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Not Wanting To Be Governed Like That: On the Relationship between Anger and Critique

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While preparing for this conference I sat down in a café to fully reread a copy of the frequently cited essay by Foucault called “What is Critique?”. As fate would have it, two women were sitting at the table next to mine who, as I gathered from tidbits of their conversation, were mother and daughter. They were in a state one could call post-puberty crisis. No matter what the mother said, whether she tried to give advice, make a comment, in fact, no matter what she tried—whether it be approaching her daughter as a friend, parental authority, or stranger—she only encountered bitter resistance. The daughter also tried to deal with her mother in different ways: as an adult, as a know-it-all, completely bored or relaxed. But above all the one thing the daughter exuded was sheer irritation. She seemed to be involved in an endeavor one could describe as not wanting to be governed in a certain way, not like that, and certainly not by her mother, parents, surroundings, society, teachers, school, educational structures, or the norms and laws that sought to put her life on a certain track.

The scenario was chalked full of affects. Their snippets of conversation and moments of silence were interwoven into my reading of the entire text. They scurried in between the lines as I tried to concentrate, repeatedly making me question if the struggle next to me as I read resonated within the text or if it was fully unrelated. Did Foucault's struggle with modern control techniques have anything to do with the mundane situation at the next table where a young woman fought with her mother over perceptions, expectations, and consequences of living one's life the right way? Had the constellation at the table next to mine been any different, perhaps I would have dashed out of the café—as I often do whenever I find people around me exchanging advice about the stock market or new-age life coaching tips—if it hadn't been for the fact that it touched on issues pertaining to this lecture as well as my understanding of and experience with critique itself.

The problem that unfolded before me concerns the relationship between critique and affect. It seems, at least at first glance, that there is a connection between critique and certain emotions: shock, outrage, anger, resentment, indignation, rage, and hate.

Linking these emotions with the desire to "not being governed like that and at that cost,"[1] as Foucault puts it, may not be too bold of an assumption. How might we theorize the connection between anger and critique? Is anger an effect of, precondition, or stumbling block for critique? Is it possible—and if so, *how*—to set up a dialogue between Foucault's remarks on critique and the long tradition of critics who have addressed, examined, and performatively expressed the link between anger and critique: Virginia Woolf, Frantz Fanon, Iris von Roten, Valerie Solanas, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Audre Lorde?

Foucault sees critique as having emerged within the context of resisting modern control techniques founded on the idea that "each individual [...] in his every action, had to be governed."[2] This art of governance, which initially only pertained to medieval monasteries, makes its way out of the religious sector into a broader social context in the fifteenth century, a time when it is reproduced and pervades all realms of everyday life. Foucault sees the position of critique as an effect of this development and simultaneously as set in opposition to it. For Foucault, critique is therefore a practice of "desubjugation" and "reflected intractability" of the continual attempt to reduce and change the way one is governed.[3] What is important here is that the specifically modern power of governance is set in a constitutive relation to truth. Critique means questioning the legitimacy of power created through knowledge and the authorization of knowledge created through power.[4] Critique is not merely a form of refusal or resistance; rather it is coupled with attempts at intervening in and redirecting the orientation of the discourse of truth through the use of the discourse's own instruments. Even so, what *emotional* constitution is associated with critique and in what ways is it engrained in the work of critique? In addressing these questions, I have turned to the writings of two thinkers, Iris von Roten and Audre Lorde, who conceive of *anger* as a pivotal moment of critique.

Iris von Roten: Refusing To Be Governed in Such a Way

In her book *Frauen im Laufgitter. Offene Worte zur Stellung der Frau* (1958) Iris von Roten presents a detailed analysis of the structures of Swiss patriarchy and the paradoxes of the bourgeois social order of gender. Von Roten's outrage is openly displayed within her heuristic study of everyday life, which she uses to

address these issues. I interpret her anger here as a productive element of her writing. There are two things Iris von Roten does in this analysis: she simultaneously breaks with prescribed conventions by utilizing a style driven by her outrage *and* declares this act of manifesting her anger as an act of critique. Both actions are visible in the first page of her book. Here, von Roten writes that it is virtually impossible to resist the feeling of indignation that arises when one considers what men have been writing about women. She continues, "I do not even attempt hide it [her indignation], because I feel women have too often grinned and bore it, that women have too often pretended to not hear aggravating things said so distinctly it would have been impossible to overhear them. We must express our disapproval in order to shake the blind faith in self-evident solutions and procedures that simply do not exist."[5] Von Roten's outrage is not an uncontrollable affect or an unedited subjective remnant. On the contrary: she is able to break with a specific technique of governance through this mobilization of her experience of anger, an anger that is ironically triggered by the experience of being governed. For, the outrage concerning this form of power is not an intended effect, but one that it evokes. Part of this particular form of governance is its task of allaying the very outrage it may evoke in the governed subjects. Women are called upon, as von Roten writes, to "grin and bear it" and expected to transform and internalize the impulse to rise up in a way that does not further interfere with bearing this very type of power.

Von Roten does interfere however. By taking her own outrage seriously and expressing it she is able to establish a new perspective. She uses the standards of measure that apply to bourgeoisie society tenaciously in her analysis of social demands on women. In her study, in which the foundation of an entire system is turned back

on itself and put into question, she exposes a number of gaps between the notion of self-realization as a bourgeois social ideal and the restraints placed on women's lives. In this way, Roten sharpens the view on phenomena regarding the formation of the female subject, which could easily be supplemented with Foucault's schools, barracks, and clinics. She writes about cooking, cleaning, crocheting, fixing, mending, and saving as disciplinary and governing techniques used to confine housewives to specific spheres and direct their involvement in society. For example, she writes that women develop a "petty-minded instinct" through their cleaning-related activities, which compels women to take "preliminary action against dirt and decay—which are the very signs of our existence."[6] For female individuals, partaking in a society founded on self-realization and that considers cleaning a life purpose results in an overemphasis on cleaning as their purpose and a reversal of its function. The Swiss housewife outdoes herself not in her desire to combat dirt, but in her efforts to prevent it, or in other words, in her protection of "the household from public vandalism."[7]

Von Roten's biting analyses expose psychic constellations, which certainly do not describe a natural, high-strung form of femininity, but can rather be read as the effects of paradoxical social constraints and naturalized techniques of governance. The way in which women's lives are confined, regulated, controlled, and obstructed are presented as a scandal here, the very reason they are so scandalous is the way women are supposed to live their lives is diametrically opposed to what the bourgeois society promises them —minus the possibility of being able to claim it.

Thus, the discourse which van Roten's angry critique or critical anger is directed at is what enables her critique. Her outrage does not precede her critique and it is not a prediscursive source of her

resistance. It emerges as both an effect of *and* as a motor to fight against a certain regime of power, against being governed a certain way. She seeks to dismantle what has been constituted as "unchangeable" in order to "[shake] the blind faith in self-evident solutions and procedures that simply do not exist."[8] These are the words she uses to formulate a critical practice that bears a resemblance to Judith Butler's reading of Foucault's pivotal text on critique. According to Butler, the critic is faced with a two-fold task. She demonstrates how the interconnection of knowledge and power assert a specific order for the world. At the same time, she examines the ruptures in this order. "So, it is not only necessary to isolate and identify the peculiar nexus of power and knowledge that gives rise to the field of intelligible things, but also to track the way in which that field meets its breaking point, the moments of its discontinuities [...]."[9] Iris von Roten identifies ruptures at the points where the preconceptions of a fully realized life not only apply to a man's life, but also to a woman's life. This reveals a destabilization in the bourgeois discourse, as it is unable to sustain its own premises. Von Roten writes that these incongruities, based on renewed the promise of enlightened thought and covered up with poorly constructed arguments about a woman's true nature, are no different from a salesman trying to get you to buy a "goat herder's miracle cure."

Rather than endure the paradoxical social dictate of man's self-realization *and* women's self-abandonment in the inner realm of a disjointed psyche and silently bearing its poorly constructed attempts at legitimization, von Roten turns to the outer realm. By stating the obvious, mundane everyday tasks—crocheting, knitting, cooking, mending, saving, which are rarely considered as having any societal effects , she creates a controversy. Her work shows this controversy that lies within the system can appear only through

acts of resistance, of non-acceptance, of desubjugation. The outrage about thousands of injustices women experience daily not only forms the emotional basis of the critique, but it is also an intricate part of and the condition for a critical position. The anger expressed in von Roten's text manifests itself as the fulcrum for thought that breaks with traditional conventions, thus rendering them visible and contestable.

Audre Lorde: The Uncircumventability of the Collective

Audre Lorde's essay on "The Uses of Anger"[10] is another text in which the connection between anger and critique is exemplified. For Lorde, anger is a constitutive element of subjects exposed to exploitation and domination. In her work, as in Iris von Roten's, there is a dual relation between anger and dominance: on the one hand, anger is aroused as a reaction to oppression and, on the other hand, it can be a motor for opposing oppression. Similar to von Roten, Audre Lorde maintains that turning anger inwards robs it of its transformative potential.[11]

Lorde not only differentiates between anger channeled outward and the silence that stands for repression, but also between anger and hate: "If I speak to you in anger, at least I have spoken to you: I have not put a gun to your head and shot you down in the street."[12] If putting a gun to someone's head is an expression of hate and thus the execution of a plan based on pure violence, then its aim would be to kill the other person. This places the person in the position of deciding either to bow to the oppression or be killed. The purpose of hate, Lorde writes, is "death and destruction."[13] Anger, in contrast, does not involve a desire for death or total submission. On the contrary, anger is a reaction to the difficulty *and* necessity of being able to act collectively in the

face of extreme inequality. *Desubjugation*, for Lorde, is a practice that consists of a struggle to find a necessary yet impossible common ground, a struggle to come together that can only ever be realized in the future and only ever in the conjunctive.

The context in which Lorde addresses this issue is among others through relationships between Black and white women. She establishes that it is no simple feat for Black and white women to form a collective. The rifts that divide them are still too great: the lack of knowledge, the injuries, the inequalities and the innumerable and institutionalized forms of injustice are overwhelming. Writing a common history means acknowledging how history has been different for the different women involved. Lorde finds that "while white women are beginning to examine their relationships to Black women," they only seem to want "to deal with the little colored children across the roads of childhood" or "the[ir] beloved nursemaid[s]," Black women are more concerned with examining "the acute message of your mommy's handkerchief spread upon the park bench because I had just been sitting there" or "your daddy's humorous bedtime stories."[14] The dissonances brought to light by this memory work then emerge as the first possibility of creating a common frame of reference. Anger is a way of expressing differences, simultaneously separating *and* linking them, and is an adequate medium for producing new and subversive relations within a racist and sexist system.

Although anger may serve as a point of connection as it is directed towards others, it still fails to render them equal. It implies the challenge to re-define differences that systems of domination have negated, downplayed, or even mystified. Lorde writes, "Anger is a grief of distortion between peers, and its object is to change."[15] When read in this manner, anger is a means of breaking up hegemonic narratives and creating new languages for alternative

narratives. Judith Butler's considerations of critique as something which does not follow any given category, but instead "constitutes an interrogatory relation to the field of categorization itself [...],"[16] can be linked to Audre Lorde's endeavor to find new ways to speak about the relationships between Black and white women. Lorde does not propose a congruous counter-narrative, but instead seeks to *disrupt* white women's hegemonic narratives by incorporating different knowledge, for example, by speaking about a park bench that a white mother covers with a handkerchief after a Black person sat on it or a white father who tells his white child a racist bedtime stories they find amusing. In doing so, she points to the limitations of memory work and to a specifically white form of amnesia. However, she also creates new relations, and although the scenario on the park bench is not a nice story, it is the story of a shared (hi)story. New forms of collectivity emerge through the work on ruptures within epistemological fields.

For Lorde, as for von Roten, there is an interrelation between anger, resistance, language, and knowledge. The orientation of the anger directed to the outside realm, however, is quite different for both authors. Von Roten's critique is aimed directly at the system of dominance and thus more indirectly at the people who possibly find this system disquieting. Von Roten demands change and it would be incorrect to insinuate that her writing is not addressed to others also interested in change. Her first step however is to confront the methods and logics of the system along with its legitimacies and demands. In this way her approach is similar to Foucault's. Lorde, on the other hand, primarily aims to reach those who also seek to challenge the predominant forms of domination, which is clear in the dialogues she formally incorporates in her piece. She speaks to a collective that can be conceived as a collaboration of all those who seek to resist being governed and

aims to “examine and redefine the terms upon which we live and work.”[17] Lorde seeks to create a “we,” even if it can only be realized by means of offense, confrontation, and dissonance. The incorporation of collectivity as part of critique is what sets her approach apart from others.

Critique and Affect

The attempt to connect anger and critique opens up several questions that will remain unanswered here, including how we can conceive of anger that coincides with the exertion of oppression. Another question that remains is also under which circumstances we can and cannot make use of anger —for example when lethargy, indifference, or resignation take the place of anger. Moreover, anger is often instrumentalized, strongly linked to fear and, subsequently, becomes directed at the wrong subjects or contexts. Another questionable issue is related to the other affects that inform the practice of critique. Does anger play a more prominent role than sarcasm, arrogance, or austerity? Or would it not be more appropriate to put forth an analytics of affects in terms of critique?

The aim of this article however is not to provide a comprehensive analysis of critique and affect. Instead, I have aimed to underscore a certain *formal similarity* betweencritique and anger. Anger is inextricably and unmistakably entangled in the power it seeks to challenge and which it is subjugated to. In this vein, it resembles the figure of critique in Foucauldian terms: anger and critique are reactions to something, directed against something, and their meaning is derived from this antagonism in which they are also involved.[18] The question that remains is how to challenge the deep-seated occidental distinction between intellect and affect in order to outline a critique that considers outrage, anger and wrath

as part of it. Angry critique therefore comes from a place of being directly affected, as it clearly demonstrates *how* certain lives are foreclosed while others are enabled. Anger is thus aimed at the carefully protected economically administered relations between proximity and distance and objectification and objectivization in an attempt to organize them differently.

The power of anger, as Iris von Roten clearly expresses, could lie in its *invalidating* relation to knowledge: in its refusal of hegemonic justifications of power and the continuation of the governing practices that facilitate them. Audre Lorde establishes a *validating* relation to anger by confronting other subjects with knowledge that is likely to disrupt the predominant order, a relation through which a difference emerges that enables the formation of a new basis for collective action. Hers is a theory that does not predefine the collective as specific mode or aim of critique, but as one that conceives of collectivity as the very condition for critique.

Judith Butler, "What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault's Virtue." http://transform.eipcp.net/transversal/0806/butler/en.

Michel Foucault, "What is Critique?" in *The Politics of Truth*, eds. Sylvère Lotringer and Lysa Hochroth. New York: Semiotext(e), 1997 [1978].

Audre Lorde, "The Uses of Anger" in: ibid *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Berkeley: Crossing Press 1984, pp. 124-133.

Iris von Roten, *Frauen im Laufgitter. Offene Worte zur Stellung der Frau*, eFeF: Zurich 1991.

[1] Foucault 1997 [1978], p. 29.

[2] Foucault 1997 [1978], p. 26.

[3] Foucault 1997 [1978], p. 28.

[4] Cf Foucault 1997 [1978], p. 32.

[5] [Author's translation.] Iris von Roten, *Frauen im Laufgitter. Offene Worte zur Stellung der Frau*, eFeF: Zurich 1991, p. 5.

[6] [Author's translation] Ibid., p. 420.

[7] [Author's translation] Ibid.

[8] [Author's translation] Ibid., p. 5.

[9] Judith Butler, "What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault's Virtue." http://transform.eipcp.net/transversal/0806/butler/en

[10] Audre Lorde, "The Uses of Anger" in: ibid *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*.

Berkeley: Crossing Press 1984, pp. 124-133.

[11] Ibid., p. 132.

[12] Ibid., p. 130.

[13] Ibid., p. 129.

[14] Ibid., pp. 125-126.

[15] Ibid., pp. 129.

[16] Judith Butler, “What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault’s Virtue.” http://transform.eipcp.net/transversal/0806/butler/en

[17] Audre Lorde, “The Uses of Anger” in: ibid *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*.

Berkeley: Crossing Press 1984, pp. 124-133, p. 133.

[18] Michel Foucault, “What is Critique?” in *The Politics of Truth*, eds. Sylvère Lotringer and Lysa Hochroth. New York: Semiotext(e), 1997.