



FRANKFURT RESEARCH CENTER
for POSTCOLONIAL STUDIES

NORMATIVE ORDERS
Exzellenzcluster an der Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main



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In conversation with Nikita Dhawan & María do Mar Castro Varela

What is Critique?

Saturday, 21st May 2011, 18-21h,

**Campus Westend, Hörsaalzentrum, HS 1 (Audimax)
Grüneburgplatz 1, Goethe-University Frankfurt**

Frankfurt Research Center for Postcolonial Studies
Cluster of Excellence "The Formation of Normative Orders"
Goethe University Frankfurt

Free admission. Limited seats.
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Persistently to critique a structure that one cannot not (wish to) inhabit... (Spivak)

...it is from this condition, the tear in the fabric of our epistemological web, that the practice of critique emerges (Butler)

What does the practice of critique entail? What does it mean to exercise *ruthless* critique *here and now*? What are the sources from which the necessity and urgency of critique emerges? In contrast to the understanding of critique as fault-finding, negative evaluation, legitimate rejection or condemnation, a critical understanding of critique unfolds it to be a process of production and revelation of crisis. As a mode of radical questioning, of unsettling self-evident answers, of interfering in established relations of power, it is simultaneously a self-critical process. The standard understanding of criticism privileges an Archimedean point that is positioned outside the context it seeks to critique. This assumes the validity of its own perspective prior to the practice of criticism that remains unquestioned. In the process it does not problematize its own criteria and position and thereby ends up stabilizing the prevalent power relations. But there is no position beyond power to exercise critique; rather it entails the questioning of the constitutive violence of dominant theories, concepts and norms. Critique thereby becomes an intervention, a resistance to conformity, a tool that can bring the production of truths into crisis. It disrupts secure foundations, interrupts the functioning of discourses, not to substitute them with more accurate alternative epistemes, but to reveal the complexity, contingency and violence of our “regimes of truth”. Critique may thereby be understood as an exercise of exposing “constellations of power”, of *voluntary insubordination*, of desubjugation. The aim of understanding the practice of critique is not a mere exercise of investigating the content of the act critique, but to explore the accompanying processes of subject-formation that the mode of questioning as well as the reflection on the processes of critique bring about. This is neither about exposure of error, nor about good or bad, right or wrong according to accepted standards. It is neither a method nor a theoretical position, rather critique is an exploration of how it may be possible to think otherwise – persistently denaturalizing and historicising the order of things. It is a practice in which we pose the question of the limits of our most sure ways of knowing, doing and thinking. It entails a crisis of the epistemological framing of our worlds. Consequently, a critical attitude is carried out by the willingness to submit fundamental truths to questioning, a refusal to accept anything on faith or authority. In doing so, the practice of critique entails risk-taking, a putting oneself in danger in the face of existing power. It is *ruthless* in the sense that it does not fear its own consequences.