10 Dissent, Hierarchy, and Value Creation: Liberalism and the Problem of Critique

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Freedom of Entry

In 2013, two artists were summoned to fix a problem. Property vacancy rates were at a post-recession high in Ireland, and Offaly County was one of the worst hit, the midlands region blighted by unoccupied buildings in newly developed town centres. Echoing similar strategies in other parts of the country, the County Council and Arts Council funded a contemporary art festival and invited both up-and-coming and established artists from the region and further afield. Their presence, it was hoped, might encourage residents to consume and become familiar with contemporary art, a project that funders hoped might stoke enthusiasm for a new arts centre planned in town. The two artists in question, Avril Corroon and Kerry Guinan, were more cynical. To them, this seemed like a familiar effort to deploy art as a political strategy through which funders and developers could regenerate depressed urban landscapes, adding value to derelict neighbourhoods while distracting from the fact that their solutions were temporary stopgaps for long-running structural inequalities.

Both third-year students at the National College of Art and Design in Dublin, Avril and Kerry were involved in activist campaigns critical of the then-government's response to the crash and speculative investment in the property market. At face value, they seemed like appropriate candidates for the job: young, politically engaged artists keen for the exposure a festival exhibition would bring and eager to address the infrastructural fallout of the recession. But the festival organizers were in for an unexpected twist.

The artists were given access to an unoccupied building in the centre of a town called Tullamore and told they could convert the space into a "pop-up exhibition" for the duration of the festival. While they were theoretically given free rein in designing the space, the festival curator evidently had in mind a familiar variety of contemporary art exhibition: a vacant, retail building through which the public might amble, lingering on pleasantly confounding art objects

and, as the ideal vision would have it, enlivening a derelict site with their public presence and amenable discussion. Art, following this line of thinking, was a powerful tool for creating a sense of belonging and social effervescence in areas where the local community had been displaced by exclusionary processes of regeneration. Avril and Kerry were aware, and deeply critical, of this ambition, and as Kerry said, particularly of the role art was intended to play as an "instrument" through which to "legitimize" the processes of deurbanization, property speculation, and housing collapse – in which the funders were, in their view, complicit.

So, they took the concept of creative licence to its extreme logical conclusion. Once they were granted access to the building, they made a hundred copies of the keys and deeds and distributed them to households in a half-mile radius, along with a notice granting the recipients unconstrained access to the property, with which, they were told, they could do whatever they pleased. As they distributed envelopes through mail slots, residents emerged from their homes to enquire amongst themselves, in an image of public exchange markedly distinct from the one the festival organizers had in mind.

Later, as Avril and Kerry distractedly sipped coffees in a nearby shopping centre, a clearly piqued woman thundered past the window, notice in hand, and stormed into the local Citizens Information Centre. As it transpired, a group of residents had entered the building. Shocked and suspicious when his key actually opened the front door, one man called the landlord, who called the festival organizers. Within two hours of opening, the "exhibition" was shut down. Given one more chance to "put something in the room," Avril and Kerry offered the keys and deed, which were displayed in the shopfront window after their artistic intervention.

Subsequently entitled *Freedom of Entry*, this "art act" exhibits hallmark features of the genre of art to which my interlocutors ascribe. In 2016–17, I conducted fieldwork with left-wing artist-activists, the majority of whom lived, worked, and organized in a network of informal collectives, squats, and occupations that had cropped up in vacant sites in the years after the recession. All of them were invested in disruptive and uncomfortable genres of artistic production, and many of them lived in gentrifying neighbourhoods near controversial regenerations and social housing demolitions. Driven by event-based actions, art acts like the one described above are designed to confuse, interrupt, and reorder public space, often through what interlocutors described as "over-identification" with, or "over-performance" of, the object of critique. These art acts involve a selection of mundane objects and spaces, difficult to distinguish as "works of art," or of disorienting and satirical performances in the city streets. "Traces" of the act are often subsequently exhibited and discussed with other artists and members of the public in galleries and open question-and-answer sessions. The objective is thus to deploy art as a means

through which to draw attention to, and provide a forum for discussing, the limits of contemporary governance, drawing on humour, parody, and absurdity. The goal is to jar a public audience into internalizing novel critical views of everyday life and considering possible alternatives.

As I have argued elsewhere (Morningstar 2021), artists' engagement with public space, and their style of critique, is a classic instance of what Michel Foucault describes as cynical *parrhesia. Parrhesia* is often defined as the "duty" (Foucault 2019, 65) to speak truth to power from a position of inferiority, and it is thus a productive tool for thinking about the politics of public expression and free speech, as this volume argues. However, another vein of Foucault's thinking on *parrhesia* is less concerned with speech than with the political potential of controversial public spectacle. Foucault's thinking on this subject is concerned with the long tradition, from ancient cynicism to modern art, political radicalism, and religious reformism, of manifesting politically dangerous ideas in public space not only through "critical preaching" and combative "dialogue" but also through "scandalous behaviour" (169). What makes these parrhesiastic forms cynical is the impulse to maintain a polemical attitude in relation to social norms and public figures and institutions. Through the display of unpleasant forms of taboo, absurdism, or contradiction, the cynical parrhesiast can galvanize a public audience, encouraging spectators to "internalize" the parrhesiast's cynical attitude and to become capable of viewing the world afresh through cynical eyes (181). As Foucault observed, in many modern and contemporary artistic movements, this is accomplished by mobilizing public culture against itself, treating art as a tool for critiquing cultural production from within. In Ireland, as elsewhere, this means appealing to forms of intentionally anti-social cultural production like the art acts described above: instead of facilitating a pleasurable encounter between artist and audience, the artist turns art itself into a conduit for staging a cynical revelation.

That said, the parrhesiast is a contradictory public figure, and the artist is a clear example of the reasons why. The parrhesiast is both a person of sufficient "status" (Foucault 2019, 118) that they can command the attention of a wide public and those in power, and one who makes themselves vulnerable to marginalization and the anger of a crowd (44). This chapter is interested in what this fact means for the contemporary status of critique – ranging from artistic rebellion to provocative speech – in liberal democracies. My focus is not on *parrhesia* per se but on a related problem: the question of how we should make sense of the fact that in liberal democracies, public criticism, even when it appears risky or provocative, can function to consolidate the critic's prestige, cement social hierarchies, and energize the elites nominally targeted with criticism. To address this, I set two bodies of literature, one anthropological and one sociological, in conversation with Foucault's thinking on liberalism.

First, I examine the work of Dominic Boyer and Alexei Yurchak on over-identification and the politics of indistinction in socialist, Soviet, and post-Soviet contexts (Boyer 2001; Yurchak 2003, 2008a, 2008b, 2013), and, more recently, in Euro-American liberal democracies (Boyer 2013; Boyer and Yurchak 2008, 2010). It is worth noting that these anthropologists have acted as a direct inspiration for some of my interlocutors, who – like Kerry – are aware of Yurchak's use of the word "over-identification" and of the artistic movements these anthropologists describe. Drawing on Natalia Roudakova's (2017) critique of this body of work, I argue that the parodic forms of over-identification Boyer and Yurchak describe should, however, be contextualized differently in liberal democracies versus in Soviet and post-Soviet contexts. In order to expand on why, I turn to Luc Boltanski, Eve Chiapello, Arnaud Esquerre, and Laurent Thévenot's work on capitalism, critique, and value (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006; Boltanski and Chiapello 1999, 2005; Boltanski and Esquerre 2015, 2020). These sociologists of critique argue that capitalism is distinctive for its ability to consume critique and transform it into a source of value creation or enrichment for a wealthy class.

In this way, their account of provocative public criticism chimes with Foucault's understanding of liberalism. Foucault (2008, 27) observed that one of the core features of liberalism, as distinct from the forms of statecraft that preceded it, is the explicit emphasis placed on "limit[ing] the exercise of government power internally." Liberalism is, as Foucault writes, remarkable for the serious attention it places on practising the "art of the least possible government" (28) or of "frugal government" (29). However, Foucault also notes that this limitation on governance is *itself* a technique of rule, an intensification of forms of rule that rely on explicit shows of force and a strategy for "perfecting" these forms of statecraft more fully (28). Moreover, liberalism accomplishes this by protecting certain "sites of truth" (30) – spaces in which truth is thought to emerge under natural and just conditions, outside state interference. Foucault was interested in how the market functioned as one such site of truth. I am interested here in how free speech and provocative public spectacle serve a similar function. As many vocal critics of free speech argue, the notion of free speech is perhaps best understood as an ideal type, a powerful political concept that serves the interests of some over others and can function to undercut public criticism and political action (Roberts 2004; Jack 2004; Fish 1994). Taking inspiration from these and other thinkers, I argue that we should recentre analyses of power asymmetry, political interest, and value hierarchies in ethnographies of the liberal democratic public sphere.

Ultimately, then, the above sociologists of critique offer essential context for Boyer's and Yurchak's accounts of parody as a reaction against a narrowing of hegemonic discourses and ideologies in liberal democratic public life. They demonstrate that capitalism and liberalism thrive on such critical practices.

More than this, the rise of cynical varieties of public criticism demonstrate that it is democracy, not liberalism or capitalism, that is at risk. To this end, I conclude by reflecting on the late work of critical historian of liberalism, Domenico Losurdo (2011), who insists that contemporary Euro-American politics are characterized by a renewed tension between liberal and democratic principles.

The Docklands

On an uncharacteristically balmy Saturday in autumn 2016, I stood under the bike shelter at a tram stop in central Dublin. A thin haze of rain came in fits and spurts, and as I stood sipping tepid coffee from a thermos, a small crowd began converging. Some were tourists, clad in the unmistakable leprechaun-dotted poncho then on sale at most corner shops in the city centre. They smiled hesitantly at each other, striking up quiet conversations about the weather or the surrounding area. The neighbourhood was distinctive for the metal and glass skyscrapers and hotels that punctured the skyline, jostling up against neoclassical and Georgian buildings in the city's historic quarter. The other arrivals, however, were of a different sort. Styled in muted monotones and minimalist fashions, they were immediately recognizable as art enthusiasts. As they gathered in groups of familiar acquaintances, they chatted comfortably. This latter group would be the critical mass of the audience at an experimental art production programed as part of a festival.

After purchasing tickets, we were given no other information than that we would have to meet at a given location in the financial quarter. The area is remarkable for its recent rapid redevelopment. It is the part of the city in which a striking number of tech companies, start-ups, and luxury hotels and flats have replaced small businesses, public housing estates, industrial facilities, and brownstone row-houses – all hallmarks of Dublin's historically working-class neighbourhoods. Equally controversial, several new builds in the area were left vacant or underused after the recession, and at a time in which housing was prohibitively expensive and scarce. It was in the vacant and partially constructed ground floor of one such building that we were – at this point unknowingly – to attend a "pop-up" performance, the subject of which was the "invasion" of corporate development and the toll the housing and financial crisis had taken on the millennial generation, now in search of both work and stable housing in Ireland.

As the clock ticked past the meeting time, the crowd became restless. People began ambling outside the shelter. One man craned his head this way and that, peering through gold-rimmed glasses, while his companion scrolled perfunctorily through her Instagram feed, propped up on the seat of a locked bicycle. Just then, a woman appeared around the corner of a nearby building and approached the crowd. She was slight and wearing a lavender leotard, a spray of

reeds and flowers belted around her waist. Her face was solemn and her gait steady and deliberate, and as she approached the group, each person's attention was progressively trained on her. When she was in speaking distance of the crowd, she stopped and cryptically gestured for us to follow her.

As we drew near the base of the building, the artist turned to face the crowd and explained the structure of the event. After following her to the backside of the building, we would be let into the foyer of a luxury apartment complex under construction. After that point, a performance would start, and we would be told where to go next. On the way to the entrance, the ground would be strewn with the flowers tied around her body, carefully selected, she explained, from the various invasive species multiplying in the docklands due to the environmental disruption caused by rapid development. This would be our "trace" left on this "private landscape" and its "invisible strictures" – normally inaccessible to any-one who didn't pay to use it – the only remnants of a site-specific performance as ephemeral as the urban landscape, and one through which, it became increas-ingly clear, we were meant to critically engage with the consequences of exclu-sionary redevelopment. She went on to explain that this critical encounter was a privilege: that they had gotten "special permission" to host the show in this setting and that we would be part of a select group of people fortunate enough to witness this "out-of-place" artistic incursion onto the urban landscape.

We followed her past a series of pristine, identically apportioned new studio apartments, very few of which were occupied. A young man in a white-col-lared shirt, socks, and underpants ironed a pair of trousers while watching foot-ball on TV. As we approached, he looked up sheepishly, surprised at the crowd of strangers sidling past his window. As we entered the foyer, we were met with a handful of festival volunteers wearing matching T-shirts, each of whom checked our tickets and silently corralled us along a bank of newly installed windows, stickers still plastered across their panes. The interior of the building was bare concrete, with a few pieces of construction equipment and cans of paint concealed behind a makeshift barrier made of plastic wrap and reflective silver panelling, a sequence of abstract video clips flickering on and off in quick succession on the cling-film surface. The building was labyrinthine, with several semi-finished rooms partially concealing the full extent of the space. Each audience member appeared as confused as the next, though for many, the mystification was clearly cause for excitement. As we gathered, the group maintained an inquisitive silence.

Standing before us was a man dressed in shades of natural greens, greys, and blues and wearing a deadpan expression with his gaze trained on the wall behind us. Slowly, one by one, six performers emerged from behind the walls, all dressed in the same muted tones, and assembled around the first man. As each performer arrived, they silently laid a hand on his face. They then began to sing softly, their voices amplifying strangely in the cavernous space.

In turn, each performer then removed their hand, and with it their voice, be-fore assembling in a line facing diagonally away from the audience. From this point onward, the performance became increasingly abstract. Punctuated by several reprisals of the singers' initial piece, the performers began unravelling a tape deck while holding tape in their mouths, forming a heap of dismantled cassettes that would subsequently be tangled and untangled at various points throughout the performance. In another sequence, the woman who guided us to the building walked around the room straightening the backs of her slowly slumping companions as another woman rubbed soap on the windows. One performer then made extreme convulsive motions with her arm before striding purposefully away from the audience, as two performers began singing about the River Liffey flowing "deeply, swiftly," about "water rushing in," an appar-ent reference to the momentum behind the initial speculative years of the crisis. As the piece neared its conclusion, two men took off their shirts and drank water frantically from two cups, spilling almost all of it on the floor at their feet and choking – seemingly genuinely – on their own saliva.

The Contradictions of Cynical Critique

Elements of the performance were recognizable as a critique of the years lead-ing up to and after the recession. Empty policy promises sung out in chorus and performances of the artists' bodies being burdened and overwhelmed by substances could be interpreted as commentary on the unstinted – and in the artists' view, unnatural – flow of unsustainable forms of capital investment into the city. What words were sung or spoken were shot through with the language of invasion and flooding, unsustainability and panic. More straightforwardly, the performance was designed to spotlight an unused, high-value site at the centre of recent redevelopment, one to which the audience would not otherwise have access, and which was therefore singled out as a physical manifestation of the unequal distribution of wealth and resources. By granting us privileged access – for the price of a €14 ticket – the performance was escalating the very logic subject to criticism: that space is not a public resource but a luxury to be bought, a reality that would feel very real to those in the room who had come of age during the housing crisis and who held precarious, project-based em-ployment in the creative sector.

Yet in other respects, the performance was cryptic and insular. At times, it felt more about platforming the artists' idiosyncratic experiences of the reces-sion, on the assumption that their role as artists left them especially capable of communicating this in a revelatory fashion. For the same reason, for some in the room, the performance appeared less illuminating than confounding. It was thus the case that the event generated a combined sense of exclusivity, obscu-rity, and critical awakening, and it did this by marking out a physical space in

the city, and a social encounter, as simultaneously revelatory, bewildering, and anointed.

Indeed, the production of extraordinary and clandestine spaces and social scenes was a feature of artists' lives more generally in the post-recession period. Often, they socialized in semi-hidden cafes or art spaces, tacitly acknowledged as sites where artists might gather. Yet like the performance I attended in the docklands, these spaces were also frequently funded or maintained by the Dublin City Council (DCC), and the artists in them the recipients of other forms of state-subsidized support. Indeed, in the years after the recession, as vacant spaces proliferated in the wake of a series of bankruptcies and foreclosures, the DCC explicitly turned to artists to revitalize these vacant spaces. Through programs such as Per Cent for Art Scheme and Creative Ireland, as well as "creative city" development models (Florida 2002, 2005, 2008; Kong 2014; Kong and O'Connor 2009; Lawton, Murphy, and Redmond 2010), the state explicitly framed artists as powerful allies for revitalizing the economy and increasing property values in so-called blighted neighbourhoods. It was thus precisely when artists' public criticism was most relevant to the transformations affecting everyday people's lives that they became politically "instrumentalised" (Guinan 2016).

Artists were keenly aware of this fact, which caused enormous concern: many commented on the ironic ease with which they could take up alternative forms of work and life and produce anti-cultural artwork during periods of economic downturn, as it was during these periods that they were of greatest economic and social utility to the state. Artists attributed this to what they called "co-optation," or the inevitability that sincere but aggressive forms of public criticism would be absorbed by policy programs as evidence of the health of the public sphere and the edginess and desirability of contemporary artistic production in Ireland rather than treated as truly subversive, impactful claims about those in power. As one artist interlocutor, Aaron, noted, the "creative futuristic thinking" increasingly dominant in city planning, tech, and finance meant that developers, politicians, and other stakeholders were adept at repurposing the language of creativity precisely to undercut the political punch of public criticism. Aaron had experienced this first-hand when the DCC had earmarked his arts space as part of a Strategic Development Zone, a designation nominally designed to platform creative enterprise, community building, and cultural production, but which functioned practically to facilitate the coercive eviction and sale of his thriving community arts space to the CEO of a major Silicon Valley tech company. As Aaron knew well, those in power were adept at speaking the language of creativity and dynamism in order to consolidate wealth and power: to use his words, "creativity and the language of creativity can be very quickly and easily co-opted to justify development patterns that curtail the very thing they pretend to ride on."

Aaron used the example of the "creative workspace," popular in creative and tech start-ups at the time, to further elucidate his point. These spaces would adopt the rebellious DIY and punk aesthetics common in artist studios, galleries, and other creative spaces to attract young workers and add an ephemeral sense of hipness and social value to the surrounding area. These spaces would present as being all about creativity, independent thinking, and free play, and yet they would function practically to exploit young workers employed on temporary contracts for start-ups platformed to kick-start economic growth in declining neighbourhoods – often in proximity to social housing estates undergoing forced evictions and derelictions. These spaces would push a "hang out culture" and a "cool, creative, and egalitarian" (Gill 2002) ethos to encourage forms of work that would otherwise appear straightforwardly troubling. Putting on the exaggerated tones of a cool, creative "tech bro," Aaron drawled, "Stay until 8 o'clock! Hang out! Why would you go home? You can eat here! Come meditate with me! It's *cool*!" For Aaron, this was one of innumerable examples in which the façade of artistic rebellion and creative innovation could be converted into a form of explicit value creation. In the process, any genuinely dangerous ideas or potential that lay in the artistic movements or spaces from which these aesthetics were borrowed would be overwritten by a spirit of "hipness."

This process tightly tracks Boltanski and Chiapellos's account of how critique functions as an engine of value creation in capitalist contexts. Boltanski and Chiapello's (2005, 163) work is focused on "capitalism's amazing ability to survive by endogenizing some of the criticisms it faces." They describe how capitalism actually "needs enemies, people who have a strong dislike for it and who want to wage war against it" (163). Crucially, it is through consuming its enemies that capitalism gains the kind of moral foundations that appear absent when it is treated, as Foucault argues, as a site of natural or spontaneous truth: capitalism's critics are "the people who provide it with the moral foundations that it lacks" (163). In *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Boltanski and Chiapello (1999) describe how artistic critique in particular has therefore been thoroughly incorporated in the last several decades. This form of criticism "vindicates an ideal of liberation and/or of individual autonomy, singularity, and authenticity" (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, 176) and has become central to the new management practices of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries that push a reimagination of the labourer as a wellspring of inspiration, flexibility, and dynamism. As a result, though artistic criticism was once central to left-wing radical activist ideologies, "supporters of artistic criticism have been co-opted into the power elite" (178). Artistic criticism has thus steadily transformed from a form of dissidence to an extraordinarily powerful tool through which to harness a certain kind of citizen-subject and manage workers in capitalist economies: it has become a technique of value creation and of rule.

In their recent book, Boltanski and Esquerre (2020) describe this process as a cornerstone of what they call an "economy of enrichment." They use this term to describe "the forms of wealth creation that are based on the economic exploitation of the past" (Boltanski and Esquerre 2015, 76). The rise of economies of enrichment signal, for them, a macroeconomic trend: "towards an economic order organized around the production of expensiveness" for a "wealthy class" keen on objects with an "aura" of "exceptionality" that mark them out as singular, unique, and distinctive (80). Among the examples given are a range of "exceptional items sought by a well-to-do public … for example, art objects or antiquities, luxury goods, houses associated with artists or architects, and so on" (Boltanski and Esquerre 2020, 21). These objects are not valued for their use but for the distinction they confer on those who transact them, which occurs by raising the publicity and uniqueness of the (aspiring) elite consumer. For them, this trend unites the rise of finance capitalism characteristic of neo-liberalism and the celebrity culture and publicity politics sociologists have argued increasingly shape public and private life. As they note, along with an economy of enrichment, we also witness the rise of an "economy of attention," as "increasing importance is attributed not only to the objects themselves but also to the universes in which the objects are conceived and in which they circulate – and above all to the human beings surrounding them, whether these be 'creators' … or 'personalities'" (23).

One need not go far to see the logics of enrichment in action. The examples they give are familiar, of arts spaces or monumental architecture employed to re-enliven urban centres that have suffered a decline in secure manufacturing employment (e.g., the construction of Gehry's Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, the reinvention of Nantes as a city of art). Even where enrichment appears future oriented, there is a sense that these projects root a given space in a historical narrative about the identity, heritage, tradition, or authenticity of a place, which then adds value. A core argument of Boltanski and Esquerre's book is thus that we are not witnessing post-industrialization but a displacement of industrial production to the Global South and the margins of the Global North, with the spaces that once functioned as the engine room of industrial capitalism reclaimed for the enrichment of a wealthy global class, and upwardly mobile consumers keen to jockey for publicity through proximity to sources of distinction.

As noted above, in Ireland, this has taken shape through the explicit incorporation of pop-up and temporary arts projects in derelict properties as part of an entirely explicit set of policies that fund short-term creative enterprises and arts spaces to return property value and cultural caché to neighbourhoods earmarked for regeneration. The vignette with which this chapter opens is a case in point. In this sense, artists, their work, and their use of space can be understood as an exemplification of the possibilities and limits of critique in

liberal democracies. Artists actively sought out spaces at the margins of controversial redevelopments, where they hoped they might exploit the cracks in ambitious policy programs to probe political alternatives. Yet their presence in these spaces was overtly "co-opted" for the purposes of economic revitalization, their anti-cultural critical attitudes deployed as a desirable paradigm for critical citizenship – precisely because this critique wasn't thought to pose any real threat, and their presence could be explicitly incorporated in policy documents as evidence of "vibrancy" and "community." Indeed, in a variety of policy initiatives in the years after 2008, the then-government frequently cited the profusion of artists and artistic spaces in the city as evidence of Dublin's status as a European capital of culture – a cosmopolitan city capable of attracting a creative and upwardly mobile consumer base who might be lured in by the ephemeral sense of the city's cultural magnetism. This was true even as the cost of living was rising to record heights, outpaced only by those recorded in the current cost-of-living crisis, and the housing crisis was among the most acute in Europe.

Thus, artistic critique – however parodic, satirical, or non-sensical – was easily exploited by political figures for whom a demonstration of the proliferation of radical criticism could be leveraged as evidence of the health of the public sphere, as a tool for generating value, *and* as a tactic to distract from simmering underlying structural inequalities. At the same time, and to make matters more complicated, artists' ability to engage in critical public expression in the first instance was conditional on being granted a platform, public funding, and a critical voice by the same well-positioned actors. Artists were therefore cynical. Critique was double-edged: it acted as a tantalizing conduit to sincere truth-seeking, which they imagined undertaking on behalf of an equally cynical and downtrodden public, yet by virtue of its relative exclusivity, their critique was also a confirmation of the hierarchies that continued to structure the public sphere. This fact would sometimes convince them that there was little point in artistic criticism, as it ultimately appeared to serve the powerful. Staying quiet and remaining "hidden in plain sight," as Aaron put it, was sometimes the safest route to protecting alternative forms of work and life from the logics of co-optation.

Critique and Value Creation

In order to unpack this vexed relationship between critique, hierarchy, and value it is worth turning to a recent body of comparative anthropological work on artistic production, dissidence, and public criticism. My focus here is on what is distinctive about the relationship between critique, hierarchy, and value creation in liberal democratic contexts, which these anthropologists illuminate through comparison with ethnographic accounts of critique under

illiberal conditions. Boyer and Yurchak's work is especially illustrative. They have explored how we might theorize forms of dissidence not easily classed as opposition or resistance. To do so, they have examined the conditions of possibility of dissent in political contexts in which the constraints placed on public expression are sufficiently punitive that dissidents have been forced to explore ways of rendering their activities unintelligible to state surveillance. From the perestroika USSR to German Democratic Republic (GDR) Berlin, these are spaces in which overt displays of hostility towards those in power is not an option, as they would be met with violent retribution (Yurchak 2013; Boyer 2001). Moreover, owing to the formal consistency, or hegemony of form, of political ideologies and discourses, all overtly "political" action is absorbed by hegemonic discourses, interpolated as either consistent with or a threat to state ideology. It is in contexts like these that we see the rise of *stiob* – absurd, parodic overidentification with the object of criticism. By over-performing the absurdities of political discourse, dissident artistic movements can carve out a space of indistinction resistant to the logics of state surveillance.

A clear and crucial difference between a liberal democratic context like Dublin and the perestroika USSR or GDR Berlin is, of course, the extent and quality of political repression in the public sphere. Yet there is also a striking similarity between these contexts. As Boyer and Yurchak (2008, 2010) argue, both exhibit a "hegemony of form" in public discourse and political ideologies (see also Boyer 2013). Indeed, it is for this reason that they claim we are witnessing an uptick in parodic, absurd critique in Euro-American liberal democracies. They attribute this to a narrowing of what are considered acceptable forms of public criticism and political ideologies. Following this reading, liberalism is, as in the late years of the Soviet Union, undergoing a self-imposed collapse, whereby its core ideological values and discursive practices are becoming overly formally consistent and hollowed out, rendering them ripe for parodic criticism. This literature thus sees this style of parodic critique as a warning bell for the health of the liberal democratic public sphere.

Yet as Natalia Roudakova (2017) notes, the above analysis is less focused on how or why these forms of criticism gain ascension or the relationship between critique and hierarchy. In her recent ethnography of truth-seeking in the press in Russia, Roudakova insists that this fact cannot be overlooked. Indeed, she argues that without appreciating the ways in which social class impacts on the kind of critique one finds plausible, we could not understand the contemporary erosion of truth as a value in Russian public and political life. Roudakova examines how hierarchy relates to cynical forms of critique like *stiob*. As Roudakova writes, *stiob* was not just a canny strategy for protecting critique, pursued at the margins by side-lined dissident actors: "*stiob* also worked as a class and education marker among soviet artists and intellectuals. Instantly recognizing *stiob* for what it was, Soviet intellectuals could mark their distance

from the presumably naïve others who might be confused by the ambiguity of *stiob*" (182). *Stiob* was thus an ambiguous tool of disorientation, one Roudakova argues became increasingly compelling to "friends of power" (181) after the collapse of the Soviet Union. This "new *stiob*" (181) is an intensification of the form Yurchak describes among Soviet dissidents in that it has lost any elements of sincerity. It is marked by a distinctively cynical orientation not only to those in power, but to all ideological commitments. It "mocks from no place of conviction; it is passionless mockery" (183). Roudakova thus offers a counter-interpretation of *stiob* as not only a tool for carving out a space of indistinction but also for accumulating prestige and vying for power. The *stiob*-like cynicism of friends of power has functioned in Russia and further afield as an intermediary between elite actors and the public. As Roudakova argues, "friends of power" – especially "cultural producers" (181) – become key mediators between "the cynicism of the powerful and the powerless" (181). These intermediary critics are significant because they are able to command the attention of and maintain popularity with "nonelite audiences," as both express the same "variety of cynicism" and therefore appear to share interests (181). These kinds of critics can therefore straightforwardly serve the powerful, who can platform these actors strategically to tactically exploit feelings of disenchantment and, ultimately, to consolidate power.

If we return to the sociologists of critique discussed above, this analysis has clear ramifications beyond illiberal Russia. Roudakova helps us understand how cynical criticism, of the type my interlocutors practise, could be politically useful for the elite actors targeted by their critique. These artists are, in some regards, "friends of power." They may not act as ideological mouthpieces of the political class in the way that partisan journalists do in illiberal Russia, but they are platformed by the actors and institutions in relation to which they maintain a polemical, cynical attitude. The DCC, developers, politicians, and arts institutions offer them a soapbox on which to practise a form of public criticism that serves those political actors precisely *because* they are the target of criticism. It appears to prove that those in power facilitate space for dissent, and it generates for those actors enormous capital, in the form of property wealth and immaterial assets. This is by no means the artists' fault, and it occurs despite artists' often most vigorous attempts to resist this process. It is nonetheless an extremely important and distinctive problem that besets critique in liberal democracies. In liberal democratic states, criticism does not need to toe the party line, so to speak, for it to serve political interests. The expression of bracing public dissent can itself function as a route to value creation and as a politically expedient confirmation of the health of the public sphere. A key difference between liberal and illiberal states is thus indeed that dissent is institutionally protected in the former and often radically constrained in the latter. This fact of course matters. But so too does another important truism: that

publicly platformed dissent can itself be harnessed with extraordinary ease for purposes other than those that serve the interests of the critic – whether that be the people or the artist. Criticism is, in other words, entirely political, and our attention should therefore always be on whose interests it serves.

Conclusion

This chapter has focused on a predicament: that critical public dissent serves as a hyper-effective form of value creation in liberal democracies. Public criticism emerges here as double-edged: though it might elsewhere function to effectively pressure political actors, it can also enrich the elite actors targeted with criticism. What this chapter should reveal to us is that liberalism does not come with protections against this problem baked in. If we want to protect liberal values, and to extend them to a more universal democratic public, we cannot turn to capitalism to achieve this. In what remains, I want to step back and consider the implications this state of affairs has for Euro-American democratic politics. To do so, I turn to the work of critical historian of liberalism, Domenico Losurdo.

Losurdo offers a powerful rereading of liberalism as a political project. Losurdo (2011) argues that beginning in the eighteenth century, liberals were less concerned with extending freedom universally than with wresting power from an absolute monarch, with liberalism imagined as a bulwark against both "monarchical" and "democratic absolutism." Thus, it was not considered a problem that freedom was never extended to all citizen-subjects. Instead, monumental concessions were justified, with limits placed on who would enjoy the benefits of a liberal society, whether in factories in England, workhouses in Ireland, or on plantations in the United States. This trend continued apace throughout the twentieth century, with freedom and equality consistently ringfenced for a select class of liberal citizen-subject. In the period after the Second World War, and in the wake of a growing tide of workers and civil rights struggles, liberalism was forced into a temporary agreement with the universalist ambitions of democratic politics. But in the last several decades, Losurdo argues, we have once again returned to pre-war levels. Losurdo (1994) calls this the "purge" of democracy from liberalism.

Following this reading, liberalism is not only a set of institutions and practices designed to safeguard against the tyranny of the majority. It is a political project that serves the interests of some, and which has only extended freedom further when met with genuine confrontation. Indeed, as Losurdo (2011, 299, 49) argues, liberalism was only ever implemented within a "restricted sacred space" for a "community of the free" and withheld from those who occupied "the profane space" of servitude and labour. Moreover, the expansion of this sacred space of liberalism has most frequently occurred through co-optation by

the elite of desirable actors. As Azzarà (2011) argues, Losurdo demonstrates that, historically, it has often been the case that "an enlargement of the sacred space could only occur by means of a selective co-optation from above operated by the ruling classes, rather than an autonomous pressure from below carried out by excluded social groups or subjugated nationalities" (Losurdo 2011, 168, 280–5, quoted in Azzarà 2011, 106). This is not to say that upward pressure – through protest, direct democracy, or dissent – has not yielded landmark political achievements, but it is to suggest that where these achievements are won, it is often because widening the "community of the free" is seen to advantage those who have already gained entry. What follows is that liberalism will always yield a political battle between the interests of "the recognised and the unrecognised" (Azzarà 2011, 104) – those who have gained entry and those who have not, those who feel they can command attention and those who feel they cannot.

We can understand the contemporary critics I describe here as in a crucial intermediary position between the recognized and the unrecognized. While elsewhere these artists' work and public criticism has been a crucial contribution to landmark democratic achievements in Ireland (Morningstar 2024), they are also frequently confronted with the problem that prominent actors are adept at co-opting critique and transforming it into a source of value creation. If we combine this fact with Losurdo's claims about the contemporary cleavage between liberalism and democracy, the significance of this should be apparent. The channels to direct democratic participation are narrowing, and where that perception gains popular traction, people are more vulnerable to political ideologies that promise either to puncture the boundary between the recognized and the unrecognized, or to allow those already inside the sacred realm to police its boundaries. To gloss these reactionary movements as anti-liberal populism misses the point. Populism isn't a threat to liberalism but rather a direct consequence of it. It is what happens when the channels to direct democratic participation appear closed, when the failure of liberalism to extend freedom and equality on a truly universal scale becomes too conspicuous to be ignored, and when the dividing line between the recognized and the unrecognized is under question.