

CRITICAL THINKING BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE

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Abstract

The paper entitled “Critical Thinking between Theory and Practice” has primarily a theoretical character for it aims at conceptually clarifying several terms whose meaning, though different, overlaps both in common language, as well as in specialized literature. Our paper clarifies the following concepts: “critical thinking”, “critical spirit” and “criticism”. The first chapter of the paper, besides these conceptual clarifications, also identifies individual and social benefits of critical thinking - when applied in social and political spheres. The second chapter briefly analyses several “corrupted” forms of criticism as we identified them in the Romanian public space, while also pointing out the causes that generate them. The third chapter debates upon the need and strategies to educate critical thinking in Romanian society, as well as the art to protest and to accept justified critics.

Keywords: *critical thinking, criticism, aggression, protest*

Critical thinking and its benefits

Motto:

The secret of intellectual paramount is the critical spirit; it is the independence of thinking. This generates difficulties that appear impossible to get over to any form of authoritarianism. The authoritarian human being will generally select those who obey, who believe and are sensitive to his/her influence. By doing so, the authoritarian one will surely select mediocre persons because those who protest and doubt will be left over”. (K.R. Popper “Societatea deschisa si dusmanii ei” - [The Open Society and Its Enemies])

Critical thinking: a brief multidisciplinary perspective

Critical thinking has been assiduously tackled in specialized literature because it has drawn the attention of philosophers, logicians, psychologists, sociologists, specialists in philology and politics, etc. However, in social practice, critical thinking is so insignificantly present that it could almost be perceived as nonexistent.

One of the meanings of critical thinking is “the capacity to compare ideas, examine their significance, subject them to a polite skeptic analysis, to weigh them in relation to other opposite points of view, to build argumentation systems that would support and give them coherence and to adopt a position on the basis of these structures. It is a complex process of creative integration of ideas and resources, of re-conceptualization and re-framing concepts and information. It is an active process of knowledge that simultaneously runs at several levels”¹.

Critical thinking does not refer to the accumulation of information, but to the development of the capacity to process information. It is a process which implies analysis, synthesis, and evaluation on the basis of criteria and values – which are assumed by an individual and practiced with art and efficiency (Benjamin Bloom); it also is a way of dealing with and solving problems and it is based on convincing arguments that are coherent and logical, as well as rational. Its main attributes are: clarity, rationality and freedom.

The concept of “critical thinking” firstly imposed itself in the USA and it was apparently used for the first time in 1941 by Edward Glaser in his coursebook: *An Experiment in the Development of Critical Thinking*.

Recently, considering that the term “thinking” is too general and even a bit vague to describe the process of critical thinking, the following terms have been suggested as synonyms: *critical reasoning* or *critical argumentation*; the former attempts to offer reasons for certain convictions and for the evaluation of actions through the ordinary logical means² the latter could be applied as a form of critical thinking, which mainly aims at identifying and evaluating daily arguments³. The latter does not rely on symbolical, thorough forms of thinking, but rather on the practical aspects of logic; it is a form of logic applied to ordinary thinking, perhaps a sort of training for the argumentative aspects of daily life; it is a logic adapted to the requirements of daily reasoning, as well as to the reasoning process characteristic of certain sciences since “it is an instrument that could be efficiently used to correctly analyze human theoretical activity in any domain in which it would be applied”⁴.

¹ OUR CHILDREN AND CRITICAL THINKING: GUIDE FOR PARENTS, p.5; This guide is an adapted form for parents of a set of eight guidelines developed by J. Steele, Meredith K. Ch. Temple and was conducted within the project Grundtvig Learning Partnerships "Linking European families - me, you, us" , funded Socrates National Agency.

² Anne Thompson, *Critical Reasoning: A Concise Guide*, Routledge, London, New York, 2002, p.2, cited .: Marius Dobre, critical thinking. A few guidelines, [PL.vol XVI]. Pdf.

³ Douglas Walton, *Fundamentals of Critical Argumentation*, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. xi.

⁴ Petre Bieltz, *Fundamentals of Critical Thinking Course distance learning*, Maiorescu University, 2005, p. 10.

Critical thinking does not identify itself with logic – the science of good reasoning/good interference – but it implies logic. “However, critical thinking is more comprehensive in comparison with logic because it does not merely imply logic, but also the true or false nature of utterances, the evaluation of arguments and proof, the use of analysis and investigation, the application of several competences that help us decide to believe or to do something”⁵. Critical thinking interacts with philosophy, psychology, pedagogy, etc. It interacts with philosophy in a dual mode. “Thus, while focusing on argumentation, philosophy acquires the statute of critical thinking, while critical thinking becomes applied philosophy”⁶. “The main characteristic of philosophy, which makes it different from science, is its critical nature. It critically examines the principles applied in science and in daily life; it reveals any inconsistency that might exist in relation to these principles and it accepts it only if the critical investigation did not produce any ground to reject it”⁷.

Critical thinking is the main requirement for psychological theories. The American Psychologists Association (“APA”) states that arguments or interference are always used when dealing with psychological problems and they make psychologists examine the source of information within a reasoning, even if they are not uttered.

Critical thinking, called by some authors “informal logic”, has actually a pedagogical dimension for it is meant to enhance reasoning abilities⁸.

In our opinion, the term “critical thinking” is frequently used by specialists in pedagogy (educators) and by the theoreticians of literature. “To many educators, critical thinking means superior thinking; the word “superior” usually refers to the high position occupied in Bloom’s taxonomy of cognitive abilities. (...) To the theoreticians of literature, criticism is a thorough approach of a literary text, the analysis of the ideas and especially of the sent message”⁹.

Since 1989 specialists in artificial intelligence have become interested in critical thinking, which is based on the logic of argumentation, and have started to make research work, which they coined “non-monotonic logic”, whereby they refer to a new operating program for the future computers¹⁰.

⁵ Lewis Vaughn, *The Power of Critical Thinking*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2005, p. 4., , apud. Marius Dobre, *Gandirea critica. Cateva repere*, [PL.vol XVI]. pdf).

⁶ George Clitan, *Critical Thinking*. Micromonograph Publishing Eurobit, Timisoara, 2003.p. 88-89.

⁷ Bertrand Russell, *Problems of philosophy*, All Publishing, Bucharest, 2004, p. 98, 99.

⁸ Dragan Stoianovici, *Reasoning and Critical Thinking*, University of Bucharest, 2005, p. 16.

⁹ Daniela Cretu, project „ Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking-foundation for the development of a new teaching / AFTN Magazine, No.3 / 2001 http://www.actrus.ro/reviste/3_2001/rev2s.html.

¹⁰ Petre Bieltz, Marius Dobre, *critical thinking in psychology*, Maiorescu University of Bucharest, 2013, p.12.

Critical thinking, as it is defined in philosophy and social sciences, is clearly different from person-oriented criticism. In the former case, criticism aims at contesting ideas, theories and problem-situations, etc., whereas in the latter case, criticism aims at criticizing a person, a fact which we consider unacceptable. Most often responses given to criticism, labeling, humiliation and condescension are: interruption of communication and relationship, verbal aggression and higher tension. In a society based on the respect for human dignity, person-oriented criticism is unacceptable. We can criticize an action, an idea that another person shares, but we cannot criticize a person for all that he/she is!

Unfortunately, the way in which DEX defines “criticism” does not make this distinction, thus generating real confusion. I am going to give the DEX definition for this terms: “to criticize = “to reveal the shortcomings, errors and imperfections of a person, a work or some situations (revealing the causes and the means to repair them); to appreciate the ethical and artistic value of a work, etc.; to point out in a mean way (or in an exaggerated manner) the weaknesses of a thing or of a person; to comment in a mean way, inventing shortcomings and errors; to gossip”¹¹. Since the first meaning of the verb “to criticize” is “to reveal the shortcomings, errors and imperfections of a person ...”, are we surprised why in informal language, in social practice, criticism seems to have nothing to do with critical thinking? Are we surprised why criticism is mistakenly regarded as a form of person-oriented criticism, defamation, verbal aggression and the humiliation of the rival, etc.?

The benefits of critical thinking

Democracy is a complex world that requires the large participation of citizens in the decision-making process. In my opinion, the development of critical thinking abilities is a *sine qua non* condition for an effective and efficient participation of citizens, who must be able to critically examine social and political contexts, correctly evaluate alternatives and participate in the decision-making processes as persons who are fully aware of their acts. In other words, the large number of persons who adopt a critical (free and responsible) perspective over social and political realities can decisively contribute to the consolidation of democracy through their participation and deliberation, thus leading to the actual democratization of the Romanian society.

¹¹ DEX '09 (2009) added LauraGellner, <https://dexonline.ro>.

The control of those who govern by those who govern remains formal if they lack the ability to process information or to deal with social and political problems, while using convincing, sensible, logical and coherent arguments. Deliberative democracy comes up with the best debates in order to ensure the best decisions. "The better the quality of a debate, the more legitimate and efficient the decisions are"¹².

Moreover, critical thinking discourages stereotypes, prejudice, discriminating behavior, authoritarian attitudes, while encouraging the responsible information and participation of citizens in social-political life. In other words, the development of critical and free thinking opens the path to the manifestation of the non-discriminating democratic spirit.

Critical thinking brings benefits not only in political life, but also in the economic one. Companies recognize that critical thinking and problem-solving abilities are assets that significantly enhance professional performance. That is why the large companies do not hesitate to invest important sums of money in developing active listening techniques, as well as critical and creative thinking techniques at the workplace.

Last but not least, critical thinking abilities help one understand scientific concepts and theories – no matter the domain that they represent. Besides creativity, critical thinking is crucial for innovation, research and development.

Developing critical thinking abilities is not only a social asset. It is primarily an individual one. To an individual, critical thinking is an essential quality both in private and in professional and civic life. Critical thinking helps a person select information, evaluate it, perceive it critically and creatively, reject irrelevant or false information or decide what is and what is not important, connect different ideas, theories, place in contexts new ideas and knowledge. Critical thinking helps us find solutions to different problematic situations, no matter where they emerge from. Gheorghe Clitan appreciates that "benefits which result from the exercise and development of critical thinking abilities may be identified in at least three domains: persuasion, knowledge and cooperation. Logical abilities which make us accept a belief on the basis of solid argumentation or on the basis of obvious proof may protect individuals from the collateral effects of persuasion (commercials, mass-media manipulation, political promises, etc.). Practicing logical abilities may also lead to enhancing knowledge through reasoning: by inferring new information (conclusions)

¹² James S. Fishkin, *Democracy and Deliberation: New Directions for Democratic Reform*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991; paperback edition, 1993.

from previous knowledge (premises), i.e. not by making general and vague assumptions or by producing slogans, common places and thinking stereotypes”¹³.

We could state – without exaggeration – that critical thinking helps a person to remain informed while protecting oneself from the information bombing, to develop oneself as a psychosocial being and to discover the ways in which one can capitalize his/her assets in a world which is continuously and rapidly changing.

Corrupted forms of critical thinking in Romanian society

In our collective mentality, there persists a belief according to which one should be critical in his/her relationship with the others, and if one person is not critical, particularly in social and political life, he/she is perceived as being weak, coward, passive and/or naive. On the other hand, a critical attitude is associated with know-how, courage, responsibility, discernment and democratic spirit. If a critical attitude is the result of critical thinking, it is desirable to be used, apart from the situation in which criticism becomes too excessive. As we have already mentioned, unfortunately, in our society there are a lot of persons, i.e. the majority, who associate criticism with critical thinking. Actually, they do not know what critical thinking means, and, if they do, they do not apply it either in social-political life or in their personal relationships. In social-political life, criticism appears as an enemy of critical thinking, as an aggressive way to destroy an enemy. A brief reference to the content of the articles published in the press, of TV talk-shows, street disputes etc., all creates the images of a society that is overwhelmingly full of a negative, offensive and defamatory form of criticism. This form of criticism often becomes a person-oriented attack, while taking different forms like: contesting, defamation, insult, intimidation, media lynching, cyberbullying or Internet harassment, etc.

We are going to make reference to the last two forms of criticism, which, in our opinion, have become quite concerning within the Romanian public sphere.

“Media lynching is a non-journalistic, extremely aggressive, complex and long-lasting action, which is promoted by one or more media institutions that could act separately or not and that act with intention or with vengeance against an individual who is usually a public figure in order to compromise his/her position, to destroy his/her credibility and reputation. The purpose and motivation of a media lynching is the elimination from the public sphere (or simply from a certain position, structure, etc.) of a person who blocks or hinders the satisfaction of a certain interest, be

¹³ George Clitan, *Critical Thinking*. Micromonograph Publishing Eurobit, Timisoara, 2003, p. 56-57.

it a private or a group interest; the lynched person may have become a public enemy out of different reasons or interests or simply accidentally”¹⁴.

Media lynching is a media technique that dominates public communication in our country and it is radically different from civilized and respectful dialogue; media lynching is born out of a defamation culture, it is characterized by disrespect for man and truth and for the diabolic promotion of personal and group interests.

“*Authors of defamation acts*, social agents and actors (famous persons, conscience directors, opinion leaders, journalists, etc.), are a particular category that resort to degrading techniques, whereas *the victims of defamation* are those who refuse to resort to such ignominious acts while remaining the favorite targets of the former ones”¹⁵.

A society in which the authors of media lynching (famous persons, opinion leaders, journalists) continue to “preserve their statute within public life is a society without any direction, in which moral values, reputation and public image are not actually considered civic values”¹⁶.

As to cyberbullying authors (Internet harassing persons) and the above-mentioned media technique, we appreciate that its presence in Romania is really worrying.

Cyberbullying or abuse and harassment via Internet may be found in different forms: verbal aggression, defamation, personal data theft; this is the latest and most serious form of person-oriented attack. Its consequences are devastating, leading to suicide cases, as it happened with some teenagers¹⁷.

Studies have revealed that in Romania the Internet harassment instances amount at one of the highest levels in Europe. Thus, the European average for Internet harassment (cyberbullying) is 19% for children, while in Romania it has reached 41%, i.e. very close to the highest level (which has been recorded in Estonia:43%)¹⁸.

Person-oriented attacks, from contesting a person to media lynching and cyberbullying have in common verbal aggression and/or image destruction.

Verbal aggression is not harmless at all. Psychologists warn about its negative effect, which may amount at the seriousness of a physical or sexual abuse, leaving inner stigmata for good. “Victims of verbal aggression may have a low level of self-esteem, may suffer from anxiety and

¹⁴ Ion Novacescu, Policy sphere, <http://www.sferapoliticii.ro/sfera/174/art14-Novacescu.php>.

¹⁵ Sergiu Simion –Diary of a psychologist, <https://sergiusimion.blogspot.ro/2013/10/mic-tratat-despre-teoria-si-practica.html>.

¹⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁷ <http://nation.time.com/2013/10/16/a-florida-tragedy-illustrates-rising-concern-about-cyber-bullying-suicides/>.

¹⁸ <http://www.sigur.info/news/latest/hartuirea-si-abuzul-pe-internet-cele-mai-intalnite-probleme-online-in-romania.html>.

depression or may have the tendency to harm themselves (...), have attachment issues, feel that nobody understands them, doubt their intelligence, psychical health or even the ability to communicate, may become addicted to alcohol or drugs (...) find it difficult to make decisions, etc.”¹⁹

Specialized literature brings into evidence not only the large range of “malign”, “far-fetched” forms of criticism, but also the premises (causes) of criticism, which generate these forms. Without having the intention of exhaustively presenting the causes of these malign forms of criticism, I would like to enumerate the most visible of them.

- a) **Self-sufficiency criticism.** One feels that he/she is all-knowing and that he/she is in possession of the supreme truth, a fact which gives him/her the right to judge everything and everyone. Actually, this is a “malformation of the critical spirit, which results from its manifestation as a form of intelligence. The one who feels smart hits hard!”²⁰.
- b) **Criticism results from one's ideological belonging to a certain group or from sharing a certain view:** thus, one criticizes anything that those who do not agree with his/her political orientation do or say. In this case, one's only concern is to monitor his/her opponent's presence in public, to exploit their vulnerable points, to put them in an unfavorable situation by misinterpreting their discourses, to destroy their public image and to manipulate public opinion to one's own advantage.
- c) **Criticism generated by hatred, envy and vanity.** A concluding example is offered by the literary critic Alex Stefanescu. In an interview, he refers to the violent reaction and the “devastating” hatred that some of his colleagues manifested after he published “The History of Romanian Contemporary Literature”. The discontent of some of these critics – the author says – “was caused by the fact that he did not write about them or that he wrote little about some of them or that he did not praise enough their books. Others were discontent because although he praised their books he also praised writers who were their enemies”²¹.

The conceited considers that the system is wrong and must be modified if he is not sufficiently appreciated or if the system does not bring him at the top of the hierarchy.

¹⁹ Mihaela Gheorghe, How to defend ourselves from verbal aggression, *Psychologies*, July 9, 2016, <http://www.psychologies.ro/cunoaste-te/cum-sa-ne-aparam-de-agresivitatea-verbala-2153479>.

²⁰ Andrei Plesu - Sound and the Fury, October 3, 2016, adevarul.ro/news/societate/zgomotul-furia-1.../index.html.

²¹ Interview with Alex Stefanescu, http://adevarul.ro/cultura/carti/interviu-alex-Stefanescu-critic-literar-m-am-retras-viata-amoroasa-fost-barbat-1_5286258fc7b855ff56fbc25/index.html.

d) Criticism – an expression of incompetence, ignorance.

Quite often the most ignorant ones happen to be more critical and exigent, intolerant, noisy and self-confident. The noisy incompetent criticizes the others because he is afraid to be criticized. He is the one who starts criticizing. By attacking the first he wants to avoid being criticized. He tries to annihilate the critical spirit of his competitors, letting them dis-incriminate themselves, find proof of his innocence. Unfortunately, the noisy ignorant happens to control the situation, according to the principle: “The one who cries louder is right.”. You cannot fail to wonder why competence fails when dealing with incompetence and ignorance. “The well-known effect *Dunning-Kruger* functions in this situation: the ignorant suffers from an illusory superiority, he has no dilemma, while the competent one tends to doubt himself and believe that what he does can be simply done by another person, too”²². When the competent one “thinks, doubts and tries to find solutions”, the noisy and self-confident ignorant, who has no dilemmas, succeeds in being the first.

A different type of competition (illegitimate, of course) has come up: the one who criticizes the first, no matter if he has arguments or not, no matter if they are grounded or not, appears to be right. Sometimes mass-media plays this game, too.

e) Snobbish criticism. The “Dada spirit” is obsolete, it is cool to criticize, destroy, be against something or someone. These persons, “who appear to be innocent, are <<against>> something or someone because it seems to them that it is <<funny>>: we play a game, we avoid being quiet in the bourgeoisie spirit and we avoid being enlisted. These are the malign forms of the critical spirit”²³.

These reactions are, according to Andrei Plesu, “omnipresent in public life”. Finally, agreeing, saying yes to what others say/do is not fun! Not even when what they do or say proves to be of value, especially then. When you are not able to produce, to build something, what else is left to you than criticize what the others have done? How can such a person distinguish himself/herself if not denying the ones that create? They praise themselves by denying the others!

f) Criticism generated by frustration and personal discontent that is oriented against the others. It is more comfortable to criticize the others or to find someone who is “guilty” than to recognize your own failures (wrong choices, insufficient involvement, wrong

²² Marcel Cremene, Critical thinking and values selection, 2015 <http://www.contributors.ro/cultura/gandirea-critica-%C8%99i-selec%C8%9Bia-valorilor/>.

²³ Andrei Plesu - Faces of criticism, The truth, October 19, 2015, http://adevarul.ro/news/societate/chipuri-spiritului-critic-1_56243428f5eaafab2ccd1e90/index.html.

management of resources, etc.), thus protecting the image you have created about yourself.

- g) Criticism – as an expression of intolerance: if you are not like me, if you are different, you are not good, you are “wrong”.
- h) “The critical spirit is often manipulated as an expression of freedom (...). We have won the right to self-sufficiency and to the arbitrary, we have won the right to care about no rules. I can judge all the others because there is nothing to win or to lose. There are no limits to the language and attitude that I can adopt, so I can capitalize my aggression and nerve”²⁴.

The right to freedom is seen here from an invalid perspective: it lacks responsibility, respect, virtue and politeness.

Without pretending or intending to deal with this presentation exhaustively, I close here the list of the so-called corrupted manifestations of criticism, as well as of the causes that generate them.

Conclusions:

At the opposite pole: “the art to criticize” and the rules of civilized polemic

In conclusion, we find that, in Romanian society, the dialogue on critical thinking has not yet become common practice. Most often, criticism is manifested as personal attacks, offensive, defamation, harassment so that the enemy of critical thought. This represents a serious obstacle in the way of communication, organizational affiliation, problem solving, strengthening participatory democracy. . For this situation to change, it is necessary that the education system to put in the center of its objectives, critical thinking and creative development of children.

Children need to learn early „art ” to protest, to formulate critically reproofs and the rules of civilized polemics. If they do not know this „art”, even if their criticism is objective and entitled it can generate conflicts, tensions, breaking relationships. Or, if honest criticism, it aims to reduce tensions and not amplification.

The art to criticize – according to Jeanne Signard – means to respect the following rules of behavior: talk to the person you criticize directly and not to another person; talk privately first and only then in public; avoid making comparisons because they may generate, as the case may be, indifference or irritation; protest verbally and not by using mimic, because the latter may be

²⁴ Andrei Plesu - Sound and the Fury, October 3, 2016, [adevarul.ro / news / society / noise-anger-1 ... / index.html](http://adevarul.ro/news/society/noise-anger-1.../index.html).

wrongly understood; avoid ironies – sources of annoyance and aggression; be prompt, do not let mistakes accumulate in order not to aggravate a situation; do not mention complaints without solutions repeatedly; do not say you are sorry: when you make a complaint you are not guilty; servilism is not a virtue in our epoch; do not use emphatic words like “always” or “never” because by criticizing you hope to make things right; be straightforward and precise; shape your critics and limit them to what can be changed; describe facts in a concrete manner, without interpreting or trying to identify hidden intentions; describe the negative effects of unsolved complaints; this description does not have to be false or threatening; refer to the system of values that your interlocutor has; potential solutions have to show up as positive values to the person whose actions are criticized; bring into evidence the positive aspects of the situation, as well; do not ask the criticized person to make things that are impossible to him/her and identify an acceptable solution without creating the impression that it is the only one or the best one.

To support our argumentation we also recommend the book *Rules of Civilised Polemics*, published at the Oxford University Press in 1890.

“In any scientific, social and politic polemics, the discussion should confine to the change of ideas and only to those ideas which have affinity with that issue. The parties in polemics use as arguments either scientific theories or concrete facts, relevant in respect of the problem discussed.

The parties do not have the right to bring into discussion the opponent’s character, temperament or past, as those neither confirm, nor invalidate the validity of the ideas they assert. The parties do not have the right to discuss the reasons which determine the opponent’s ideatic attitude, as he diverts the discussion from the issue itself.

Labeling the opponent by mentioning the thinking school, professional organization or political party he belongs to constitutes a violation of the polemics rules and proves the lack of arguments and weakness.

In a civilized polemics it matters only the arguments brought by the opponent as a person and not as member of a school or organization. You are not right because you are a materialist thinker, an owner or a worker, but only if your arguments are convincing or not.”

We have quoted this text with the hope that at least a part of the concepts it presents are going to be considered in the polemics that the Romanian public sphere will witness in the future. We are positive that this will happen thanks to the introduction in the Romanian school of a key

objective: the development of critical and creative thinking. As to this objective, we intend to approach it in a future article.

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