

The time of *criticalthinkings*

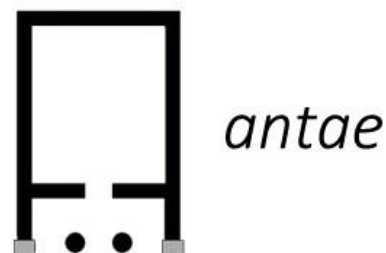
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The time of *criticalthinkings*

An island: *there*, in smaller times in a timeless sea.

Stung by recent events, its people achieve consensus on the need for critical thinking. Improbable. But impossible things had happened, even there. They surprise themselves, but something had to be done. 'As a nation, we must think more, and we must think more deeply,' they declare through those who think up this kind of thing. 'Our thinking must not only go deeper, it has to develop the capacity for critique,' the people sort of learn to say. Or, as the intoning tells them, you, we, might not survive ourselves.

Having got this far, they turn their half a million backs on the political groupings that had previously dulled that capacity with the rewards of loyalty, as well as on the religions that had schooled them in the rewards of faith. They are thrilled by this double emancipation. Some time is needed before the thrill can be worked off. Pragmatism, the greatest of survivors, then asserts itself. So not unreasonably they ask, 'But who will teach us critical thinking?'

It's a good question, everyone agrees.

Why, the University, of course, one response runs. The nomination gathers plausibility, then momentum. The island has a University, the University is good, the University is trusted. And some, if not all, of those who think up this kind of thing think there.

It's that kind of one-University sort of place. A one season, many climates, one mountain, many abysses, one river, many currents kind of island. A one language, many tongues, one chamber, many parliaments, one nation, many commonwealths kind of country. A one airport, many harbourings, one hospital, many surgeries, one Metro line, many traffic routes kind of place.

It has its one story of many narratives of undoing. But in the new propensity for consensus, there is agreement that the University must be the go-to can-do place for critical thinking.

So the people, in their for-once for-one many-ness, thinking that the hardest part – the consensus bit, the unity challenge – is over and done with, present themselves ready for their critical faculties to be spurred into boldly conceiving what they had not thought before.

Faced with this national urgency, the University gets its acts together with smoothness and speed. It accepts that it must find critical thinking's personnel. It suspends any temptation to gather critical thinking to fiefs and seats. It senses that this would be a travesty. What is called for in the instance is even-toned identification of those best placed to instigate critical thinking's stirrings. Unfussy acceptance of those ascriptions is the priority.

As the identification of those best suited to the task gathers momentum, there is accompanying resolve in The Building. As it's called. This is an elegant structure right in the centre of the country's biggest town, in whose streets the University is laid out in an arrangement fortunately free, in the main, of gown and frown frictions. The Building radiates, *is*, academic order. There the perception grows that nobody should get too precious in this instance about protocols and procedures. Critical thinking, everyone understands with a lucid insight that leads some observers to wonder whether in the new settlements and dispensations it has in fact not already found itself, is instead to be driven by a spirit moving beyond anything that might cramp its style.

Nation, vision, action. Academy, necessity, remedy.

Eventually – and it's not like it is one of those too-long eventualities besetting the island, at all – it transpires that critical thinking is to be routed through the Faculty of Letters, the feeling being that this quaintly named seat of the Humanities might have the challenge ahead covered.

The critical Faculty, in its moment. Its responsibility, the nation's critical faculties.

The Council of the Faculty of Letters is convened. It is an august body, gratifyingly numerous, edifyingly diverse. No apologies for absence are received. Every member can see that this will not be a case of swamp and circumstance around the not very much. Nobody takes minutes, because the hour cometh. The eyes of scholarship have the light of mission. How many years has it been since they had a *project*? A *national* one? And now here they are, called to the most momentous project of all. Critical thinking: it's going to be happening.

Being critical thinkers themselves, everyone there quickly concurs on who the most accomplished practitioners of critical thinking's most incisive variants are. In consultation with those who think up this kind of thing, they fasten on the most effective mediators for critical thinking's conveyance to the amenable and expectant public.

Overwhelmed by the responsibility and a little proud-apprehensive, a little sheepish-flushed, this task force – the enactors – questions if it should perceive itself in that way. Is that what it is, really: the preeminent critical thinkers on the island engaged in the critical task of bringing critical thinking to the nation, the nation to critical thinking? They might or might not be, they tell themselves, but needs must when needs are critical like this. So they proceed to think critical thinking critically. It is the project's first exercise. The good long hard look at itself.

Whereupon they feel they must ask if it is teachable, and if so how. They probe the question of its curricula at different stages of the education system and across extra-mural accommodations. They know that all media will be important. They see that even then it will require something more. They want critical thinking to go out of the box, beyond the page, past screen, waves or cloud.

They would like to avoid the pitfalls of any mildest monolithic tinge. Consequently they grow a little concerned about how many criticalthinkings – for

the project is now impressed in people's minds with *one* noun in the *plural* – there could possibly be.

Criticalthinkings: the project is scored in everyone's mind in italics. The better to register national emphasis on the island's priority.

The question of what the responsibility might be to each mode of criticalthinking is delicate. The spirit of consensus now airing all the island's spaces fans the agreement on this point – 'Yes, it *is* delicate' – strongly. And no indeed: the conflicting responsibilities will not prove easy. Everyone can see that. Everyone there knows their country, and their state.

Meanwhile there are those who find that the enthusiasm for *criticalthinkings* that has seized the nation is itself open to critique. Some of them wonder if and how this point, which they did see straight off, might sensitively be broken to the people. Some of them air it openly. Some of them hear it back from some of the people.

Having themselves an honest capacity for self-critique, the enactors question, in all responsibility, their own suitability to the task.

On all of this, memoranda and dossiers are prepared. Only enough as will enhance; not so much as will cramp.

Those who think this kind of thing up urge on those who think this kind of thing through. Those who think this kind of thing through feel they must have a word, not words, with those who think this kind of thing up. From the two groups comes the suggestion for a further project. It could be called, by whoever – both come to realise that they ought to merge to survive, since neither is clear who might survive whom – *Critiquing Critique*.

And as they notice the people developing sharper responses to their critical approach to *criticalthinkings*, the enactors wonder whether they continue to be needed. It would be a little silly, they feel, to suggest they should critically think through the public's cogently critical thoughts on their ways with *criticalthinkings*.

Those who think up this kind of thing wonder if they can survive this. Those who think this kind of thing through begin to think they won't. But as they are slowly merging, they are slowly surviving.

They can see they cannot be the Ups. Or the Throughs.

Realising that they ought to be critical also of the process that identified them as preeminent critical thinkers in the first place, the enactors feel they must widen their circle. This makes for a happy chance, because others had been criticalthinking that same thing for some time. The widening happens first within University spaces. There grows an insistence that this whole process should, after all, have been interdisciplinary and inter-Faculty from the start. Arrangements are made. Of another kind as well. Critical thinkers from continents, not islands, are invited to co-think this through. They suggest that critical thinkers from other island spaces should join.

Things happen. Things look better.

Following which, the next stage evolves. Buzzwords and buzzbodies. The social partners, the economic guardians, the everywhere monitors, mention the word

stakeholders. They ask if critique is not best when it is distributed, devolved, networkable. This is tried. The suspicion soon grows strong that the solution is not that one either. Some worries about impasse arise.

The worries radiate further when the distribution, the devolving, the networking, is offered to each island cell of the many-ness calling itself one. So many nodes: it's all so very complex.

The desire for *criticalthinkings* rises. It doesn't dim. To each their own.

Those who think this kind of thing up and through wonder if the nation is sensitive to the desire for *critical thinking* dimming a little. Plural, singular: this is ever its story. Yet the new spirit of consensus is sufficiently alive, still, for the nation to serenely decide that the project – which *must* survive – ought to be suspended until it can be thought through with powers of critique sufficiently penetrating to establish whether the culmination of any national programme in critical thinking is always fated to coincide with recognition that it was never going to happen.

As those who think this kind of thing up and through put it.

The thought breaks that it's just their critical thinking project that's like this.

This, their kind of island story. Surviving their worst, which survives their best.

It not-long eventually happens that the italics inscribing themselves in the nation's mind start to spell out evolving emphases. National italics stray, straighten off script. Lean otherwise, out of true.

Some disinclinations settle on critical thinking. Still, the people level up.

They see that things really ought to be just a little finer but probably won't be. Nobody disagrees. It does not seem critical to do so.