

**Immediacy**  
or,  
**The Style of Too Late Capitalism**

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**VERSO**

London • New York

## Antitheory

In his 700-page 2020 masterwork *Critique and Praxis*, the Columbia law professor, Foucauldian theory expert, NPR talking head, and death-penalty lawyer Bernard Harcourt pronounces that critique has become too divorced from praxis. The praxis renewal to which he enjoins his fellow theorists is surprisingly not, however, collective action, but—on the same wavelength as the immediatizing impulses of autofiction and stream aesthetics, in the same underpinning of circulatory disintermediation and imaginary inflation—anti-representational emanation:

We critical theorists should no longer be speaking for others. The question “What is to be done?” must be reformulated today. Critical theory cannot speak for others. It must instead foster a space for everyone who shares the critical ambition to speak and be heard. The solution to the problem of speaking for others is not to silence anyone, but the opposite: to collaborate and cultivate spaces where all can be heard, especially those who are most affected by our crises today. This reflects as well a new writing style and grammar today. We no longer write in the third person, as Horkheimer did at midcentury. We do not write in universal form either, as Marx or Hegel did before that. Neither do we hide behind the passive tense. No, today, each and every one of us must write in the first person. And that means that we can no longer ask, passively, “What is to be done?” but must actively reformulate the very

question of critical praxis for ourselves. For me, it becomes: “What more shall I do?”<sup>1</sup>

Existing modes of writing cannot work; theory is no longer tenable. Collective demands and objective courses of action do not hold; only the subjective and singular are appropriately moderate. The very project of representation—presenting at some remove, binding together more than individuals, speaking for others—has become illegitimate. In opposition to the syntheses of critique, by which groups agree on what is bad (structural racism, say), and what is to be done (defunding the police, say), and with which common signifiers to constitute collectives (“Black Lives Matter,” say), praxis here infinitizes minute actions of irreducible individuals, permanently deferring integration. Rather than compose demands or slogans or visions of what would be less bad for more people “in universal form” (freedom from fear of extrajudicial death, say), praxis extrudes “spaces where all can be heard,” where perpetual presence abounds. Harcourt authorizes this conclusion with words from Bruno Latour, the contemporary prophet of assemblage and realism: “There, I’ve finished, now, if you wish, it is your turn to present yourself.”<sup>2</sup>

Successional self-itemization configures praxis as a “decentering” in which “universality is replaced by particularity: what is true now turns on personal self-interests” and as a retreat “from institutions to the personal” because “organizations are obstacles to organizing ourselves . . . we need to turn inward to transform the self.”<sup>3</sup> First-person present as idiom solves the democratic paradox of representing others, electing itself as more politically and aesthetically sound than theories or tactics scaffolded by

1 Bernard E. Harcourt, *Critique and Praxis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 17.

2 Ibid., 33.

3 Ibid., 237. The first part of the quote comes directly from the Invisible Committee’s pamphlet *The Coming Insurrection* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009), while the inward turn conclusion is Harcourt’s.

collective subjectivity or shared signifiers. Of course, it's significant to see a white man voluntarily decenter himself, and gratifying to clock the practical effects of venerable theories that have audited the malfeasance of institutions and the harm of universals. Yet, in emptying out the convocative and generalizing dimensions of critique and then filling that void with the genre-bending fulminations of real talk, immediacy pronounces its univocity. Unrepresentative personalism becomes epistemic silo and political prophylactic, explicitly repudiating the middle ground between one experience and another. If you rightly thought praxis involved mediations like repetitive genres to scale upward from the individual and buttress a mass—the face-to-face production of using “we,” the narrative of where power lives and how we might want to live, the email reminder to participate in rallies, the phone-bank script, the local op-ed, the concrete slogan around which many can unite—then *Critique and Praxis* is here to set you straight. That old notion of praxis owes too much to representation and synthesis, and yields too much impersonality and mediation. Against such abstractions, praxis must concretize itself, atomistically, animating the magnetic “I.”

Harcourt's adoption of the first person unfettered from the third person's coercive collectivization whirls in on itself, circling in the inchoateness of its calling, vibrating in the echo of its ethos. Rather than a narrowing, though, in the view of its proponents this inwardness exponentially expands:

Everything we do as individuals, every choice we make, every action we take affects these struggles and upheavals. This is the unbearable and daunting reality: every one of our most minute actions will affect. Unbearable, indeed. Agonizing and excruciating. The burden is almost too much to bear. The utter singularity and endlessness of the struggle. It is urgent. Time is running out.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Harcourt, *Critique and Praxis*, 539.

Hear in this electric charge immediacy as urgency, immediacy as immersive interiority, immediacy as infinitesimal tessellation—and, of course, hear the rhyme with Knausgaard's acid-brilliant flat ontology: *everything is everything*.

This algorithmic automanifestation, infinitizing identification and reduplicating direction, rivets immediacy as theory style for our time. Across a variety of disciplines, theory—the very tool that should help fathom how dominant culture is determined by the circulation-forward base—has now itself been submerged by immediacy as endgame. Declensionist blur and sui generis radicalism are immediacy marrow common to contemporary luminaries in legal theory, media theory, geography, gender theory, poetics, and communization theory. Righteously appealing, immediacy theory takes for its content self-scrutiny and indeterminate entanglement, and increasingly it takes for its form an auto-authorizing, lyrical, fragmented-first-personalism. This makeover of theory as concrete, fluid—in the mix—derives from well-meant reprove of impersonal abstraction, masculinist reserve, and rationalist systematicity. Moving in formation, however, the overcorrection has swerved, with immediacy virtuously and undialectically opposing a hypostasized sin of too much mediation. Immediacy theory thus clinches the trends in cultural production we have studied in arts and letters: the absorptive relationality of practice without medium, the enclosed voice of emanative antifiction, the delugent flow of apostrophic recursion, and the premium on planate exchange. In this concurrence, contemporary theory verifies rather than relativizes the mode of production. Immersive intensity transmits an instant message; it brooks no abstract mediations. Sir, this is an Arby's.

Fast food for thought, immediacy theory gorges on the very unmitigated emission demanded by the intensified circulation dispositive of too late capitalism. Because theory emerges in conditions not of its own making (the ruling ideas in every epoch are the ideas of the ruling class), it must deliberately introduce a break among its determinants. Within the manifest zeitgeist of

too late capitalism, immediacy theory cleaves too close. If contemporary theory has not recognized or analyzed immediacy despite its undeniable hegemony in cultural production—if the summative descriptions and causal narrative this book provides have been necessary—this is finally because so many of the experts in cultural criticism across so many disciplines and traditions have spent the twenty-first century manufacturing immediacy themselves.

It is widely observed that ours is a culture of post-truth and anti-expert populism, in which every man does his own research in his own corner of the internet. Individuals live in impenetrable information bubbles; cults and conspiracies are on the rise; science rejection has been modeled by the world's largest corporations' knowing acceleration of atmospheric carbonization, a trickle-down denialism manifesting in vaccine truthers, home schoolers, and cabal believers. Immediacy reason issues from plutocratic destruction of public education and independent media, but it also bears the imprint of theory's divestment from knowledge and individuation of epistemology. Circling viciously, immediacy style for theory actively suborns further deskilling of academic labor.

Hegemonically ordained by all these vectors of power, ardently esteemed by all our leading lights, immediacy theory remains glaring in its negation of theory, which ought to be one of the ultimate media of mediation: intercession; thick, slow, strange relay; and hewing out relative autonomy. It ought to be the medium in which we can step back from the merely evident. It ought to be the medium in which we can situate the valorization of immediacy as a historical specificity. It ought to be the medium through which we can perceive the systematic and surprising interrelation of culture (what front-facing cinematography has to do with supply chain logistics, what engaged art has to do with networked algorithms). And it ought to be the medium in which ideas themselves negate their own delimiting determinations, shed their old baggage as mere interpretations, and hit the

dialectical jackpot to intervene in the world. Theory effects distance, abstraction, *movement away*. Immediacy fomenting intimacy, immersion, the negation of intercession. Theory takes us out of a situation, out of phenomenality, out of ourselves, and into realms of reflection that escalate to include the dislocation of our ineluctable situatedness, conceptualization of our many determinations, and speculation about inexperienced possibilities. Immediacy imbibes the immanent. Theory cultivates and cooks, constituting new nourishment for flourishing. Taking distance and cutting distinctions, lineating formations and daring construction, theory risks something other than absorption or blur. Through its orotund negations, immediacy theory is antitheory.

### that old critique of immediacy

To fathom this negation more genealogically, recall that theory originates in the critique of immediacy. Definitionally, theory objectivates philosophy, critically interrogating the place from which philosophy is seeing in order to expand the philosopher's sightline from "being and the world" to a meta-level of reflection upon the problem of *how to know* being and the world. Hegel signifies this disruptive turn in philosophy, for he exposed the ruse of "immediacy" in his philosophical predecessors.<sup>5</sup> In his first book, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel right away introduces immediacy as a prevalent error that any rigorous philosophy taking up a critical relation to its own conditions of possibility must preempt. Charting this error, he argues that thinking happens via a first phase of "sense certainty," in which fundamental objects present themselves to the mind through the senses and the mind enjoys certainty that it knows the objects. Sense certainty is epistemological immediacy: simple data present

<sup>5</sup> For one of the clearest assertions of this point, see Andrew Cole, *The Birth of Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

themselves to perception as a “this-now,” the senses input them, and consciousness immediately integrates the data into concepts of the objects. For Hegel, this immediacy is both insufficient and illusory. Thought worthy of its name reflects upon its apparent immediacy, its apparent seamless extrapolation from phenomenal senses, and the apparent givenness of phenomena. Through this reflection, thought registers its actual mediacy, “the complex process of mediation” by which the apparently given is constructed and the apparent passive reception of the given is active. The mind works with processing tools that are socially and linguistically determined—such as the categories of space and time that underwrite any recognition of “this-now.” Adequate thought must fathom these processes and determinations, focusing on the primacy of relationality—of, in short, mediation. It therefore negates the putative coherence of experience, since neither the subject who experiences nor the object available to experience are self-identical. Hegel reiterates his problematization of immediacy in his next work, *The Science of Logic*, noting the pretense of “being” as indeterminate, undifferentiated immediacy and specifying that philosophy necessarily begins not with this empty abstraction but rather with a more mediated “essence,” an actuality of being and reflection. Glossing this systematic program across both major works and beyond, Robert Pippin notes: “One way of putting the whole point of German idealism . . . is to note the denial by all those thinkers that there can be anything like ‘unmediated immediacy,’ an intuitive apprehension of pure being.”<sup>6</sup> For philosophers in this wake then, immediacy has to be understood as a kind of anti-philosophical defense—an over-presence, over-identity, over-certainty that forecloses speculative and critical movement.

When Karl Marx initiated his radical break with the history of philosophy, he did so in large part by criticizing Hegel on

<sup>6</sup> Robert B. Pippin, *Hegel's Idealism: The Satisfaction of Self-Consciousness* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 183.

Hegel's own terms. To take relationality as primary must mean, he argued, not just an abstraction, but rather an obligation to inquire into and acknowledge the very fabric of relations that make philosophy possible: the social structure that allots food, shelter, and time for literacy and speculation.<sup>7</sup> Mediation is not just an ideal process in the realm of ideas (we require categories of time and space to think) but a material process in the realm of corporeality and social interdependence (we tarry with nature to make our conditions of existence; our social relations are contingent rather than fixed). Philosophy cannot be content to wax about consciousness; it must also investigate its own position in society and history, grasping its own mediation by relations of the ruling class system. Moreover, philosophy focused on this mediation must grapple with the problem of mediation in its historical specificity—that is, as posed by capital, the medium which effaces itself. For money is a means of circulation (C–M–C), but capital is this means become end, the medium that self-substantializes as more than medium to obscure mediating functions (M–C–M). Mediation thus becomes the ultimate object of Marxian critique: how thought is mediated, how labor mediates nature, how social rule mediates social position, how capital mediates value while pretending it is not a medium.<sup>8</sup> The repudiation of mediation that characterizes the antitheoretical currents we will study below undoes theory's requisite criterion.

Still other permutations of mediation propel theory after Marx. Theodor Adorno extended the exploration of social mediation by more deeply investigating both the subject of philosophy and its object. It is not enough for critique to register that there is no immediately perceiving subject independent of its social

<sup>7</sup> Karl Marx, “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right,” in *Marx: Early Political Writings*, trans. Joseph O'Malley (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

<sup>8</sup> This central importance of mediation is argued across the entire corpus of Raymond Williams. For an elaboration, see Anna Kornbluh, “Mediation Metabolized,” in *Raymond Williams at 100*, ed. Paul Stasi (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021), 1–20.

constitution; critique must also explore how there is not any simply given object, how reality and phenomena are produced through means like war, bureaucracy, mass media, and ideology. As he insists, "It is through the transition to the priority of the object that the dialectic becomes materialist."<sup>9</sup> The social relations that determine and mediate the thinking subject do not immediately present themselves for analysis. Indeed, the very definition of thinking for Adorno is nothing other than "the rejection of the overweening demand of bowing to everything immediate."<sup>10</sup> Adorno's lesson is one that Marx knew, but maybe he sometimes forgot: you cannot simply add social and material considerations to Hegelian idealism, since ideology inflects any sense-certain uptake of those considerations. If taking an object as a given constitutes a mistake of an idealist stripe, then objects that insist upon their own givenness—their lack of mediation, their authenticity, their formlessness—must be equally suspicious. Art claiming its identity with reality doubly obfuscates the primacy of mediation, presenting a difficulty that perpetually concerned Adorno. When that art is mass-produced and mass-circulated, mass immersion compromises perceptual faculties. Spoon-fed soap operas, surrounded by billboards and saturated with sonic streams, whole cultures are made over into mass deception.

Trouncing all these outmoded mediations by name (Hegel; Marx; Horkheimer and Adorno; critique), Harcourt advances praxis as anti-mediation: if critique has foundationally held immediacy to be a mistake, then praxis—especially praxis after critique—should affirm immediacy. This oppositional alternative appears not as Harcourt's own genius invention but as the rightful consummation of Latourian history of science, feminism,

<sup>9</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Asthron (London: Continuum, 1981), 183–97.

<sup>10</sup> "The effort implied in the concept of thought itself, as the counterpart of passive contemplation, is negative already, a revolt against being importuned to bow to every immediate thing." *Ibid.*, 19.

analytic philosophy, and sociology, all of which importantly call into question the objectivity and generality that mediation effects. Dismiss not the immediacy program of everyone speaking for themselves as grandiose white male melancholy, since deep traditions of feminist and Black epistemology and exploration underwrite it—as indeed Harcourt already attests in the paragraph following that with which we began, which cites Angela Davis, Fred Moten, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Sara Ahmed, and Chantal Mouffe.<sup>11</sup>

Immediacy as self-substantiation metabolizes many flights of late-twentieth-century theory: authentications of situated knowing, elevations of personal experience, suspicions of grand narratives, transpositions of politics into ethos, and promotion of autoethnography across the disciplines. At the same time, this metabolic process should not be received as an organic trajectory endogenous to theory, since it so overdetermined by the crush in parallel domains: in literature (autofiction, #OwnVoices, self-help, university writing pedagogy); in the "speak your truth" industrial complex (personal branding, professionalism); in perspectival cinematography and the intimate ambient video stream; in the algorithmic base of i-tech (exponential information organized by binary oppositions of ones and zeros); and in the instantaneity of the just-in-time, on-demand circulation economy. The startling redefinition of praxis as deluging self-presencing belongs, in other words, to a bustling market—one that capaciously promotes manifestism as internal redress of its own depravities, and flow as dissolution of its own contradictions.

<sup>11</sup> Harcourt, *Critique and Praxis*, 17–18.