

Anna Kornbluh

Extinct Critique

That ideology critique is contentious enough to warrant this special issue of *SAQ* owes in large part to Bruno Latour's 2005 essay, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?," published in *Critical Inquiry*, which is a landmark journal of cultural, aesthetic, political, and literary theory across the humanities. In a clarion call, Latour raised alarm about a practice so recurrent in contemporary theory as to be a ritual itself: namely, that behind every fact, every façade—indeed behind nature itself—lies a social construction just waiting to be uncovered by the critic. The unavowed theology of this critical habit, he argued, enabled climate denialism, because plutocrats themselves had come to invoke the constructedness of facts and broad epistemic uncertainty as justification for their lucrative lethal carbonization of the earth's atmosphere. Out of steam, critique backs fossil fuel. Latour's concern establishes a connection between critique and practice, academic theory and political reality, one which makes a neat homology (critique exposes social construction; Republicans and corporations find this exposure congenial). But his argument also deliberately occludes the causes of this homology, since he derides the hubris of "explanations resorting automatically to

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power, society, discourse . . . empires, capitalism” (Latour 2004: 229) and endorses in contrast “a renewed empiricism” (231). Where a materialist might say that carbon executives deny climate change because it pays, Latour’s empiricism eschews the alleged transcendence of causality, regarding instead the immanence of horizontal, distributed interaction. Heeding Latour’s call, the ensuing movement of postcritique in political theory, philosophy, and literary and cultural studies has adopted both a horizontalist ethos and empiricist episteme—but strikingly has not preserved this originating concern with climate. Nor, we might note sixteen years later, have ruling ideas changed in response to the postcritical turn. Rather, since we put down critique, climate denialism has become full-throated, full-throttle climate nihilism.¹

If critique and the discourse of its exhaustion has something to do with the crisis of ecological degradation, perhaps this something can be grasped less through what critique produces in the world, and more through how the world produces critique, including the critique of critique. Such a reversal corresponds to the original procedure of critique in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels’s *The German Ideology*, which instantiates materialism as regard for the environments of ideas. Surveying the “ruling ideas” in their present, Marx and Engels observe of their colleagues “It has not occurred to any one of these philosophers to inquire into the connection of German philosophy with German reality” (Marx and Engels 1998: 36). “Reality” they proceed to specify as the material environment that supports the conceptualization and communication of ideas, what they call the “definite social relations” that enable the “existence of living human individuals” (37). These relations involve “first . . . the organization” of individuals and their consequent relation to the rest of nature” (37). Critique here already importantly configures itself as ecological awareness: an inquiry into the connection of ideas to the social relations capacitating the production of human existence.² Of course ecology is a vastly complicated interrelation of manifold agencies, but as the Marxist theorist Raymond Williams pointed out long before Latourian horizontality, the networked assemblage, object oriented ontology, and postcritical affects became ruling ideas, “complexity” must not obscure the general “intentions” of capitalism, for only if we grasp those tendencies in their distinction can we imagine and implement genuine alternative modes of production, including now, when it is too late.

My title “Extinct Critique” marks this too-lateness and this materialist impulse: not merely metaphorical exhaustion but material extinction now conditions critique. The wholesale destruction of the precious environment

of the university means there are only last critics standing; the wholesale destruction of Earth means there will soon be few humans at all. How does postcritique register or indeed perform this environment? What are the social relations of production and reproduction that materially determine postcritique? And since critique entails not only “negative” diagnoses but also affirmative projections of emancipation, what is to be affirmed after situating postcritique in relation to extinction?

Eve Sedgwick’s formidable lament of paranoid reading decried most of all a lack of surprise attendant upon gotcha historicizing arguments, and pioneers in literary study like Stephen Best, Sharon Marcus, Heather Love, and Rita Felski eloquently conjure enchantment and immersion as alternatives to critique—but the “no future” of extinction will not be a surprise, and we will not be ironically distant from it. Most academic critics live all too acutely the degradation of their environments, even if the highest theorists have been the most insulated from labor exploitation and industrial restructuring. While the number of students going to college has increased steadily in the thirty-year period since states started dramatically slashing public funding for higher education, the percentage of students majoring in humanities subjects has plummeted. The profound recission of state funding has meant all manner of privatization of the public, administrative bloat and upward wealth transfer, precaritization of labor (75 percent of academic instruction nationwide is fulfilled by instructors other than tenure-stream faculty), and ballooning college costs. In many of the most extreme cases—Alaska, Oklahoma, Montana, North Dakota—defunding correlates to the volatility of the extractive economy, as Sheila Liming (2019) recently commented. Meanwhile the great recession, the jobless recovery, the continued privatization of public resources, and responsabilization of individual families for wellbeing has exerted vise grip pressures on the regard for the function and purpose of the university, with extreme vocationalization supplanting general education and liberal arts curricula.

This backdrop of flattening contextualizes the regnant flat ontology in so many theoretical fields. The profession of criticism is being disassembled, the ecosystem for thinking is imperiled by rapidly escalating levels of cognitive-compromising carbon, and meanwhile our thought leaders rhapsodize these declinations as “weak theory” and “amateur criticism.” The trumpeting of amateurism as “a feminist alternative to the disciplinary fashioning of criticism” (Micir and Vadde 2018: 519) by modernity’s cult of expertise has unsavory parallels with the anti-expert, anti-disciplinary deskilling of university labor, as the contingent faculty of Twitter like Jacquelyn Ardam

quickly pinpointed.³ In fecund retreat from “masterful” “suspicious” “heroic” Marxism (Best and Marcus 2009: 6, 11, 15), “surface reading” and weak theory proffer tender mercies of “the proximate, the provisional, and the probabilistic” (Saint-Amour 2018: 440). An adjacent methodological embrace of the personal sanctifies in the domain of academic literary study the very logic of the wider literary marketplace—personalization, memoir, autofiction, immediacy— and the logic of the even wider economic sphere, of new enclosures. These attenuated personal knowledge frames have deep roots in standpoint epistemology, and their consolidation in the recent past tracks oh so closely with heightened austerity. Jeff Williams (2015) has usefully umbrellaed many postcritical methods as “the new modesty”—scientization and de-interpretation, less speculation and synthesis and more use of statistics, MRIs, or other data, the supplanting of explanation by description. Such minimization of specialized knowledge protocols and a hurry to take up the frameworks of putatively more legitimate disciplines like computer science, quantitative sociology, and laboratory psychology mirrors our industrial diminishment—the structural adjustment of our profession, with its acute decommissioning of cultural and literary interpretation. Seen from this environment, postcritical praxis looks like methodological innovation as alibi for the tenured elite: so there will not be another employed generation of professional critique? We don’t need it anyway.

The synergy between modesty, weakness, critique out of steam, and the ruin of the university combusts in the very specific historical situation of the post-great-recession university, but a longer arc of theoretical unbinding also tracks with the great acceleration of fossil fuels. The futurelessness and deteleology of extinction instantiate the anti-instrumental impetus of critical inquiry, from Adorno and *The Postmodern Condition*, *Écriture Féminine*, and *No Future*, to *l’avenir* of deconstruction, that which evades and disrupts all specification, mastery, or use. Theoretical critique propounds so many variations of pessimism, subtraction, and irony. The literary and aesthetic interpretative customs flowing from these philosophical interventions combine rapturous reverence for the sublime and the singular with meticulous accumulation of particularities in history and context with suspicion of grand narratives and positivized values. We are driven by a code of particularizing and concretizing, of dismantling systems, of destabilizing universals—of taking things apart. Suspicious of concepts, signifiers, and institutions, many theorists have understood their political purview as the struggle against what stands. Dissolution and dismantling are celebrated as the opposite of constituting; the phenomenally popular philosopher Giorgio Agam-

ben (2016: 263–67) names this value “destituency” (from the Latin *de + statuere*—to move away from setting things up, deserting, forsaking, abandoning). Constituting is violent containment; destituting is lavish unforming. Our eminent theorists thus proclaim themselves “unbuilders,” equating building with dubious synthesis and the made form. Formlessness as aesthetic value animates anarchy as ethico-political value—but the question of critique in the time of extinction requires that at least we hear how the vitalist mantra “burn it all down” rhymes rather much with the institutional embers on our incinerating planet.

Dissolutionism is the intellectual modality of an ongoing destruction of environments, both the felling of the habitable earth and the razing of the university as an ecosphere of flourishing. The retreat from analysis to phenomenological witnessing, affective response, and epistemic modesty enact as methodology the privatizations that have eroded the university and enfeebled collective action, while the wholesale repudiation of the intellectual and political value of Marxist frameworks of causality and totality has clouded the situation, including the labor conditions, in which intellectuals find themselves, since Latourianisms now proffer as political action contemplating the agency of the stone and the sylvan beatification of extinction rites. Making these erosions and becloudings matters of concern, while also turning thought instead to bulwarks and rays, is the properly dialectical answer to the question of critique today, in the midst of the first forced extinction. It is an answer all the more urgent since so many humanistic and literary theoretical and critical responses to ecocide have been taking shape as dispersive panegyrics to hypercomplexity, while the problem of oligarchic obstacles to decarbonization is tragically simple.⁴

Postcritical horizontalizations—euphoric affective connections, deliquescent anarchic agencies, and dislocated capitalist causality—correlate with the ruling ideas of our time: climate nihilism and the demolition of the university. Critique does more than make such correlations though; it also offers synthetic, projective, and constructive affirmations. Note the different spatiality of this operation: the full movement of the dialectic, the negation of negation, the advancing of contradiction, sublates horizontality, offering in its place some vectors of the vertical. Dickey as this seems, speculatively pursuing this upward motion for critique can usefully dislocate the ruling horizontalism.

Several insurgent figurations of the vertical can guide this speculation. First, Marx theorized freedom as creative building, and propounded many crucial norms for human flourishing throughout his critique of the capitalist

mode of production. Second, Fredric Jameson, the avatar for Marx in most of these postcritique debates, consistently theorizes utopia, which he argues is most powerfully mediated through architecture and infrastructure, the built form and the idea of constituted space. Third, the discourses around the Green New Deal tacitly theorize an emancipatory verticalism: instrumentally, unambiguously, seizing the state power held by the virulent minority—fossil fuel executives and billionaires—and wielding that power for the majority.

Let us go through these three insurgent figurations in a little more detail. Evidently it needs to be said that Marx is a positive dude. Critique is not just interrogation and subtraction and negging; it is also affirmation and composition. Even though he invented the practice of ideology critique, exposing how ideas participate in power relations, and even though his radical revisions of materialism set it up as a tool for revealing how norms and normative values uphold unequal distributions of power and wealth, his work also promotes norms and emancipations.

The liberatory movement that Marx and Engels positively call for is predicated on the norm that things would be better if the regime of surplus value did not organize the production of material life itself, if the state served the immiserated and expelled rather than the larded few. At the base of this conviction that a better social formation is possible rests Marx and Engels's definition of human beings as creative, constructive *builders*. Rejecting common ways of differentiating human nature from animal nature, Marx and Engels settle on the idea that whereas animals merely subsist, humans produce a mode of production: "Men can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, by religion or anything else you like. They themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to produce their means of subsistence, a step which is conditioned by their physical organization" (Marx and Engels 1998: 37). Humans are productive, making their own conditions of existence, and this essential quality of generative laboring is appropriated by the capitalist mode of production:

Labor is, first of all, a process between man and nature, a process by which man mediates. . . . We understand labor in a form that stamps it as exclusively human. A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality. At the end of every labor-process, we get a result that already existed in the imagination of the laborer at its commencement. He not only effects a change of form in the material on which he works, but he also realizes a purpose of his own. (Marx 1990: 283–84)

The architect encapsulates the human's constitutive constructive capacity, which differs from the bee's in its imaginative quality. Percussing this imaginative dimension of labor, Marx (1990: 1044) pairs the figure of architect with that of the poet: "Milton produced *Paradise Lost* in the same way that a silkworm produces silk, as the activation of his own nature." Labor yields existence and yields literature; the ontological character of creative constructions founds Marx's enthusiasm for building.

The intense creativity of human existence is violated by the systematic division of labor and the exploitative conditions of labor, whereby workers are denied the freedom to create multiply. Against this violation, Marx proposes the value of alternative collations. He writes, "In communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic" (Marx and Engels 1998: 53). The diurnal simultaneity here sublates specialization, division, qualification, particularization, actualizing instead "the general production" and extensive space of "society" essential to creative, constructive existence. Such refusal of division notably rejects the lineations of administered, valorized temporality, favoring the spatial axis of relational sociability. Freedom flourishes in the spatial room of reordered time. The ultimate prescription is for critique itself, this creative and life-sustaining activity, that expresses the constructive drive of *homo faber*.

This enthusiasm for literary creativity and critique as essential to human existence inspires the bold claims of Jameson's 2016 book *An American Utopia*. As if in the only possible dignified response to the postcritique enterprise, Jameson published an outrageous, dialectical affirmation—he wrote a utopia!—which has become one of the very most scandalous theory texts of our present. Blending the utopian genre's disposition toward spatial imagining with his perennial interest in architecture (including a really crucial essay, "Architecture and the Critique of Ideology"), Jameson asks what is to be built up? *An American Utopia* is a speculative experiment to locate the utopian potential latent in capitalism. In the storied tradition of the utopian genre, *An American Utopia* holds that a more collectivist society would necessarily require organized provision of goods and services; in the storied tradition of dialectics, Jameson's utopia casts that organization as already here, now, in actually existing infrastructure of the military. A veritable social welfare paradise offering housing, education, transportation, and medical care

across a spatial network coordinated by distinct centralized and hierarchical forces, the military surprisingly models a utopian state.

From Jameson's fascinating willingness to regard structured organization as technique rather than constraint, we can educe a new imagining of the political affordances of composition and verticalism—of making arrangements and holding them in formation. Although the politics of building have usually been reduced to the politics of containment or closure, this new imagining makes space to insist on the contrary that the built form and the constituted social can host freedom. Forms can be reformed; theory infatuated with formlessness, flow, and unmaking misses this simple fact. Built sociability—order, organization, institution, law, the state—affords support, benefits, and efficacy beyond the suppression of particularities and reifications that are so often cited in horizontalist rhetoric—and these are the integuments of concerted movements to reimagine collective life in the face of extinction.

Indeed, this is how we must read the novelty of the conception of collocated sovereignty advanced by the platform for the Green New Deal. Against the tide of denialism, kleptocratic nihilism, and inertia, and against as well the theoretical sacred cows of horizontalist mushrooming interpenetrations, poetic forsaking of instrumentality, and denunciations of anything falling short of the abolition of value—against these political fantasies and these academic theories, current politics offer an alternate theory. Here is a plan, developed by black scholars and indigenous activists and Bolivian leaders, championed by women, that is ready to start somewhere enormous when enormous is not enough. Naomi Klein calls it a “story of civilizational transformation” (Klein 2019: 17) which requires “reinventing the very idea of the collective, the communal, the commons, the civil, and the civic” (Klein 2014: 404) and questioning “what we value more than economic growth and corporate profits” (461). This transformation appeals to historical precedents of multilevel governmental direction of the entire society, including autonomizing the political and regulatory functions of the state from industry by ending campaign contributions, and publicizing/nationalizing fossil fuel companies to ensure their breakup. The basic theory behind these demands is that it is possible to repoliticize the economy, and while this politics often wears a communitarian/pluralist sheen, there can be no mistaking that a big deep state is its condition of possibility. Absolutely heretical to reflexively anti-statist, anti-institutionalist dissolutionists, this *de facto* state theory is just elementary dialectics: thinking at large scales, centrally coordinating planning, centrally providing infrastructure are affordances of the state form, which organized political power of the people can wield for their own wellbeing. Standing

Rock and We Are Seneca Lake and Skolstrejk för Klimatet formulate a theory of the state and of the necessity for other dispensations as the affirmative correlate of the critique of carboniferous reason. How can we be out of steam and modest, horizontalist and weak, when there is such an urgency to buttress the firefight, when the environment for our thought is a desperate spur?

Dialectical critique is affirmative, so here are my norms. Do critique: assess the environments for thought, and build necessary alternative environments. Commit to strengthening our institutions for critique and reflection and mediacy, precisely now when they've been decimated. Do the feminized service labor of making the place where we work *work*. Behold the university as a site of workplace struggle and as an immediate sphere in which it is possible to be effective, even on the colossal problem of the ecocide: organize to be sure your institution divests from fossil fuels, organize (and bargain fairly with) university laborers like faculty, contingent faculty, graduate students, and support staff, and then organize some more. In your teaching and writing, risk synthesis! *Theory must work to build the world up*. We must, in the present, make claims about causality, systematicity, and the revaluation of values, so we can make the very specific move to counter rapacious greed with rapid decarbonization. The dispersive poetics of attunement to the material world, romancing precarity, and dissolving binaries entice us to lie down. Critique and its cartography of other spaces enjoins us to stand up.

Extinction rebellion leaders are eloquently calling for judgements of the good and the just. The war vet turned extinction pedagogue Roy Scranton dares us “to make meaningful choices in the shadow of our inevitable end” (Scranton 2013). The political theorist Thea Riofrancos (2019) argues, “resignation cloaked in realism is the best way to ensure the least transformative outcome.” Climate strike leader Greta Thunberg has her own building metaphor for struggle, what she calls “cathedral thinking”: “We must lay the foundation while we may not know exactly how to build the ceiling” (Thunberg 2019). This kind of *in medias res* synthesis, this celebration of the freedom in necessity, this consecration of construction—this too is the lifeway of critique.

“Critique” and “crisis,” it is surely a literary cliché to note, have a common etymological origin in the Greek *krínein* κρίνειν, “to decide.” The extinction crises in theory and practice, in the university and on Earth, force a decision. It is too late, our ossified intellectual habits are dying, as are we—but crisis paralysis, romantic resignation, and arrested critique guarantee the worst. Wild imaginings, big abstractions, and brassy syntheses are less bad. Weak theory is a seductive siren, postcritique a consoling modesty. Go out strong.

Notes

- 1 Some arguments in these pages echo theses in my recent books (Kornbluh 2019a, 2019b).
- 2 For a different version of this argument, see Foster 2000.
- 3 See the Twitter thread here <https://twitter.com/jaxwendy/status/1130937926156738562?s=20>.
- 4 For more on this contradiction between complexifying tendencies in theory and simplifying tendencies in analysis, see Malm 2017.

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