

CRITIQUE IS A TRIBUNAL OF CRIME

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Laurent de Sutter, *Superweak: Thinking in the 21st Century*, Robert Hughes (trans.), Cambridge, Polity, 2026, 255pp, £17.99 paperback, £52.95 cloth.

‘To judge is to commit a crime’ (p106)

‘Once critique, always critique’ (p224)

Laurent de Sutter’s *Superweak* abounds with such claims – abrupt, startling and epigrammatic. Yet the book offers more than a series of provocations, however striking. Rather, its ambition is to generate a certain intensity in order to redescribe critique as *the* dominant regime of modern thought. What, de Sutter asks, might thinking become if this regime were no longer treated as inevitable?

The book’s central thesis is announced with delightful bluntness: ‘From theatre to design, from political theory to rhetoric, from literature to the social sciences, the critical project constitutes the default system for all thought processes enjoying any degree of respectability’ (p5). Against Foucault’s conviction that critique constituted a radical *rupture* in the history of thought, de Sutter now argues that it has become modernity’s very operating system. No more a mode of resistance, ‘Critique is [now] the materiel of superstrength’. As such, its absolute omnipresence determines in advance what counts as serious, admissible, rational and even possible thought. ‘To critique is to be right’ says de Sutter. ‘[I]t is to feel the intoxication of the powerful asset that reason provides to those who accept its supremacy: the intoxication of the impossibility of resistance.’ Yet, he continues, this ‘being right is useless’ because ‘[n]o one can reason against reason’. Critique’s ‘superstrength’ thus serves only to leave thought more powerless – the ‘desiccated, bloodless corpse of the superstrong ensnared by the very thing that had given them their strength’ (pp7-8).

The book does not conceal the difficulty that shadows de Sutter’s entire enterprise: any effort to get *beyond* critique will always risk becoming (yet) another turn in critique’s own spiral. De Sutter is fully aware of this risk – in fact it is one of the conditions under which the book proceeds – his essential task being less to avoid the paradox, than to make it visible.

The scale of de Sutter’s claim is reflected in the book’s organisation, which demonstrates that his argument is not only epistemological. Structured around the ‘five weaknesses’ of critique that de Sutter announces in his introduction – aesthetic, political, juridical, textual and epistemic (pp8-10), his argument is unfolded across five short books (*Phusis*, *Archè*, *Nomos*, *Gramma* and *Epistémè*) before returning to the question of whether critique can ever escape itself. The

effect is to present critique not simply as a theory of knowledge, but a whole regime of thought and practice: a posture of the body, an ordering of space, a judicial function, a realism of language and, finally, a regime of argument.

Binding these five faces together is de Sutter's insistence that critique's apparent strength has turned into weakness; that its obsession with being right – making 'correct' distinctions, occupying the superior position – has merely undermined thought's ability to do anything other than reproduce its own procedures. 'Subjects who imagined themselves armed with the greatest strength, awakened to find themselves embarrassed by a logic within which they functioned only as powerless vectors' (p8). The problem with critique, in other words, is not only that it dominates but that its domination is self-defeating. Hence one of the book's most powerful formulations, articulated in *Nomos*: 'One does not judge what happens; one judges so that *nothing* happens' (p110).

Supporting this assertion is de Sutter's claim that critique depends on (what Kant called) 'architectonic' principles, which, he argues in *Archè*, link government to architecture, thereby establishing 'a kind of community of thought between the fact of power and the fact of knowledge'. This he claims, is why critique must always dig deep into the basements of thought where the treasures of *reason* are hidden. With subtractive force, critique must strip away the 'indistinct' to distinguish the 'what-is' (pp65-66). If the first commandment of critique is that '[o]ne must make distinctions' (p63), it is this principle that enables it to find a space, assign permissions, decide in advance what can *count* as thought. From the perspective of architectonics, 'to know is to have the right to power – the knowledge of principles, conferring the right to exercise their proper power' (p59).

Thus, for de Sutter, critique is not merely *governmental*, but '*crushing*'. Like a 'deadly contamination', it 'devours everything'. Yet, 'the resources of power it offers ... serve for nothing, nothing at all' (p50). The problem as de Sutter sees it, is that '[n]ot just anyone can take part in critique': those who do not subscribe to its specifications 'are denied the right to speak' (p73). Participation requires prior initiation into critique's rules. What one may say depends not on what one wants to say but on what one can say, and what one can say depends on what one must say (pp73-74). *Superweak* is therefore not only a quarrel with Kantian reason. It is a rebuke to critique as an initiatory order, a bordered regime of intelligibility, a mechanism for censure, and a way of governing what may count as admissible reason – one whose very strength turns into self-defeat. Voyeuristic and exclusionary in its very ideal of knowing, critique's drive to 'see clearly' belies its attempt to rule by dispelling obscurity and policing what de Sutter calls 'the hole' (p160).

Some of the most striking insights in *Superweak* emerge from de Sutter's training in legal philosophy. For instance, in *Nomos* he argues that the 'development of critique from the early sixteenth century onward must therefore be seen as the development of a way of thinking deliberately based

on the long history of the judicial function' (p109). Kant, who he argues, 'resolved to erect a monument to critique' made *judgement* its very operation. By confining thought to a space that Kant himself called the 'tribunal of reason', thought became, 'that which rendered a verdict' (p99). Later in the book, Kantian reason is described as a form of 'theoretical striptease' (p185) in which truth is pursued as naked exposure. De Sutter's *own* conspicuous judgement of judgement is elided, in order to proceed to one of the book's more startling claims. In a remarkable passage on medieval criminal law, he argues that *crīmen* (the Latin word, derived from the verb *cernō*, meaning 'to sort through facts, to distinguish right from wrong') originally named the act of judging. Over centuries, the focus of the word shifted from the legal process (separating/sorting/making a verdict) to the *subject* of the process. Because *crīmen* is the name for the way judgement sets incrimination in motion, it eventually comes to refer to the formal indictment or charge itself. Hence the line: 'To judge is to commit a crime' (p106).

If *crīmen* designates judgement in its juridical register, de Sutter's account of *krisis* gives this logic a wider philosophical reach, albeit a stark one. Philosophy from Plato onward, he alleges, binds thinking to judgement, and in doing so it designates the critical moment in which a final judgement was to be formulated as a *krisis*: 'Plato maintained that it was indeed the *krisis* which was at the origin of the separation of the whole from itself – and thus the operator of the leap from the indistinct into the distinct, of the leap into being from the place of non-being' (p102). For de Sutter, this ontological scission – in which *krisis* forcefully separates indistinctness from the very *thinkability* of a world – is not a punctual event but an ongoing process. If judgement, through the making of distinctions and 'discriminations' forcefully imposes a separation, it unfolds as *krisis* – i.e. as 'violence, brutality, horror and destruction'. Thus '[t]o judge is to give birth to death'. Meanwhile, philosophy emerges as the discipline that, de Sutter claims, 'introduced execution, together with judgement, into the domain of thought.' 'Philosophy', he continues, 'is the capital punishment of thought' (p105).

For de Sutter, this is not mere rhetoric. Critique, he repeatedly contends, is necessarily *violent*, not merely in its occasional conclusions, but in its very *form* as a regime of thought. In the book's opening table, the juridical face of critique is linked explicitly to 'Judgement', 'Death' and 'Limit' (p9) – a sequence that becomes the book's central nervous system and its motor. What *Superweak* finally opposes is neither critique's ineffectuality, nor even its exclusionary powers, but its juridical and thanatological consequences: 'the generation that critique made possible was the generation of death' (p105). This is the book's strongest, most troubling claim: not merely that critique dominates, but that it converts thought into a violence of separation that organises in advance, the very contours and the borders of the thinkable.

The strongest articulation of this point comes in 'Critique of prejudicial reason'. Here de Sutter holds that critique can judge only within a pre-

determined 'space of prejudice' (p109). Critical truth – 'the truth of a division of the world' – relegates everything that does not share this prejudice to the margins of 'the tolerable, hence of the sayable, hence of the thinkable, hence of the possible' (pp109-10). For de Sutter, this, ultimately, is what is at stake. Critique is not only a method of clarification but a prior partition of the world. A few lines later comes one of the book's most compelling descriptions of critique, as *order-maintenance*: 'One judges so that, whatever happens, only the order itself happens' (p110).

Rancière's influence is clearest here, especially in de Sutter's early identification of aesthetics as 'critique's original moment' – its 'inaugural scene' (pp19-20). In what he explicitly presents as an extrapolation from Rancière, Sutter infers not merely the significance of aesthetics as that which precedes politics, but the stronger claim that politics is conditioned by a prior 'distribution of the sensible' – an *a priori* ordering of what can be seen, said, thought and done – the partition that determines who or what is perceptible, intelligible and politically countable. For de Sutter, critique begins not with concepts alone, but with a sensory and affective regime: with posture, sensibility and the body's relation to what-is. In this sense, *Superweak* is also a book about aesthetics and politics: about how an aesthetic ordering of experience prepares the ground for critique's later political, juridical and epistemic forms. On de Sutter's account, modern aesthetics belongs to *critique's history*, furnishing one of its founding conditions.

Artistic practices, by contrast, are the places where that condition is lived out most visibly. The dandy, Beuys, punk, Alice Waters, Ornette Coleman, architecture and science fiction are concrete scenes in which critique is embodied, intensified and, at certain points, edged toward its possible transformation. This is why for de Sutter, *poetics* matters, because it names the point at which critique's demand for judgement gives way to invention. For example, in his reading free funk, Coleman's '*excarnation*' is described as an event indifferent to taste, judgement and rule. Hence, de Sutter argues, 'in post-critique, aesthetics dissolves into a poetics' (p53). Through Vico, he develops this point further by opposing the 'art of critique' to the 'art of topics', where 'judgement is of no importance' and thought is oriented instead toward invention, singularity and novelty (pp124-25). What thought needs, he suggests, is not another aesthetic regime of judgement but a poetics capable of invention (*ingenium*) (p125).

The optimistic horizon of the book therefore lies not in art as such, and not in aesthetics as critique's founding scene, but in *poetics*: a movement away from judgement and toward invention and making. Its central wager is that, if critique's apparent strength has ended in ineffectuality, then this exhaustion may reopen possibility. If critique offers little more than 'the profound sacrifice of possibility', leaving us 'bound and tied' (p8, p6), then the point of *Superweak* is to see if another horizon can be made thinkable. That horizon is what de Sutter calls an 'affirmative weakness'. *Superweakness*, he explicitly states, is

not mere fragility, surrender or lack. It is 'another excess, another super', a way of 'digging into the world precisely from the place where it is digging into us' rather than annexing the world to thought (pp9-10). The promise is not mastery, but a different relation to what exists.

This is why the book keeps returning to possibility. In the introduction de Sutter says postcritique should be 'an opening to explore, an ignorance to grasp' (p9). Near the end, he sharpens that into a more practical claim: 'all is possible, all is permitted, all exists, and anything can give rise to anything, provided that one does it or makes it happen' (p179). This is the book's most explicit promise: not that possibility is already there waiting to be discovered, but that possibility depends on doing, making, fabricating.

In the end, it is this positive horizon that gives de Sutter's thought a compelling vitality: thought is prised away from adjudication and turned toward fabrication, continuation, threshold and adventure. Yet this is also where the book is least determinate. Adamant in his diagnosis, de Sutter is less explicit about which practices or collective forms might sustain the '*superweak*', which ultimately remains gestural, atmospheric, ethical. A genuine limitation, this is also a self-declared one. De Sutter does not presume to offer a programme – rather the intention is to create a void that might arouse a renewed desire to think beyond judgement and beyond the monopoly on being right. Finally, the optimism of *Superweak* is that of construction: the 'opposite of a stop', 'to do is to continue, to make or fabricate a continuity' in which affirmative weakness is linked explicitly to poetics, as the inventive horizon *beyond* judgement. Once critique's sovereign posture is abandoned, thought may recover the capacity to continue, to invent and to make something happen rather than merely judge what already is. That challenge lands sharply at a moment when critique is not only exhausted as an academic style, but increasingly precarious as an institutional practice.

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