

Critique in the Age of Populism 2018-2020

1. Aim of the study circle

Recent years have seen a surge in handbooks published on critical thinking, within every imaginable discipline, from nursing to teaching to the humanities. The deluge in publications is directly connected to the emphasis that different state institutions all over Europe, and in particular in the Nordic countries, have placed on critical thinking as fundamental for such things as democracy and good citizenship. The flip side of the institutionalised critical thinking is however a trend in the sphere of free cultural practices with less funding and state institutions trying to influence contents. Two competing narratives seem to be at hand: one that tells us that it is the aim of good governance and legitimate politics to create critically thinking, engaged and creative citizens, and one that tells us that free critique does in fact not function as a political tool for change. In the age of post-truth-politics critique based on well-reasoned judgements seems to have no place; in favour of a purely negative critique **often lacking even facts value** but still capable of mobilizing political sentiments. The aim of the proposed study circle is to investigate critique as a phenomenon placed between institutionalised practices, post-truth-politics and the sphere of free cultural expression, i.e. between normative claims of the value of critique and the seeming ineffectiveness of reasoned critical thinking as a tool for political change. Guiding questions are: What does critique mean in the post-factual society? What happens with critique when it is no longer connected to reason? What is institutionalised critique? What is the relationship between capitalism and critical thinking? Is it possible to formulate a notion of critique that can work both inside institutions, as a fundamental value, and outside of institutions, as a tool criticising hegemonies and ideologies? How can critique be understood as a theoretical concept, to be taught in teachers' educations and as an important skill in the humanities, as well as a social practice that has actual political effect?

The main contribution of the study circle will be to clarify what role critique can play in a highly radicalised and increasingly populist political landscape, as well as contributing to drawing a roadmap of possible ways to enable critical thinking and a critical stance relevant

for the future. An additional outcome is to create and consolidate a network of researchers, practitioners and activists in the Nordic and Baltic countries who work with critique as a tool. This will contribute directly to productive exchanges between research and society, on an issue that has direct impact in political life and that concerns issues fundamental for democracy.

The study circle will draw participants from various disciplines as well as several Nordic and Baltic countries. Disciplines represented will be philosophy, art, comparative literature, history, sociology, history of ideas and practitioners such as social activists and literary critics. As can be seen below, the study circle has support from participants from Sweden, Denmark, Finland, and Lithuania.

The six sessions planned corresponds to six different perspectives on critique and various of the sessions can be held in collaboration with other already existing study-circles, such as the circle 'Appearances of the political,' the circle on human rights, as well as the feminist circle. The goal of the study circle is to produce two publications: 1) anthology with NSU Press, 2) a special issue in an academic journal.

Although critique as such is not spatially bound, a certain engagement with the locations during the period of the sessions will be possible. Gotland, where the summer session 2018 will take place, is, like other locations in the Nordic countries, during a week every summer the place of public discussion and debate with politicians and intellectuals. This kind of institution today both sets the limit and challenge the possibilities of critique in the public sphere.

- **Populism, culture and institutionalized critical thinking: formulating current problems of critique**

The session will focus on formulating problems of critique and critical thinking with the aim of connecting contemporary political, cultural and institutional processes, such as the current state of the public sphere – post-truth-politics -, conditions of free arts and populism with the apparent failure of leftist counter-movements.

- **Institutions of critique and post-truth-politics**

The session will focus on institutionalisations of critique and critical thinking as a normative value in state ideology in the Nordic countries. Beginning in the Nordic experience it will address the problem of the apparent connection between institutionalised critique and the emergence of populist movements and post-truth-politics.

- **Critique, creativity, spontaneity.**

The session aims at investigating what are the limits of critique when perceived of as a negative or deconstructing practice. It will furthermore investigate in what way critique can be perceived as creative, spontaneous and as a means of formulating positive projects. Can something be learnt from the populist movements? In some notions of critique, spontaneity plays a crucial role. What are the possible outcomes of connecting creativity and spontaneity with critique?

- **Norm critique, ecocriticism, criticality, feminist critique: variations of critique and universal value.**

The session will discuss how variations of critical schools and projects can be understood in relation to the need for a formulation of universal projects. The aim of the session is not only to discuss variations of critical schools as opposed to the formulation of universal political projects, but also limits (as implied by the discussion of “criticality”) and how they can be mutually fruitful. The aim of the session is to gather enough material for an anthology published with NSU Press.

- **Literary and cultural critique in the political**

The session aims at analysing and investigating the intersection between literary and cultural critique and politics. In what ways and to what extent can artistic and literary practices function as critique of institutions, social orders and ideologies? In what ways can literary and cultural critique be understood as ways forward for a critique of the post-facts critical populist movements?

- **A genealogy for a critique to come**

The last session will focus on the concept of critique and how it should be understood in order for it to be relevant in the future. The discussions during the earlier sessions will be drawn together, creating the possibility of tracing a genealogy for contemporary critique. Issues of critique as social action, foundation for democratic rule, but also as deconstruction and counter narrative, will be raised, and

discussed together. The session will produce a joint genealogy, in the form of articles, fit for publication as a special issue in an academic journal.

Nordic relevance

The Nordic countries have in common with other European countries a long tradition of a public sphere of critique and debate of art, literature and social and political issues. Nordic academics as well as free intellectuals, artists and writers have played an active part in participating in and sustaining an open climate of critique. The openness, availability and characteristic of the public sphere has been of vital importance to the development of democracy in the Nordic countries. Today, when the public sphere is becoming internationalized, with large European and global populist movements, it is important to explore, develop and expand the particular Nordic critical traditions and its relationship to global movements.

2. Methodological considerations and structural overview

Motivation/background

Several contemporary debates in the Nordic countries have posed questions about the nature and reach of critique, such as debates about the Mohammed caricatures in Denmark, or on the control of contents in state financed museums in Sweden. On a Global level, populist movements from Hungary's Orban to Duterte in the Phillipines and Trump in the USA, have succeeded in criticising democratic institutions with arguments that run counter to fundamental values of a state of law, such as equal human rights or the right to life and livelihood. In relation to these debates the question can be raised as to what extent notions of critical thinking actually contribute to promoting ideals of the human being as a free individual and how it connects to ideas of the legitimate function of democracy.

Philosophically, feminist, inter-sectionalist and Marxist movements to the left have for a long time perceived of the critical deconstruction of power structures as a major tool for political change, but these ideas have a seeming backlash enforced by the global rising tide of economically neo-liberal but value-conservative populist movements. Within academia, an ideal of utility competes with critical conceptions of humanities and social sciences, threatening autonomous discussion and research for what is demanded by either the market

or for state initiated political purposes. This places academics in the difficult position of having to answer to the demands of funding institutions, at the same time as their very purpose is to hold a position of social relevance. The need to draw a map in which all of these different but simultaneous phenomena related to the notion of critique, can be formulated as a larger common process, is the direct and urgent background to the study circle.

1. Current problems of critique	Wintersession in Copenhagen
2. Institutions of critique	Summersession
3. Critique, creativity, spontaneity	Wintersession in Åbo
4. Variations of critique and universal value	Summersession
5. Literary and cultural critique in the political	Wintersession in Sundsvall
6. Genealogy for a critique to come	Summersession

3. List of people and institutions supporting the proposal

Gothenburg University, Gothenburg

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Nordiska Sociologiförbundet

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