



**Critique is Dead –  
Long Live Critique:  
A response to  
Finlayson and Cusset**

NATALIE FENTON

*Goldsmiths, University of London, UK*

*Media Theory*  
Vol. 7 | No. 1 | 63-74  
© The Author(s) 2023  
CC-BY-NC-ND  
<http://mediatheoryjournal.org/>

**Abstract**

This piece offers some reflections and discussion points on the articles published by Alan Finlayson and François Cusset in this special edition of *Media Theory*. I argue the need to be cautious of tendencies towards techno-centrism even when so many of our lives are dominated by digital mediations; for the need to remember and take account of the longer history and prevailing influence of legacy media; to ensure that in our focus on front-stage politics we do not miss emphasising a critique of back-stage power and the growing influence of elites; that we must recognise that the myth of the value of inequality is not totalising and that it is surely the role of critique to identify the sites of its exposure; and finally the pressing urgency of reclaiming the emancipatory powers of critique.

**Keywords**

critique, anti-critique, inequality, political transformation, digital

**Introduction**

This commentary consists of reflections on the papers here submitted by Alan Finlayson and François Cusset hinged broadly around the state of critique. The obvious point to make, given such thought-provoking papers, is that we should reassure ourselves that despite being under attack, critique is in fact alive and well (albeit constrained and embattled in various ways). On the face of it, this may seem

like a puerile point (where there are anti-critique tirades there must always be critique on which they are based), but at the end of this commentary I will come back to its importance. I do not intend to summarise the papers here (you should read them in their entirety) but to reflect on some of the key issues and concerns they give rise to. To begin, it is worth considering that the papers share some similarities on how they address the forms and nature of the attack on critique:

Both papers refer to an inflation of critical discourse through the appropriation of some of its key terms leaving it disarmed and hollowed out of meaning, rendering an unprecedented powerlessness of critique. Each situates this turn in a political moment that is fiercely anti-public, hyper-privatised and highly individualised: a moment where an aggressive reactionary right-wing politics is using critique (or at least a particular notion of critique) as a mechanism of backlash against a Left progressive politics for its demise. Here, I was reminded that Foucault (2000) argues that neoliberals formulated competitive markets as needing political support such that all governing is oriented for markets and by market principles and markets must be built, facilitated by, propped up and rescued by political institutions. This requires the on-going and active denigration of a politics of the public good wherein critique (of the critical theory kind) can be found. So the consequences of critique are dissipated – it may reveal corruption and repression but who cares, it no longer matters – because the anti-critique critique deems it to be no more than an unhinged Left political strategy that has gone too far. In an anti-progressive political manoeuvre, we see the entrepreneurial subject as a highly individualised self, who is repositioned away from the public good (as a progressive liberal norm) and towards private gain (as the natural way of the world).

Both papers also contribute part of the disempowering of critique to the technological affordances of social media or the “technostructure of digital life” that has become the habitual reality of a highly individualising and hyper-privatised lifeworld that facilitates the quashing of critique through narcissistic projections and identitarian affiliations. And so, critique becomes separated from its modernist tradition of challenging the existing social order in the name of equality and justice, and evolves towards sheer posturing and strategic mimicry in the online world, which is what makes the critical attitude available for hyperconservative if not fascistic reappropriations. Finlayson

talks about how ideological entrepreneurs seek to manufacture criticism of modern politics. How they are gratuitously extremist and offensive in order to provoke censorious moral reactions. That these are then claimed as proof of the legitimacy of their own critique that left-wing iconoclastic renegades are totally out of touch with reality – a response that is designed to encourage attack and create fandom. Cusset, in turn, refers to the culture wars while Finlayson notes the anti-woke agenda of an anti-political politics that castigates those doing critical theory for simply being too left wing to be able to see that there are natural limits to equality and social justice.

In both papers I was reminded of a longer history – the debates around the “looney left” in the UK in the 1980s with the demonising of a politics concerned with racial and sexual inequalities in particular, that was deliberately peddled by the Right as a vote winner. The tabloid press at the time lapped it up and firmly entrenched the discourse as part of an anti-multiculturalism agenda – a deeper reactionary political project intent on establishing the limits to equality. The so called “war on woke” builds on this long history of the Right’s attempts to whip up a moral panic (Cohen, 2011) about left-wing “identity politics” by presenting it as a threat to the British way of life rather than the promotion of equal rights; framed as “political correctness gone too far” (Curran, Gaber and Petley, 2019) rather than the interrogation of systemic inequalities. The “war on woke” is another attempt to create an ideological enemy through processes of othering that distance and exclude the minoritized (Pickering, 2001), polarising issues and feeding off the long-term stigmatisation of particular social groups (Krzyzanowski, 2020). As Cammaerts (2022) notes, it is a political battle designed to garner support for and embolden the Right and fragment and repress the Left during a period of burgeoning social and economic inequalities.

Finlayson’s claim, however, is that as the current configuration of reactionary critique is taking place in an entirely new digital constellation it requires a different set of considerations. The nature of power only reveals itself in historical specificity. The newly fragmented nature of consumption in a digital world leads to different kinds of micropolitical relations that further reduces and individualises politics and political experience to the exchange of texts, images, claims and counter-claims that lead to an anti-political politics. In turn, this at once hides its own politicality while also claiming authority through generic difference from the official politics they critique.

All of the above will resonate strongly with many critical scholars of media and communication and much of it I agree with. But where does it leave us? How do we reclaim critique from the clutches of communicative capitalism (Dean, 2009)? Critique, of course, has a praxis, so how we critique an anti-critique (which simultaneously offers its own perversion of critique) matters. What should we take account of? Below I raise a series of thoughts for further reflection:

1. The first point relates to the emphasis on the digital constitution of forms of reactionary critique. Both papers claim that digital spaces are key to understanding why we are where we are. Finlayson says the digital realm is the primary terrain of ideological contestation today – well, maybe in some places and for some people. But we should be mindful of research such as that done by Leguina and Downey (2021) extending the work of Bourdieu and the sociology of class more generally, who show how digital capital functions as a bridging capital aiding the convertibility of other forms of capital to the benefit of already advantaged groups. So it may well be the main platform for debate but old inequalities prevail. Cusset notes how algorithms and viral workings of digital networks favour volatility and schizophrenia of critical discourse. So are these new, different kinds of micropolitical relations a technological biopolitics of our age? If so, will we ever be able to defend a politics of contestation rooted in agonistic respect while the economic model of these platforms thrives off precisely the opposite? And if a large part of the problem is the economic model on which technology presides, wouldn't we be better highlighting these aspects and directing our critique to encouraging non-commodified versions of a digital economy based on social ownership of digital assets and democratic control over digital infrastructure and systems? Even with the technological affordances of social media that allow reactionary critique to move faster and further, should we focus so heavily on the digital dimensions or rather look more closely at the political and economic trajectory we have been on since the 1960s that may have taken a particular form now because of a host of political and economic factors and *some* technological affordances? In other words, while focussing our gaze on the technology do we lose sight of the political and economic factors that have led us to this point and in the process run the risk of doing the job of the right-wing ideological entrepreneurs for them?

---

2. Similarly, while focussing on social media we threaten to shift our gaze away from the role of mainstream legacy media. Finlayson's ideological entrepreneurs seem to share a startling amount of ideological congruence with the majority of the UK national press – much of which has long since been anti-equality. Think back to the debates in the 1980s about welfare scroungers and the unworthy poor (Golding and Middleton, 1982); the constant flow of anti-immigration (Berry, Garcia-Blanco and Moore, 2016); anti-Islam (Massoumi, Mills and Miller, 2017) and misogynistic discourse (Savigny, 2020) in our mainstream media. These anti-equality discourses may shift focus every now and again with a changing geopolitics but the focus has remained firmly on anti-equality agendas. The enduring representation of an undeserving underclass is argued to enable “structural conditions of a deep social, political and economic crisis” to be imagined as problems of “individual behaviours” (Dowling and Harvie, 2014: 872), turning increasing levels of inequality and poverty into individual moral (or “cultural”) crises rather than political economic ones that are then used to politically justify neoliberal policies. A more recent study from the Policy Institute (2021) found that news articles in the mainstream media on the existence or nature of “culture wars” in the UK increased by more than 25 times between 2015 and 2020, influencing the reframing of political debates and driving negative perceptions of progressive issues. These legacy news discourses may be given a heightened prominence and longevity through digital circulation but their existence has a long standing. Social media prospers from hate because toxicity travels far and fast, generating ever more clicks that sustain the advertising model that social media platforms (and news publishing websites) are premised upon. Mainstream legacy media feed into and off this frenzy.

3: Thirdly, I worry that our anxiety about the state of critique (and its multiple forms) is a distraction that is all part of the political strategy of the Right. Are the Right smirking, rubbing their hands in glee, while the Left devour themselves vacillating over the end of the power and social purchase of their own critique? And while we agonise, are increasingly powerful and well-resourced business, financial and technological elites influencing politics, economics and wider society through means that are invisible to most, behind closed doors and deliberately outside of the public sphere? When revisiting this piece in January 2023, it was revealed that Richard Sharp, the Chair of the BBC had been appointed by a panel that included a Conservative party

donor and prospective Member of Parliament, as well as the wife of the former chair of the *Spectator* who worked with [Boris Johnson](#) when he edited that political magazine. Further, Sharp had been given the job after helping Johnson secure an £800,00 loan, a conflict of interest he had failed to declare and that ultimately led to his resignation. This happened during a period when the UK government was seeking to “rebalance” the boards of public bodies, particularly in the arts, heritage and broadcasting sectors, by appointing allies and blocking critics, in part to help it fight the “[culture wars](#)”. In Gramscian terms, this is a war of position being waged by those with wealth and power that gives them access and advantage. Just as public mediated democracy becomes more unstable and visibly chaotic, private (largely) invisible forms of polyarchy become more ordered and entrenched. Thus the space between symbolic front-stage politics and the actual institutions, networking and backstage decision making of elite power has got slowly larger. Inequalities between classes, regions, races and generations continue to rise, while national politics and economic systems move towards fragmentation and dysfunction. We must be ever vigilant not to miss emphasising a critique of where power actually lies.

4: This brings me to the fourth point. Finlayson’s paper ends with the importance of the foundational political principle of equality – one I wholeheartedly agree with. In a previous article, Finlayson (2021) argues that while contradictory and conflicting positions have emerged across the Alt-right (from conservatism through to ethnonationalism and libertarianism), these are united in opposition to liberal ideas of the state. In particular, what unifies the Alt-right is a belief in the value of inequality. Finlayson explains: “inequality is a core concept, understood as a natural phenomenon, scientifically verified and the necessary basis of civil order, essential to the maintenance of individual freedom, economic stability and cultural coherence” (Finlayson, 2021: npn). Such views are consistent with those of Hayek, who was openly critical of the attempts by welfarist states to equalize natural differences between individuals, but Finlayson observes that contemporary forms of right-wing populism go further than this as they advance “a broad-based challenge to the technocratic politics of third-way neoliberalism and globalization” and demand “yet greater marketization of ideas and ideologies, culture and consciousness” (ibid) in a blend of radical conservatism and libertarianism. The “ideological entrepreneurs” of the Alt-right put their faith in the market to reveal the true capacity of individuals and the natural inequalities of talent.

Things have gone wrong not because politics has given way to the market but because the market has been subordinated to politics. In this manner the concept of social justice is dismissed entirely as a lie borne of left-wing conspiracy.

The anti-equality offensive functions in perfect tandem with the social media economy of clickbait advertising because the more gratuitously extremist and pugnacious the postings are, the more they will provoke outraged reactions and the more the audience grows. To optimise performance, platforms have encouraged advertisers to group together related audiences to create affectively charged clusters who are encouraged to take the clickbait through a focus on their divisive views. But at what point do the ideological entrepreneurs in Finlayson's paper recognise themselves as losers in neoliberalism and confront what he calls the "fantasy resolution"? When does the contradiction hit home that neoliberalism has moved beyond defending spaces of competition and exchange in the market to being about the sovereignty of property rights and the property holder – the defence of monopolies, where winning at all costs is the primary objective, where the super-elites feather their own nests and perpetuate their own privileges? The myth of the value of inequality is not totalising and critique also needs to identify the sites of its exposure.

5: So what can we do to reclaim the emancipatory powers of critique? While Finlayson's paper shows how the rhetoric of his "ideological entrepreneurs" connects with real social constituencies who experience exclusion from cultural and economic participation, he doesn't fully discuss how the Left have failed to address this. In his book, *How the World Swung to the Right*, Cusset asks the question – is this about the Right or is it about a crisis of the political and activist Left whom he says are caught between "renunciation, awakening, disempowerment and melancholy" (2018: 131)? A Left he says that is split into the "managerial left" who are accused of no longer being on the left (a.k.a. Keir Starmer, the current leader of the Labour Party in the UK) and those who accuse them of this treachery (defined as the extreme left) who carry the illustrious label of "Corbynistas" in the UK. In his paper published in this special issue, Cusset refers to the sad legacy of the social-democratic Left in power – the betrayal of working classes, the prohibition of any radical social agenda, and the devastation of social struggle. So the Right steps in to fill the political vacuum and make people believe that they are the anti-conformists, the anti-elitists, the courageous minority isolated from

the liberal mainstream. They invite those who may be experiencing economic disadvantage to funnel their anger to other minoritized people, to exorcise the “red devil” in our midst, or as Finlayson relays, to swallow the “red pill” that will get rid of the Leftist virus – an invitation to ditch the moral pretence of the public good, see the truth for what it is, expose the lie of equality and you will feel better, your shame about your beliefs will go and you can say good-bye to self-loathing and depression.

Cusset’s (2018) book talks about hope lying in an alliance of a unitary social project and the question of minorities – a coming together of macropolitics and micropolitics – both transversal across identity or single-issue politics and unitary for the survival and renewal of the old emancipatory project. A lot has happened since the book was written and the article published here is much less hopeful – but the question remains: Where will the unifying politics on the Left come from – and could this be the foundational political principle of equality that Alan talks about?

When inequality has become so extensive then ever more people feel its consequences. The rising inequality that we are now experiencing in many parts of the world damages the remnants of liberal democracy we have left and also reveals that the various forms of representative democracy we have lived through have not led to more economic redistribution and do not benefit the many. Leading economists around the world argue for the reduction of inequality as a global and national economic necessity. They point out that inequality is not inevitable, it is ideological and political and endures through what Piketty and Goldhammer (2020) describe as “inequality regimes”: justificatory mechanisms for the institutional structures of inequality – the legal system, the educational system, the fiscal system – that organise and entrench the ideology and practices of inequality in societies. Communicative mechanisms and institutional practices of our media and tech industries should be added to this list as further structural elements that embed and vindicate inequality regimes.

But the gaps between ideology and experience are also beginning to be recognised. Over a decade ago, in the annual British Social Attitudes survey (2011), 77 per cent agreed that benefits for the unemployed were “too high and discouraged people from finding a job”, as against the idea that they were “too low and caused hardship”. In the latest survey (British Social Attitudes Survey, 2022), that figure had dropped to 45 per cent – the first time since 2000 that it had been the less popular of the two views. As

more people feel the consequences of inequality, the contradictions of neoliberalism are exposed and the red pill loses its efficacy.

Coming back to where we began – critique may be under renewed attack and we should seek to understand and interrogate this in its contemporary social, political and technological specificities. But it is not gone – as the articles in this special issue bear witness to. The attack bears the hallmarks (and scars) of what has gone before and a political economic trajectory that is ever more familiar to and questioned by the many. In such circumstances and under such conditions, critique not only enables explanation but also sheds light on possible routes to social and political transformation. Never has critique been more urgent or necessary.

## References

- Berry, M., Garcia-Blanco, I. & Moore, K. (2016) *Press Coverage of the Refugee and Migrant Crisis in the EU: A Content Analysis of Five European Countries*. Project report. Geneva: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Available at: <https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/87078/1/UNHCR-%20FINAL%20REPORT.pdf>
- British Social Attitudes Survey (2011) *British Social Attitudes 28*. National Centre for Social Research. Available at: [https://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/38959/bsa28\\_0introduction.pdf](https://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/38959/bsa28_0introduction.pdf)
- British Social Attitudes Survey (2022) *British Social Attitudes 39*. National Centre for Social Research. Available at: <https://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/latest-report/british-social-attitudes-39/introduction.aspx>
- Cammaerts, B. (2022) ‘The abnormalisation of social justice: The “anti-woke culture war” discourse in the UK’, *Discourse & Society* 33(6): 730–743.
- Cohen, S. (2011) *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers*. Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge.
- Curran, J., Gaber, I. & Petley, J. (2019) *Culture Wars: The Media and the British Left*. Second edition. London; New York, NY: Routledge.
- Cusset, F. (2018) *How the World Swung to the Right: Fifty Years of Counterrevolutions*. (N. Wedell, Trans.). South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e).
- Dean, J. (2009) *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

- Dowling, E. & Harvie, D. (2014) 'Harnessing the Social: State, Crisis and (Big) Society', *Sociology* 48(5): 869–886.
- Finlayson, A. (2021) 'Neoliberalism, the Alt-Right and the Intellectual Dark Web', *Theory, Culture & Society* 38(6): 167–190.
- Foucault, M. (2000) *Essential Works of Foucault. 1: Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, edited by Paul Rabinow. London: Penguin Books.
- Golding, P. & Middleton, S. (1982) *Images of Welfare: Press and Public Attitudes to Poverty*. Oxford: M. Robertson.
- Krzyżanowski, M. (2020) 'Discursive shifts and the normalisation of racism: imaginaries of immigration, moral panics and the discourse of contemporary right-wing populism', *Social Semiotics* 30(4): 503–527.
- Leguina, A. & Downey, J. (2021) 'Getting things done: Inequalities, Internet use and everyday life', *New Media & Society* 23(7): 1824–1849.
- Massoumi, N., Mills, T. & Miller, D. (2017) *What is Islamophobia? Racism, Social Movements and the State*. London: Pluto.
- Pickering, M. (2001) *Stereotyping: The Politics of Representation*. Red Globe Press.
- Piketty, T. & Goldhammer, A. (2020) *Capital and Ideology*. Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: Harvard University Press.
- Savigny, H. (2020) *Cultural Sexism: The Politics of Feminist Rage in the #MeToo Era*. Bristol, England: Bristol University Press.
- The Policy Institute (2021) 'Public split on whether “woke” is compliment or insult, and unsure what “culture wars” means – despite huge surge in media coverage'. Available at: <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/news/public-split-on-whether-woke-is-compliment-or-insult-and-unsure-what-culture-wars-means-despite-huge-surge-in-media-coverage?ref=onemanandhisblog.com>

**Natalie Fenton** is a Professor of Media and Communications at Goldsmiths, University of London where she is also Co-Director of the [Centre for the Study of Global Media and Democracy](#). She was Vice-chair of the Board of the campaign group [Hacked Off](#) for 7 years and a founding member and former Chair of the UK [Media Reform Coalition](#). She is also on the Board of [Declassified UK](#) an investigative journalism website for in-depth analysis on British foreign policy. Her books include *New Media: Old News: Journalism and Democracy in the Digital Age* (Sage, 2010); *Misunderstanding the Internet 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition* co-authored with James Curran and Des Freedman (Routledge, 2016); *Digital, Political, Radical* (2016, Polity); *Media, Democracy and Social Change: Re-imagining Political Communications* co-authored with Des Freedman,

Gholam Khiabany and Aeron Davis (Sage, 2020) and *The Media Manifesto* co-authored with Des Freedman and Justin Schlosberg and Lina Dencik (Polity, 2020).

**Email:** [N.Fenton@gold.ac.uk](mailto:N.Fenton@gold.ac.uk)

