing to the former, as expressed in a resolution of the Radical Caucus at the 1969 Conference of the American Anthropological Association: Anthropology since its inception has contained a dual and contradictory heritage. On the one hand it derives from a humanistic tradition of concern with people. On the other hand, anthropology is a discipline developed alongside and within the growth of the colonial and imperial powers. By what they have studied (and what they have not studied) anthropologists have assisted in, or at least acquiesced to, the goals of imperialist policy. (Hymes 1969: 51)

The more nuanced or contrasted picture presented by Talal Asad (1973), who focused on British anthropology, resulted in a similar analysis: Anthropologists can claim to have contributed to the cultural heritage of the societies they study by a sympathetic recording of indigenous forms of life that would otherwise be lost for posterity. But they also have contributed, sometimes indirectly, towards maintaining the structure of power represented by the colonial system. (Asad, 1973: 17)

The critique of imperialism had become inseparable from the critique of anthropology since both were regarded as ideologically linked. From then on, anthropologists had lost their political innocence.

The postmodern critique that emerges in the 1980s, with the pivotal publication of James Clifford and George Marcus's *Writing Culture*, is of a very different nature. The material under scrutiny is not society but texts about society. The task is 'to introduce a literary consciousness to ethnographic practice by showing various ways in which ethnographies can be read and written' (Marcus, 1986: 263), even if 'to recognize the poetic dimensions of ethnography does not require that one give up facts and accurate accounting for the supposed free play of poetry' (Clifford, 1986: 26). What is therefore at stake is no more the ideology of the discipline but the discipline as representation. The critique is political, but it is about the politics of writing. The point is not the connivance of the anthropologists with the dominant, but the fictions they generate under the name of ethnography. Critics question their relations not to imperial power but to scientific authority. They do not assume that social scientists are supposed to unveil a truth masked by ideology to protect interests but that they are doomed to produce only partial truths, in the dual sense of being incomplete and biased, whether they concern the political organization of the Nuer or the status hierarchy of the Balinese. In other words, critique is about the pictures the anthropologists produce and



the perspectives they adopt, two processes which they nevertheless rarely acknowledge and discuss. A distinct but parallel approach was developed at the same time in Jean-Loup Amselle and Elikia M'Bokolo's *Au coeur de l'ethnie* (1985). It was parallel in the sense that they analysed colonial and ethnological texts, in this case with the specific objective to deconstruct the reification of ethnicity. But it was distinct in the sense that they did not limit their analysis to the textual material and paid more attention to the history and the politics of ethnic formation.

Undoubtedly, the distinction between the critical-theory-oriented critique of the 1960s and 1970s and the genealogy-oriented critique of the 1980s and 1990s is too schematic, and there are influences and passages between the two. Yet, although the critics of the second half of the 20th century combated the multiple avatars of anthropological positivism, just like their ancestors had fought ethnocentrism and evolutionism, they did so in two different ways: some contested the anthropologists' political neutrality while others challenged their epistemological impartiality; the former denounced the unequal order of the world whereas the latter questioned the unexamined process of its description. As one can imagine, the dialogue between the two was often difficult, including over the very point of what critique means. One could, however, consider that the postcolonial critique proposed a form of synthesis of both approaches, mobilizing critical theory to interpret the global scene beyond the ideologies that obscure power relations as well as genealogy to question the taken-for-granted pictures and implicit perspectives of Western social sciences.

Is it an effect of the presentism that tends to prevail when one examines ongoing facts? My impression is that over the past two decades there has been an acceleration of the emergence of critical moments claimed to be radically new. One can think of the ethical turn, the ontological turn, the post-human turn as well as the new materialism, the multispecies theory, the Anthropocene anthropology, to name a few (emphasizing the competitive race to the new, a recent article of the online journal *Somatosphere* was titled: 'Multispecies vs. Anthropocene'). My sense is that it may not just be a presentist bias. The academic world is in need of innovation and novelties, and academics are expected to create constantly and label or patent their creations. Anthropology is no exception. In that regard, it is rightly said that grand theories have disappeared from our field as they have from others: evolutionism, functionalism, culturalism, structuralism, Marxism, and a few more. But it is less noted that the 'isms' have been replaced by 'turns', thus transforming scholars into whirling dervishes at risk of theoretical vertigo. I do not want to minimize the significance of the new approaches proposed and of the new questions raised, nor do I want to underestimate the publish-or-perish pressures in academia. Yet, the chronicle of radical turns foretold sometimes resembles the reinvention of traditions – such as the current call for a return to the good old realism. And why not? Philosophers still think with Plato, sociologists with Durkheim, and economists with Smith – or against them. The charm of the present acceleration of the intellectual revolutions, such as the current criticism of critique, is that they swiftly take their promoters back to their point of departure. If we want

to spare ourselves the dizziness of this 360-degree gyration, how should we proceed? I would like to explore a possible alternative offering more stable grounds for critique. Let us call it critical ethnography.

## The ethnographer as critique

In the preface of *The Company of Critics*, Michael Walzer (2002: xix–xx) distinguishes between those who ‘seek only the acquaintance of other critics’ and ‘find their peers only outside the cave, in the blaze of Truth’, and those ‘who find peers and even sometimes comrades inside, in the shadow of contingent and uncertain truths’. While he admits that he has more affinities with the latter, he adds: But that preference determines nothing. What is at issue is the cogency and force, the verisimilitude and nuance, of the criticism that results from these different choices. For it makes a difference where the critic stands, inside the cave or out; and it makes a difference how he relates to the cave-dwellers.

Commenting on this passage, Axel Honneth (2009: 184–5) agrees that the position makes a difference, but privileges ‘an element of outsidersness’, that of ‘an internal abroad’, in which social critics are neither ‘so alienated from their cultures of origin that they had to take a simply external perspective’ nor do they ‘have enough trust and loyalty with regard to them to be able to enjoy a simply internal critical perspective’. This corresponds typically to the social critics in exile, such as Rousseau or Marx, he adds.

Prolonging this rhetorical figure, I want to suggest that ethnographers do not have Walzer’s dramatic choice to face and may be regarded as Honneth’s social critics in exile: they stand on the threshold of the cave, alternately stepping inside and outside, belonging partially to each world but entirely to none. As fieldworkers, they are in the cave, among the people with whom and about whom they conduct their research. As writers, they are outside the cave, among their colleagues with whom and against whom they lead their reflexion. Of course, this division of labour is as metaphoric as the cave is allegoric. But the crucial point is the following: as critical ethnographers, we know what we owe to the critical sense of our interlocutors and informants as much as we know how we shape our own analysis in critical dialogue with texts and theories. We acknowledge people’s social intelligence and our own intellectual autonomy. This dialectic is to some extent specific to ethnography, and even to ethnography carried out by anthropologists (without willingness to claim a methodological exclusivity or a disciplinary homogeneity). Indeed, it is relatively specific to ethnography, because other approaches do not reach the same depth of connection with people: the archives of the historian are fragmentary and of course mostly deal with the dead, and the interviews of the sociologist often impose a design and always determine a frame. And it is relatively specific to the anthropological approach to ethnography: while other disciplines generally use it in an illustrative way, to exemplify the author’s arguments, anthropology tends to render its substance in a descriptive, narrative and even poetic mode, which gives it its distinctive thickness.

The dialectics of the threshold has therefore both epistemological and ethical implications. Epistemologically, it indicates that the production of ethnographic knowledge is neither the mere unmediated account of facts nor the pure intellectual making of theories: it is a co-production, in which, nevertheless, the author has, at least provisionally, the last word. Ethically, it recognizes the debt that the ethnographer has towards the people with whom he works while not implying that they would be transparent to themselves: it is a co-production, in which people have their say, but also their limits. By co-production, I simply mean the elaboration of both the empirical material and its theoretical interpretation as an interactive process between the ethnographer and his interlocutors. This dialectical interaction thus refutes the alternative between critical sociology and the sociology of critique that has divided French sociology during two decades with the opposition between Bourdieu and his former disciple Boltanski prolonged through their epigones. On one side, Bourdieu's critical sociology (1990), which achieves an improbable but successful synthesis of Marx and Weber, offers a general theory of domination. On the other side, Boltanski's sociology of critique (2011), which finds its inspiration in North American pragmatism, provides a general theory of justification. For the former, critique is the project; for the latter, it is the object. One speaks of habitus, dispositions and structures; the other of disagreement, ordeals and politics. At the risk of some simplification, one can say that Bourdieu considers that the role of the sociologist, outside the cave, is essentially to reveal to the dominated the mechanisms of domination obscured by the dominant, whereas Boltanski thinks that this role, inside the cave, primarily consists in establishing a grammar of the arguments invoked and logics mobilized in disputes. Even if in the last period of his life, as he joined the 1996 social movement, Bourdieu attempted to enter the ring (did he not compare sociology to a combat sport?), and even if after the death of his former mentor, Boltanski recognized the significance of social critique (after having distanced himself from it for two decades), both succeeded better in acknowledging the problem with their theory than in finding a solution to it.

Whereas the two sociologies therefore do not seem reconcilable, for the ethnographer they are. Accounting for people's social comprehension of the world that they inhabit and analysing social processes of which they only have a partial view is not only compatible but also necessary, as demonstrated in the work of authors as different as Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1992) and Veena Das (2007). The previously mentioned case studies showed how, in a more or less conscious and explicit way, people in the South African townships, minority youths in the French projects and human rights organizations working in Palestine and with refugees express their critical understanding of the situation in which they are involved with its relations of power and games of truth. What the ethnographer 'discovers' is in fact anything but a discovery for many of his interlocutors, and it is in part at their contact that he apprehends this reality and its contradictions. His task is certainly to expound the native knowledge and do it justice in his analysis. But establishing the grammar of these representations is not sufficient. It is also essential to uncover facts that

remain invisible or inexpressible. The ethnographer has therefore to confront the various discourses with each other, to relate them to the social position of the agents, to compare them with the facts observed in the field, and to interpret them in light of other sorts of knowledge – historical, sociological, and philosophical, in particular. What is at stake in the case under study serves as a point of departure. In the AIDS controversy, these stakes were the embodiment both objective and subjective of long-lasting inequalities revealing the resurfacing of the past in the present. For urban policing, they were the reproduction of a social order in the name of the fight against crime and the shift from a welfare state to a penal state in the government of the poor as disparities grew. For trauma, they were the risk of eclipsing both the history and the voice of the oppressed population in the case of the Palestinians and of contributing to the delegitimization of refugees in a context of growing xenophobia in France. In sum, the ethnographers' interpretation of the world is always a complex combination of what they owe to their interlocutors and what they add to their comprehension. Between the two, a relation of reciprocity is established, in which the ethnographers incessantly move in and out of the cave.

But while doing so, they acknowledge both the uniqueness of their approach and its limits. Ethnography is, indeed, not sufficient to fully develop a critical understanding of the world. It benefits from other approaches. The case of punishment in contemporary society can serve as an illustration. I will develop it on the basis of the ethnography of a French short-stay correctional facility, which I conducted between 2009 and 2013. During that period, the national prison demographics, which had more than tripled in 60 years and expanded by more than one half in the past decade, reached unprecedented levels, despite a decrease in serious crime and mostly as a result of more severe penal policies. Of this remarkable evolution both the personnel and the inmates are conscious and critical.

On one side, the staff are all the more indignant about it since they are directly affected by the overpopulation of correctional facilities, with the consequent overwork, deficiency of resources, tensions with and among the prisoners, and increased risk for their own security. Wardens often have the most lucid view as they meet each new inmate at his entry in prison. With the restraint of their position, they tell of their incomprehension and disapproval of the growing tendency of the justice system to mete out short prison sentences for minor offenses such as driving without a licence and to recall offenders with non-executed old prison sentences for a misdemeanour several years after the fact. According to them, such punishment is doubly counterproductive since it disrupts the life of the person incarcerated and worsens the demographic situation in prisons. Moreover, as one of these directors commented, since short-stay correctional facilities are overcrowded, expose inmates to violence, and suffer from chronic shortage of jobs, in contrast with long-stay prisons, where each prisoner has a cell and an activity, the paradox is that those deemed innocent since they are awaiting trial and those with short sentences and hence guilty of minor crime endure a much worse plight than serious criminals.

On the other side, the inmates are also vocal about both the inequality before the law and the deleterious circumstances of their stay in prison. Watching the news on television, they contrast the harshness of the penal system for their offenses, even when relatively inconsequential, and its benevolence toward economic crime, which is mostly committed by those in power. Noticing the overwhelming presence of ethnoracial minorities from disadvantaged neighbourhoods, they conclude that there is a racial and social bias in the way justice is dispensed. While they rarely contest the rightfulness of their sentence, they have a clear-sighted and disillusioned view of the functioning of the legal and judicial apparatus. But they also criticize the correctional system for what they see as its internal dysfunctioning, the indignity of the material environment, the unfairness of the disciplinary processes and, above all, the uselessness and senselessness of an institution which keeps them in a state of idleness and hopelessness, without preparation for the re-entry into society.

The ethnographer must therefore acknowledge his debt toward his interlocutors, and part of his activity consists in transcribing and arranging the invaluable knowledge he has received from them. However, he is not only a cultural broker between the world he studies and his various publics. He translates but he also interprets. Based on the dual observation of the personnel and the inmates, he has to account for both the increase in harshness and the selectivity of punishment. Studying other scenes, such as the street, where the police use their discretionary power to decide whom to stop and search, and the court, where judges determine the sentence according to subjective criteria reflecting their cultural distance from the accused, is an important complement for a broader understanding of the racial and social bias reflected in the composition of the prison population. But statistics are crucial too as they demonstrate on large populations both the differences in severity for various types of offenses, showing for instance how, in the case of financial crime, the number of convictions increases while the number of sentences decreases as a result of an expansion of negotiated agreements, which do not exist for petty crime, and the higher risk of recidivism for people incarcerated when contrasted with those with other sentences, such as suspended prison or electronic surveillance, including after controlling a series of variables. Needless to say, the opposition often presented between qualitative and quantitative techniques is of little relevance here and some degree of positivism can even support critique. Indeed, with all these elements in hand, it becomes possible to offer a broader interpretation borrowed from Michel Foucault (1977: 272), for whom the role of punishment is not to reduce crime as consequentialists would have it, since on the contrary in its present form it tends to increase it, and not even to correct a wrong as retributivists would assert, since actually not all offenders are penalized, but to differentiate crime so as to discriminate among criminals – in other words, to circumscribe condemnable crime in order to distinguish punishable people. This interpretation is grounded in the various forms of expertise brought by guards and wardens as well as inmates: it incorporates but also exceeds them.

Returning to the allegory of the cave, it seems clear that ethnography can surmount what seemed to be the irreconcilability of critical sociology and the sociology of critique. Not that it would propose a definitive truth but that it challenges the simplification of the irremediable dualism between the inside and the outside of the cave. Ethnographers are modest travellers on its edge. Inside, they meet a great variety of persons: in the present case, these are inmates and their relatives, guards and wardens, chaplains and lawyers, probation officers and corrections officials. Outside, they cross paths with even more diverse people: activists, politicians, legislators, journalists, laypersons, and even social scientists. All become both objects and subjects of the ethnography.

But they are also its potential publics. This dimension is important for at least two reasons (Fassin, 2017). First, from an intellectual perspective, the encounter with publics is a source of enrichment for critique. It is a way to test, amend, strengthen, develop and even abandon interpretations through the confrontation with alternate views, concrete concerns, and productive misunderstandings. The public afterlife of ethnography is not merely a sort of after-sales service, it is also part of the anthropological endeavour in the same way as fieldwork or writing are. Second, from a political perspective, critical thinking is in urgent need to go public in the hard times the world is going through. As inequality, violence, bigotry, intolerance, and increasingly censorship and self-censorship expand, the work of the ethnographer cannot be limited to academic circles. The voices it renders audible as well as the material and interpretations it produces have their place in the public sphere, where it is destined to be appropriated, transformed, or contested. In the end, the public presence of anthropology (Eriksen, 2006) may be regarded as an expansion of critique into society.

## Conclusion

‘Critical theory died away long ago’, writes Latour (2004: 248) at the end of his article. *Requiescat in pace?* The blessing is premature. Rather, this statement calls for Mark Twain’s irony: the report of the death is an exaggeration. In fact, more than the inaccuracy of the obituary, it is the success of its reception, particularly among anthropologists, that should be a source of worry – a ‘matter of concern’. Such an utterance can, indeed, be performative and become the chronicle of a death foretold. To the contrary, what I have tried to show in this essay is that critique is well alive. It is irrigated by various traditions, among which we can distinguish critical theory and genealogy, less to oppose them than to demonstrate that they answer different questions while offering the possibility of a combination. Moreover, I have refused to choose between the two strands designated as critical sociology and the sociology of critique, pointing out that critical ethnography relies on both the acknowledgment of our interlocutors’ social intelligence and the necessity for us to give a broader account for a variety of perspectives.

In anthropology’s house are many mansions. The richness of the discipline resides in its welcoming of diversity. Whereas other fields – think of economics, for

instance, with its rational actor theory – claim a single hegemonic paradigm, the diversity of its legacies is a hopeful sign of the liveliness of its futures. So, let the nostalgia of realism and other old moons disguised as new suns prosper. Let post-human approaches thrive, ontologies flourish, experiments blossom, and ‘turns’ ... turn. But this intellectual whirl should not lead us to lose sight of the stubborn presence of a present laden with worrying spectres, disturbing constructions of otherness, unsettling discourses on culture and religion, distressing oblivion of recent pasts and denial of future challenges, all ‘matters of concern’ about which anthropologists have long had their say. This is therefore not a good time for them to relinquish the intellectual tool that has accompanied their development since the first faltering steps of their discipline: critical thinking.

Critique is, indeed, inherent to the anthropological project: most obviously in its ‘genealogy’ strand since their inquiry always comprises and sometimes even stems from a form of astonishment before a certain arrangement of the world (as we know that other arrangements would have been possible); more disputably in its ‘critical theory’ strand, although more of our research than many would probably admit originates in a dissatisfaction or even an indignation before a certain state of the world (as we understand the cost of this state for many of those with whom we work). Astonishment and indignation are, indeed, the two driving forces of anthropology and, to some degree, of other social sciences. They are what motivate critical inquiry. But this inquiry is not gratuitous: it is an intervention in the world to transform representations and affect practices.

An anthropologist who cannot be suspected for having overused the word ‘critique’, Claude Lévi-Strauss, ended *Structural Anthropology* (1963: 387) by this sentence with Durkheimian overtones: ‘Anthropology would plead in vain for that recognition to which its outstanding achievements in the realm of theory otherwise entitle it, if in this ailing and troubled world of ours, it did not first endeavour to prove its usefulness’. There are many ways to understand what it is to be ‘useful’ for anthropologists and how to ‘prove’ it. In a world that is undoubtedly still ‘ailing and troubled’, I would argue that the most crucial remains critique.

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