In *The Prison-House of Language*, Fredric Jameson argues that once a formalist or structuralist move is taken in literary studies, there is no way out of it. It is a step that commits the theorist to a long-term sentence within the maze of language, destined to wander endlessly through its passages without ever breaking out beyond them to establish connection with - well, in Jameson's case, History. Criticism, in the sense bequeathed by the tradition running from Arnold to Leavis, has had a similar capacity for incarceration. Even those critics who do try to escape are eventually hauled back to the penitentiary or, equally likely, succumb to critical recidivism and troop back of their own accord.

Such, at any rate, is the conclusion suggested by Terry Eagleton's *The Function of Criticism*. In this brief but provocative study, Eagleton traces the trajectory of English criticism from its origins in the eighteenth century to Leavis and beyond with a view to identifying the implications of that history for the political tasks to be confronted by contemporary critical practice. As such, it is by far the most politically focused account of the vicissitudes of criticism that we have. There is a tendency in other recent Marxist or neo-Marxist definitions of criticism's tasks - those of Said and Jameson, for example - to proceed as if criticism could be regarded as a purely abstract and disembodied practice conducted from nowhere in particular and as if for everyone. By contrast, *The Function of Criticism* performs a useful service in the importance it accords to institutional considerations in both its account of criticism's history and its definition of its contemporary function.

There is, however, a countervailing tendency within the analysis. One consequence of posing the question of the political function which critical practices might perform via an interrogation of their institutional articulations ought to be to suggest that such practices might be differently constituted and so provide the means for different kinds of political work depending on the institutional contexts in which they are applied. It should suggest that the function of critical practices cannot be prescribed independently of the institutional conditions which regulate who, within and across such practices, is speaking to whom and in what circumstances. Yet, although supported by aspects of Eagleton's discussion, many of his formulations run counter to the particularizing political logic of such a conclusion. Indeed, Eagleton's prescriptions are nothing if not generalizing, and while his discussion encompasses a number of institutional contexts for critical activity, he eventually claims a singular function for criticism and predicates the realization of that function on a particular network of institutional sites.

That this is so is attributable, ultimately, to the archive which generates Eagleton's prescriptive statements. For, apart from supplying him with the
object of his analysis, it is the archive of criticism, in the Arnold to Leavis tradition, which governs the framework within which criticism's current ills are diagnosed and solutions prescribed. Eagleton's recommendations are a move within that tradition and, indeed, a return to it. This is clear enough in the text. Eagleton's critical recidivism is anything but furtive. 'The point of the present essay,' he writes, 'is to recall criticism to its traditional role, not to invent some fashionable new function for it.' Nothing trendy, then. Criticism is to become again what it once was, where what it once was is regarded as a totalizing form of social commentary and critique - delivering a message about and, ideally, for a whole culture - which furnished a site of opposition to the state. And it must be that or nothing:

Modern criticism was born of a struggle against the absolutist state; unless its future is now defined as a struggle against the bourgeois state, it might have no future at all.

The political vocation to which criticism is thus summoned, moreover, is conceived as essential to it. It is criticism's true and original function (but one which it has since lost) which, in being restored to it, thereby returning criticism to itself, realizes its alienated essence. While this essentialist aspect of Eagleton's discussion is problematical in itself, an added difficulty is that Eagleton does not envisage it as being particularly likely that the task criticism is thus called on to perform will be accomplished - or at least, to borrow a phrase from Leavis, not in our particular time and place. In this respect, The Function of Criticism is characteristic of the antinomial way of thinking that has come to govern Eagleton's approach to the question of criticism's function. This is especially clear in a recent interview. 'As far as criticism goes at the moment,' Eagleton argues, 'I wouldn't have said there was much at stake either way.' Given the actual constitution of criticism in the here and now and (give or take the odd slippage or two into a wider public domain) its restriction to the universities, nothing of consequence seems to hinge on how criticism is conducted. On the other hand, if criticism is redefined and its social articulations modified, then 'an enormous amount is at stake'. The difficulty with such formulations is that, in constructing criticism's options in the form of a polarity without mediating terms, they suggest that the gap between these options can only be closed by an act of will as criticism is invited to choose between 'political impotence and political effectiveness'. Or the gap cannot be closed at all but results, rather, in a fissure between what can be done in the here and now and what a Marxist criticism ought properly to be doing. And this, in turn, leads to questions of critical politics being posed in the form of a dilemma concerning 'the connection between what one is actually doing now, on the spot, and an image of what in the end would count as definitive of the identity of a Marxist cultural critic'.

But why should it be thought that there need be a contradiction between what can be done on the spot and some terminal conception of the true identity and function of the Marxist critic? What is it that converts practical questions concerning what might most appropriately be done in the here and now into a question of the critic's identity? Need Marxist critics think of themselves as having an ultimate and true identity they must incessantly be in search of? That
Eagleton formulates the matter in these terms is partly due to the influence of the messianic strain within the Marxist critical tradition. In The Function of Criticism, however, that strain is inflected through the governing terms supplied by the archive of criticism in its peculiarly English variants. Thus, although Eagleton's history of criticism is organized around Habermas's concept of the public sphere, his use of that concept and the lessons he draws from it are strongly influenced by Arnold's and Leavis's conceptions of criticism's function. It is the overlapping of these two traditions on to one another that accounts for a good deal of the book's persuasive power. It provides a Marxist pedigree for a concept of criticism derived from the history of its English variants, and in so doing provides the project of a Marxist criticism with some anchorage and roots in the English critical tradition. This is clearly a matter of calculated tactics, a way of insinuating Marxist concerns into the inherited vocabulary of Anglo-American criticism. Equally, though, such an insinuation is possible only because of the common indebtedness of both traditions through the route of Goethe and Schiller in the case of Marxist criticism - to the ethics and politics of romanticism whose terms are retained but inverted as earlier definitions of criticism's function are bent back on themselves to radicalize their political connotations. As a consequence, certain assumptions derived from these traditions remain unquestioned. Foremost of these is the conception of criticism as a practice of textual commentary with a totalizing ambit which acquires a political effectivity by intervening beneficially within the ideological processes of subject formation as these operate at a general societal level. Criticism, as Eagleton puts it, has compelled widespread attention only when, in speaking about literature, it has emitted 'a message about the shape and destiny of a whole culture'.

The logic of this conception of criticism's function was most clearly stated by Leavis. The critic, Leavis argued, 'conceives of himself as helping, in a collaborative process, to define - that is, to form - the contemporary sensibility'. However, as Leavis goes on to argue, the critic can only fulfil this function indirectly via the influence of criticism on the public - the intelligently responsive public - it produces:

It is through such a public, and through the conditions of general education implied in the education of such a public, that literature, as the critic is concerned with it, can reasonably be thought of as influencing contemporary affairs and telling in realms in which literary critics are not commonly supposed to count for much.

Eagleton, too, is concerned that criticism should be 'telling in realms in which literary critics are not commonly supposed to count for much', and predicates its ability to be so on its success in moulding a public. A different public, to be sure, and one organized by a different politics. For all that, the symmetry is compelling. As such, the major difficulty with Eagleton's analysis is that, while revealing the historically determined co-ordinates of the social and cultural space in which such a conception of criticism could install itself - albeit as an illusory practice which never achieved the goals it set itself - and while charting the dissolution and fragmentation of that space, he also seeks to reinstitute that space and, thereby, find criticism a home again. A revolutionary home, for sure,
and a home for a revolutionary criticism but one which, like its forebears, is equally unlikely to achieve what is asked of it. Problematical in itself, this has the further unfortunate consequence of foreclosing on the more practical and more readily achievable tasks practices of textual commentary (not all of which need be conceived as subspecies of a general concept of criticism) might be called on to perform across the varying institutional sites which supply the conditions of their existence and domains of application.

Yet the elements of such a particularizing political logic can be derived from Eagleton's text but only, as is my purpose here, when read against the grain of the archive which sustains its more generalizing formulations. First, though, it will be necessary to elaborate Eagleton's arguments a little more fully. It will be useful, in doing so, to view them in the light of the trajectory of Eagleton's recent work.

IN SEARCH OF A REVOLUTIONARY CRITICISM

Criticism is not an innocent discipline, and never has been. It is a branch of Marxist criticism to enquire into the history of criticism itself: to pose the question of under what conditions, and for what ends, a literary criticism comes about. For criticism has a history, which is more than a random collection of its critical acts. . . . It emerges into existence, and passes out of it again, on the basis of certain determinate conditions. . . . In constructing the history of criticism we are not tracing the exfoliation through history of a linear, if irregular process: it is the history of criticisms which is at issue. . . . The science of the history of criticisms is the science of the historical forms which produce these criticisms - criticisms which in turn produce the literary text as their object, as the text-for-criticism.\footnote{14}

This passage appears early in *Criticism and Ideology*, prefacing Eagleton's discussion of Raymond Williams's work. It is echoed, at the end of that discussion, by the injunction that criticism should 'break with its ideological pre-history' and 'situate itself outside the space of the text on the alternative terrain of scientific knowledge'.\footnote{15} Published eight years later, *The Function of Criticism* both applies the perspectives developed in *Criticism and Ideology* and also announces a break with its theoretist tendencies. It thus poses, in relation to criticism, 'the question of under what conditions, and for what ends, a literary criticism comes about' as well as the question of the circumstances in which it atrophies. Rather than urging Marxist criticism to establish a clear break with its ideological pre-history, however, Eagleton, in recalling criticism to a general function of subject formation, returns it to that pre-history (or at least to selected aspects of it) and, in doing so, effects a shift from the plural to the singular mode, from *criticisms* to *criticism*.

Habermas's theses concerning the relationship between the rise of literary criticism and the development and subsequent deterioration of the bourgeois public sphere are central to both aspects of Eagleton's argument. He is at times, though, sharply critical of Habermas and usually productively so. Habermas, for example, suggests that eighteenth-century criticism and the institutions
which supported its development (literary journals, debating societies, coffee-houses) provided a discursive-institutional site for the formation of a bourgeois public opinion constructed in opposition to the aristocratic state. Eagleton, by contrast, assesses the significance of this formative moment in the history of criticism as that of facilitating an alliance between the bourgeoisie and the landed classes. The part taken by literary-critical discourse in circulating the codes of rationality between members of a public presumed to meet as equals, Eagleton argues, played a crucial role in 'the cementing of a new power bloc at the level of the sign'. The classical bourgeois public sphere, dissolving the distinction between bourgeois, squire, aristocrat and the members of the professions in involving them in the same institutions as co-discoursing equals, effected 'a discursive reorganization of social power, redrawing the boundaries between social classes as divisions between those who engage in rational argument, and those who do not'.

Eagleton does not, then, idealize the founding moment of criticism as one in which criticism could claim a purely oppositional status and function. It was rather the site and medium of a discursive and institutional class compromise. None the less, this moment supplies the model of criticism's function in relation to which Eagleton organizes a lapsarian account of its subsequent history. Centrally implicated in the major political issues of the day, eighteenth-century criticism was 'not yet "literary" but "cultural" - that is, a form of ethical-humanist commentary which, while it encompassed literary texts, did so alongside other issues of vital public concern rather than as a separated domain subjected to "an autonomous specialist discourse". It was, albeit in a polite and recondite way, a site of social and political critique.

Subsequently, owing to a narrowing professionalism and the attenuation of the public sphere which shaped its birth, criticism has turned in on itself and petrified as a consequence of its lack of any vital social relevance. At the same time as criticism's scope narrows in being restricted exclusively to the literary, so its institutional basis becomes increasingly constricted until, with the Scrutiny group, it is driven to the ultimate contradiction of seeking 'to recreate the public sphere from within the very institutions which had severed criticism from it: the universities'. This leads Eagleton to demand that criticism should break free from the dual restrictions of the literary and the university and, by engaging with the products of the culture industry, assist in the development of a counterpublic sphere within which opposition to the administered culture and politics of late capitalism might be nurtured and developed. 'The role of the contemporary critic,' as Eagleton puts it, 'is to resist that dominance' - the dominance of the commodity - 'by reconnecting the symbolic to the political, engaging through both discourse and practice with the process by which repressed needs, interests and desires may assume the cultural forms which would weld them into a collective political force.' Staking its future on the development of institutional sites located outside of and in opposition to the state, criticism, in rendering 'human needs and desires into publicly discussable form, teaching new modes of subjectivity and combating received representations', is to assist in a process of revolutionary will formation by aiding the coming to consciousness of a collective political subject.
Here, then, is the break with the theoreticism of *Criticism and Ideology*. Rather than being severed from its ideological pre-history, criticism is to re-install itself on the terrain of ideology as a practice invested in the processes of subject formation and, thereby, in the constitution of social forces. Indeed, the task set Marxist criticism is to realize the function which had been claimed for criticism at the moment of its inception but which it had been able to achieve only imperfectly. This becomes clearer if account is taken of the second and more immediate point of historical reference informing Eagleton’s discussion. This is provided by the working-class cultural associations which flourished in Britain in the 1930s (the Workers’ Theatre Movement, the Left Book Club, etc.) and which, in their more developed forms in Germany, ‘helped to make possible a Brecht and a Benjamin, and to shift the role of critic from isolated intellectual to political functionary’.22 It is this moment that serves as the organizing political centre of Eagleton’s analysis in supplying a crystallized realization of criticism’s function, a second high point in relation to which its subsequent development is, again, conceived and organized in lapsarian terms.

The history of criticism is thus marked by two falls. First, the institutionalization of bourgeois criticism in the universities from the late nineteenth century onwards is represented as a fall from the extended political function it had acquired in the classical bourgeois public sphere. Its subsequent association with proletarian cultural associations in the 1920s and 1930s is then represented as the potential achievement - at least in class terms - of the ability to articulate a validly general opinion which criticism had earlier claimed but which had been denied it by the restriction of the classical bourgeois public sphere to male property owners. Criticism’s second fall, finally, is said to have been occasioned by the post-war erosion of this proletarian public sphere as a result of the increased commodification of cultural production and consumption. Counter-balancing this, though, Eagleton argues that the formation of new types of cultural association in connection with the development of post-war feminism has created an institutional space for criticism which has broken free from the gendered exclusivity of earlier public spheres, bourgeois and proletarian. This space, Eagleton suggests, might be amalgamated with that produced by the revival of proletarian cultural organizations, exemplified by the recent development of working-class writers’ and readers’ associations. Together, these could provide a counterpublic sphere freed from both the class and gender restrictions which have marked - and marred - criticism’s earlier institutional articulations. It is in relation to such a counterpublic sphere, Eagleton suggests, that criticism can attain a genuinely universalizing function of subject formation in speaking to, for and on behalf of a general opinion in the process of its formation.

Assessed in terms of its revolutionary credentials, the argument is impeccable and, at the level of generalities, it is difficult to take issue with many of Eagleton’s suggestions. The need for criticism to engage with texts beyond the literary canon is unarguable. Nor is there any doubt that Eagleton is right to foreground the question of criticism’s institutional connections. Difficulties accumulate, however, if one asks how this is to be accomplished. The details of many of Eagleton’s formulations often stand in the way of convincing answers. Certainly, the view that film, television, advertising and mass publishing impose
the monolithic dominance of the commodity form, *repressing* needs, interests and desires rather than *producing* and *organizing* them, is unlikely to supply a means of engaging with the real complexity of those institutions and practices. Nor is it likely to sustain critical practices with any extended social reach or popularity. Unfortunately, such passages work *with* rather than *against* the grain of the analysis, and so cannot be discounted as isolated rhetorical flourishes, suggesting that the terms in which the question of criticism's function is posed may be misleading.

This is also suggested by the improbability of the mission to which Eagleton summons criticism - improbable because the terms of his own analysis suggest that what is called for is unlikely to happen. If the future of criticism is staked on the part it might play in relation to the development of a counterpublic sphere, Eagleton also argues that the very existence of such a sphere is increasingly threatened by the dual pressures of the increasing privatization of social life and the enlarged sway of the culture industry. In consequence, instead of specifying concretely achievable tasks, Eagleton tends rather to write criticism into a corner where its destiny seems likely to be that of denouncing the conditions which hem it in and restrict it as it claims a function which it cannot realize - at least not yet. 'Socialist criticism,' as Eagleton puts it, 'cannot conjure a counterpublic sphere into existence; on the contrary, that criticism cannot itself fully exist until such a sphere has been fashioned.'

That criticism thus finds itself placed on the horns of a dilemma is less of a problem than the fact that the terms of that dilemma are conceived and organized by the repertoire of options inherited from the Arnoldian-Leavisite tradition. In recalling criticism to its traditional function, Eagleton thus recalls it to its traditional dilemma also. For, at least since Arnold, criticism has always chafed under the restrictions of the limited institutional domains which have supplied the actual conditions and sites of its operation, seeking to break out beyond these to realize the universalizing ambit it has claimed for itself. It would not be difficult, in this respect, to trace marked similarities between Eagleton's account of the degeneration of the classical bourgeois public sphere and Q. D. Leavis's account of the deterioration of the reading public, or between Eagleton's view that criticism should promote opposition to the dominance of the commodity form and F. R. Leavis's view that criticism should seek to constitute and organize sources of cultural resistance to the increasing commodification of social life. In both cases, criticism assigns itself a totalizing social function - that of creating a consensus via the influence of an educated public in the case of the Leavises, and that of welding disparate oppositional groups into a collective political force for Eagleton - in relation to which criticism's existing institutional articulations are perceived as inadequate. The task then comes to be defined as one of forging new institutional mediations through which criticism can once again aspire to the totalizing function which, in its self-diagnosis, it once had but has since lost. For the Leavises, this meant rejecting the pretensions of the English Association and the Royal Society of Literature to serve as the centres around which criticism's function might be constituted and seeking, instead, to develop a missionary network of institutional mediations, spreading outwards from the university through the education
system, for the diffusion of criticism’s benign and humanizing influence. It meant, Baldick has argued, the substitution of teaching for politics. While this opposition is misleading, we may accept its terms for the moment. For what Eagleton proposes is, in effect, the substitution of politics for teaching as criticism is invited to shake free of the limiting confines of the educational system and stake its all on the development of a counterpublic sphere. While obviously differing in terms of their political content, then, the two arguments are symmetrical at the level of the structure governing the terms in which criticism’s plight is diagnosed and treatment prescribed. This symmetry is even more apparent if Eagleton’s position is compared to Arnold’s whose terms it retains but inverts: criticism is to reacquire its totalizing function as a force opposed to the bourgeois state rather than, as in Arnold’s vision, operating within that state to establish it as a centre of authority whose influence will radiate outwards and downwards through society.

That Eagleton’s discussion describes a close orbit around the tradition of English criticism whose rise and fall it traces is, however, self-evident. The purpose of these archaeological excavations is to bring to light the consequences of that closeness for the position that Eagleton takes up in relation to Marxist criticism. In seeking to appropriate the conception of criticism’s function as elaborated in the Arnoldian-Leavisite tradition, Eagleton’s concern is clearly to stake out the high ground of criticism for Marxism while the official heirs of that tradition are busily engaged, at Yale and Harvard, in the deconstruction of textual minutiae. But the function that Marxist criticism is thus called on to perform is by no means a new one. To the contrary, the notion that criticism should assist in the formation of a revolutionary subject that will command the stage of history in a moment of terminal crisis has been central to the Marxist critical tradition ever since it attained a fully elaborated form in the writings of Georg Lukács. Indeed, Eagleton’s strategy is rather similar to Lukács’s appropriation of the Goethe-Schiller critical tradition for Marxist criticism and his provision of a concrete institutional articulation for the latter in the form of the Communist Party.

Viewed in this perspective, the political cutting edge of Eagleton’s position consists in the degree to which, in recalling criticism in general to its traditional function, he is thereby also able to affirm that Marxist criticism should carry on as before, but with the advantage of seeming to do so in a concrete, realistic and institutionally grounded way appropriate to a changed set of political circumstances. By connecting criticism’s role in the processes of revolutionary will formation to the part it plays in the development of a counterpublic sphere, Eagleton is able to refurbish the classical Marxist formulations of criticism’s function while also avoiding the idealist and, not infrequently, messianic conceptions governing the frameworks in which that function has, post-Lukács, been stated and developed. Criticism is not forced back on to the standpoint of redemption (Benjamin) or negation (Adorno) pending the development of institutional mediations that will enable it to productively connect with the political concerns of the moment. Rather, Marxist criticism is to assist in the process of building the sites which, come the day, will be necessary to the realization of its true function.
This marks a significant and welcome shift from the redemptive concept of criticism which haunts Eagleton's earlier study of Walter Benjamin.25 However, traces of the earlier position are manifest in Eagleton's interpretation and use of the concept of the public sphere. While Eagleton sounds a note of caution against the nostalgic and idealizing connotations of Habermas's concept of the classical bourgeois public sphere, an idealizing impetus remains strongly present throughout his analysis. Also, whatever he says to the contrary, Eagleton is insufficiently alert to the problems inherent in the attempt to theorize criticism's contemporary function by means of an analogy with its function in earlier phases of its development. The consequence is that Eagleton places his bets on the institutional sites where, given the current organization of the field of criticism, practices of textual commentary might be calculated to have the least likelihood of any extended or cumulative social effects.

It will be useful, in developing these arguments, to distinguish between the three major institutional sites in relation to which, adopting the particularizing terms suggested by Eagleton's discussion, the question of criticism's contemporary function may most appropriately be posed: the counterpublic sphere, the university, and the mass-mediated public sphere of the culture industry. Here, I shall concentrate on the first two.

CRITICISM AND THE COUNTERPUBLIC SPHERE

In Habermas's early writings the concept of the public sphere fulfils both a historical and a critical function. Historically, it refers to the institutional conditions in which a public opinion came to be formed and articulated in opposition to the state authority. However, this aspect of the concept is simultaneously critical in specifying the circumstances which must obtain in order to produce a reasoning public to whose opinion the state can validly be held accountable:

By 'the public sphere' we mean first of all a realm of our social life in which something approaching a public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body. They then behave neither like business or professional people transacting affairs, nor like members of a constitutional order subject to the legal constraints of a state bureaucracy. Citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion - that is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions - about matters of general interest.26

As such, Habermas argues, the public sphere presupposes a clear separation between a state authority standing over society and 'a sphere of bourgeois society which would stand apart from the state as a genuine area of private autonomy'.27 It presupposes, that is to say, capitalist social relations of production. The development of commodity production and exchange produced, in the bourgeoisie, a class whose members were not directly dependent on or integrated within a state bureaucracy - as was the case with powerful social
classes in feudal and absolutist regimes - and whose interests could therefore be
constituted in a relationship of opposition to the state authority. This condition,
while making the bourgeoisie relatively independent vis-a-vis the state, also
separated its members from one another to the degree that, in the market-place,
the conduct of affairs was regulated by the principle of self-interest. As a second
condition, therefore, the emergence of the public sphere required the
development of a set of institutions and accompanying rules for the conduct of
affairs within such institutions (freedom of assembly, equal rights to participation
and membership, the conduct of procedures by agreed means which are open to
rational debate and revision) within which differences of individual interests and
opinion might be negotiated so as to produce an opinion which might claim the
status and backing of a public. In brief, then, the institutions comprising the
public sphere mediate between society, conceived as the aggregate of separated
individuals transacting their affairs in the market, and the state, conceived as
the executive public authority. As such, it constitutes the means whereby the
separated interests of the former may be co-ordinated into a public opinion and
brought to bear on the state authority in order to curb and modify it.

The main points to stress here concern the relations between state and society
which are posited as the conditions for the emergence of the classical bourgeois
public sphere. With regard to the state, Habermas has in mind the absolutist
state which, owing to its authoritarian structure, generated no internal spaces
within which an opinion opposed to its own edicts and tendencies might be
produced and organized. It was the monolithic structure of the absolutist state
which, in exiling all mechanisms for the formation of a counter-opinion from
within its own folds, obliged those mechanisms to find their institutional
supports elsewhere. At the same time, the development of civil society
promoted by the spread of market relations created a social space clearly
differentiated from that of the state on which interests distinguished from and
opposed to it might be formed. While such interests required the mediation of a
separate set of institutions in order to be shaped into a politically effective
opinion, it should not be overlooked that it was the singular class and gender
(bourgeois, male) determination of those interests which, in exiling contradictions
from what counted as the public, enabled that opinion to be represented and to
function as the general opinion of enfranchised political subjects.

It is precisely this dual set of conditions permitting the formation of a
generalized public opinion which, according to Habermas's later writings and
the related work of Claus Offe, has been undermined by the development of
bureaucratic forms of state administration in late capitalist societies. To the
degree that state bureaucracies increasingly play a direct role in the regulation of
economic affairs, so the existence of a distinct sphere of civil society is
undermined. Equally, to the degree that economic associations such as
corporations and unions increasingly take on political functions in association
with state bureaucracies, so the state becomes increasingly socialized. These
joint developments unhinge the clear state/society separation upon which the
classical bourgeois public sphere depended and which equally supports the idea
of a counterpublic sphere conceived as a series of interrelated sites of opinion
formation located outside of and in opposition to the state. Related developments in
the constitution and funding of cultural organizations similarly render problematical their conception as a set of extra-state agencies which might form the basis for the mobilization of a generalized opinion against the state. The simple fact of the matter is that many of the forms of cultural association which Eagleton looks to in this respect are either directly or indirectly dependent on state apparatuses for their funding and administration.

This requires that the terms in which questions of cultural politics are put be reconsidered. In his admirably taut discussion of the work of Habermas and Offe, John Keane clearly demonstrates that neither conceives of state bureaucracies as smoothly functioning totalities which exercise an unshakeable dominion over their members. To the contrary, both stress the degree to which multiple disequilibria are produced by the inability of public and private bureaucracies to effectively co-ordinate their relations with one another. Further contradictions are generated as those bureaucracies, driven to enlist the active support and participation of their members and clients, prove unable to satisfy the demands which such support and participation generate. This leads Keane, rather than speaking monolithically about the public sphere, to speak plurally about public spheres. A public sphere, he argues,

is brought into being wherever two or more individuals, who previously acted singularly, assemble to interrogate both their own interactions and the wider relations of social and political power within which they are always and already embedded. Through this autonomous association, members of public spheres consider what they are doing, settle how they will live together, and determine, within the estimated limits of the means available to them, how they might collectively act within the foreseeable future.\textsuperscript{28}

Public spheres are therefore ‘a continuous, if unintended, effect of the processes of pseudo-mutual recognition inscribed within bureaucratic forms of power’.\textsuperscript{29} They are brought into being not merely outside of and in opposition to the bureaucratic apparatuses of the state but also within those apparatuses or in varying degrees of quasi-autonomous relations to state bureaucracies. Feminist public spheres, for example, have arguably been most influentially and enduringly constituted within or in relation to the education system and the spaces produced by the funding operations of state agencies with an investment in the sphere of the cultural, exploiting the contradictory niches such sites afford rather than taking up a position of pure externality and opposition to the state. This obviously calls into question the notion that a series of extra-state forms of public association might be constituted into a counterpublic sphere in relation to which, through the intervention of criticism and other practices, a unified collective subject of political action might be formed. This is especially so in view of the fact that, lacking a singular class and gender determination, the constituencies produced by and involved in different sites of struggle within or in relation to the state are not easily conceived as even potentially a unified subject to which a generalized opinion might be attributed.

In brief, then, I am suggesting that the various issues in relation to which public spheres are constituted and the various institutional sites on which they are formed do not cohere in such a way as to yield the possibility of a bipolar
political opposition (people versus state) being constructed around a central contradiction, such as that of class struggle. Nor, equally, can the state be regarded as a monolith to be opposed in its totality. The state, as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe put it, ‘is not a homogeneous medium, separated from civil society by a ditch, but an uneven set of branches and functions, only relatively integrated by the hegemonic practices which take place within it’. This means, they continue, ‘that the state can be the seat of numerous democratic antagonisms, to the extent that a set of functions within it - professional or technical, for example - can enter into relations of antagonism with centres of power, within the state itself, which seek to restrict and deform them’. If a brief for criticism is called for, and I do say if, it is one that will enable critical practices to operate variably and in multiple ways on the sites of such contradictions rather than - in constructing a totalizing contradiction of its own - outside and independently of them.

This is emphatically not to argue against the part that critical practices might play in assisting the development of collective writers’ and readers’ associations, film discussion groups and so on, whatever their formal relationship to the state. Nor is it to argue against attempts to articulate the concerns and interests that might be formed within these different public spheres so as to produce, however provisionally and partially, points of intersection between them. What it is to argue against, however, is a conception of criticism’s political vocation which stakes its all on the part it might play in relation to the development of such forms of cultural association if this is at the expense of a more widely ranging set of critical interventions conceived in relation to the contradictions, tensions and different publics formed within the critical apparatuses operating on the terrains of either the state or the market. Eagleton would do well to follow the logic of his own analysis of the classical bourgeois public sphere and to expect that the business accomplished within such cultural associations would be more likely to take the form of a complex series of negotiations and compromises between varied interest groups rather than the formation of a collective oppositional subject.

The point that is ultimately at issue behind Keane’s and Eagleton’s contrasting formulations of the public sphere concerns the concept of politics which shapes them. In Keane’s case, politics is conceived not as a separate sphere or level of action which mediates between civil society and the state but rather, as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe put it, as ‘a type of action whose objective is the transformation of a social relation which constructs a subject in a relationship of subordination’. While not denying the significance of the varied micropolitics which this conception allows for, the ultimate task, for Eagleton, consists in the degree to which they participate in politics conceived as a set of macro-processes which aim at the revolutionary transformation of social relations all at one go. The limitations of this political imaginary are, by now, surely evident. None the less, it is only in relation to such a generalized conception of politics that the idea of criticism having an equally generalized political vocation makes sense. If Eagleton’s approach is mortgaged to a nineteenth-century concept of criticism, so it is also to a nineteenth-century concept of politics: the two support and sustain one another.
CRITICISM AND THE UNIVERSITY

That this dual legacy is an encumbrance is most evident in Eagleton's attitude towards the relations between criticism and the university. Commenting on the moment, in the late nineteenth century, when criticism entered into the universities, Eagleton argues that it thus 'achieved security by committing political suicide; its moment of academic institutionalization is also the moment of its effective demise as a socially active force'. Clearly, this assessment rests on the conception of politics as a separate sphere or level of activity rather than a specific type of activity which may inform different institutionally organized spheres of human activity. It also rests on a concept of criticism appropriate to such a concept of politics: that is, as a form of textual commentary which acquires its social effectivity by organizing the reader as a subject who takes a meaning from a text with corresponding consequences for his/her consciousness of and mode of relating to and acting within a generalized public arena.

If the concept of politics which motivates the analysis is questioned, however, a contrary case could be argued and with equal conviction: namely, that the moment of criticism's academic institutionalization, particularly when viewed in the light of its subsequent extension throughout the education system, enormously augmented its power as an effective social force. Indeed, to reverse the terms of Eagleton's analysis, the political weight criticism derived from its earlier institutional articulations in the classical bourgeois public sphere seems insubstantial by comparison. If Arnold spoke sometimes as a 'citizen of the republic of letters' and sometimes as a state functionary, we should not follow his own cultural reflexes in mistaking the former for a more powerful and influential voice than the latter which opened up to criticism a new, vastly expanded and more concretely embedded sphere of activity than it had hitherto enjoyed. Nor need we echo F. R. Leavis's regret at the disappearance of an educated public by viewing his activities as an educational propagandist as merely compensating for the decline in criticism's function in the public sphere. To so argue would be to concur with the 'false consciousness' of these theorists as, in adjusting criticism to the new and positive possibilities offered by the development of an extended and public education system, they represented their activities to themselves as a fall from an earlier golden age.

It is true, of course, that once its position in the universities and the schooling system was consolidated, criticism no longer functioned as an oppositional force, not even in the equivocal sense Eagleton outlines. But nor was the sphere of action thus constituted entirely without its tensions and ambiguities. If, as has been remarked, Leavis substituted teaching for politics, the result was a politicization of teaching - the production of an oppositional space within the education system - which has subsequently provided by far and away the most important institutional supports for the kind of critical practices Eagleton advocates. There should be no mistake about this. Work in educational institutions, which involve extended populations for increasingly lengthy periods of their life-cycles, is in no way to be downgraded or regarded as less vital politically than the attempt to produce new collective forms of cultural association with which criticism might engage. Politically committed teachers

THE PRISON-HOUSE OF CRITICISM
face enough discouragement without the added suggestion that the 'real work' lies elsewhere. Before we all abandon the education system and set up camp in the counterpublic sphere, a little head-counting would do no harm. There is little doubt that, if the numbers reached by radical critical practices in the two spheres were weighed in the balance, the scales would tip decisively in favour of the former. Nor is there any doubt that, without the sustenance provided by the contradictory spaces within the education system, the institutions comprising the counterpublic sphere would have a hard time of it: put simply, socialist and feminist publishing houses, radical theatre groups, and so on are massively dependent on the sales and audiences generated, in part, by the contradictory critical spaces that have been won within the education system.

This reinforces my earlier argument that the notion of a counterpublic sphere constructed in a space outside of and in opposition to the state is incoherent. The fate of such initiatives is intimately tied up with the possibility of sustaining, developing and exploiting the multiple contradictions generated within state bureaucracies. This in turn, however, requires that attention be paid to the differing and specific ways in which such contradictions are constituted. In the case of the functioning of practices of textual commentary in the education system, this calls for a history of criticism that is less concerned with the move from one significant critic or school of criticism to another than with the development of institutionally embedded forms of instruction, training and examination. Not all practices of textual commentary acquire their social effectivity by organizing the reader as a subject who takes a meaning from the text with subsequent consequences for his or her consciousness and mode of relating to and acting within a generalized public arena. Others do so by producing the reader as an agent who performs a practice within specific institutional domains to become the bearer of specific certificated competences. Some fulfil these two functions simultaneously.

To broach the matter in these terms produces a significantly different inflection of the political issues at stake in the question of criticism's contemporary function. Paradoxically, Eagleton himself has provided one of the more suggestive pointers to alternative ways in which this question might be most productively posed, at least in so far as it bears on the relations between criticism and class politics. In his *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Eagleton argues that, assessed in class terms, the most significant long-term impact of the rise of English as a discipline was registered in relation to the formation of the petty bourgeoisie. Eagleton's contention here is less that English served to cultivate a distinctively petty bourgeois world-view than that it equipped the petty bourgeoisie with a set of practical competencies which, in producing a cultural orientation distinct from the frivolous amateurism of ruling-class culture, enabled it to emerge and consolidate its position as a powerful intellectual stratum, albeit one pressed into the service - although equivocally - of the bourgeoisie. Francis Mulhern notes that the period over which English consolidated its institutional power in the universities - roughly, from the 1890s to the 1930s - also saw a vast expansion in the size of the intelligentsia and a significant alteration in its social composition. Lower-middle-class children were recruited, through an expanded education system, into an enlarged range.
of functions within state bureaucracies, new media and, of course, private corporations. Viewed in this light, the crucial bag of tricks that English delivered was that of enabling a whole social stratum to negotiate its mobility while retaining, but also reorganizing, the typical dual-class orientation of the petty bourgeoisie. If, as Eagleton puts it, ‘the lower middle class has a deep animus against the effete aristocracy perched above it, it also works hard to discriminate itself from the working class set below it’. English, in its Scrutiny moment, Eagleton suggests, fitted the bill in being both ‘radical in respect of the literary-academic establishment’ and ‘coterie-minded with regard to the mass of the people’; its concern with ‘standards’ both challenged ruling-class dilettantism and at the same time ‘posed searching tasks for anyone trying to muscle in on the game’.

None of this, of course, happened because Leavis wrote a few books or because of the functioning of criticism at a general societal level. It happened because of the educational deployment of criticism - a development whose significance cannot be properly appreciated if it is construed as a fall from criticism’s earlier function in the classical bourgeois public sphere. Indeed, what is most striking is the symmetry between these two moments, for in both criticism is assessed as playing a vital role in relation to the processes of class formation. The fact that, in one case, it did so on the site of institutions formed up outside the state whereas, in the other, it operated within state institutions is no occasion to view the latter as a ‘withered’ version of the former. To the contrary, such changes need to be assessed in their positivity as having produced a new and historically more pertinent sphere for the social deployment of criticism in response to shifting processes of class formation and their institutional domains and, in consequence, producing new modalities of critical activity also. Of these, the most important was the examination, I. A. Richards’s contribution to the development of Cambridge English and, in many respects, the linchpin of the discipline’s practical social function. As Chris Baldick shows, the examination, viewed in relation to Richards’s theory of value, was to function as a practical means of assessing the relative value of persons - hence the stress on an a-theoretical, direct and experiential response to the text. All the same, the response sought was to be a close and attentive one, alert to the slightest nuances of meaning, thus testifying to a specific cultural competence acquired through a process of training rather than to a generalized familiarity with culture. In thus prizing a petty bourgeois seriousness and the stress which, according to Bourdieu and Passeron, is placed on the role of effort in petty bourgeois attitudes to culture in contrast to a bourgeois dilettantism which prizes an effortlessly acquired general cultural knowledgability as the sole, valid sign of persons of taste, English helped to colonize the educational apparatus for the petty bourgeoisie. At the same time, it helped to colonize the petty bourgeoisie for that apparatus and the other state and private bureaucracies into which they were recruited; usually in subaltern functions, in articulating petty bourgeois, anti-capitalist ideologies to bourgeois romanticism.

It is arguable that one of the central issues facing contemporary critical practices concerns the role they have acquired through their educational deployment in relation to the formation of the petty bourgeoisie - to the
formation of its skills, competencies and practical capacities as well as to the forms of ideological and political solidarity into which it is compacted. This, however, is to raise questions of a detailed and specific kind regarding the composition of the student body, career trajectories, the effects of different kinds of pedagogy and assessment, or the kinds of ideological dis-articulations and re-articulations that can most productively be made in the light of these considerations. These questions cannot be explored here except to note that the idea of a strategy for criticism that would, in one of the areas of its practice, be conducted with the aim of influencing the formation of intellectual strata has a perfectly respectable Marxist lineage in the writings of Gramsci. Equally, it has a pertinent point of reference in Foucault's conception of the function of the 'specific intellectual' and the part to be played by such intellectuals in contesting 'the microphysics of power' - a project which can hardly be engaged with if critical activity is pitted entirely against the monolithic dominance of the state and commodity form.

These larger considerations to one side, though, my main point is that generalized conceptions of criticism's function, such as Eagleton advocates, especially when they rest on lapsarian accounts of criticism's history, deny any space within which questions of such a detailed and specific kind can even be put. If the relations of practices of textual commentary to the varied and dispersed concerns of contemporary cultural politics are to be meaningfully specified, it is necessary to displace the mood of enquiry from the singular to the plural: to ask not what the function of criticism is, as if it must have one and only one, but rather what roles might be performed by different types of critical practice given the varied institutional domains, and their varied publics, in which such practices are operative. This variable conception of criticisms and their functions recognizes that literary and other cultural texts are differentially inscribed in the social in such a way as to be involved in a range of practical affairs rather than just one: the formation of subjectivities. It is not, though, a recipe for a live-and-let-live, anything-goes-anywhere-anytime, pluralism. To the contrary, to pose the question of criticism's functions plurally and therefore specifically is to sharpen critical disputes by giving them a clearer and more practically defined focus. If, as Leavis argued, the idea of criticism cannot cogently be presented as 'a matter of generalities', this is ultimately because, at this level, there are no practical means of discriminating between competing prescriptions. They thus function purely exhortatorily rather than being amenable to any critical calculations.

There is, however, a more general difficulty associated with the very generality of the concept of criticism. For the term has both a specific meaning, one limited to the practices of textual commentary generated in the wake of romanticism, and a more generalized contemporary usage whereby it encompasses any and all practices of textual commentary, from rhetoric through to structuralism and deconstruction. Such is the sedimented cultural weight of the first usage, however, that it tends to be carried over and applied wherever the term is used and, willy-nilly, to inscribe the ethics and politics of romanticism in the discourses in which it functions as a central term. Certainly, this is so wherever the question of Marxist criticism is at issue, in that such discussions -
and Eagleton is by no means alone in this - are usually organized around the assumption that Marxism must supply a criticism which can function as an heir to its romantic forebears and, thereby, supply an alternative to the latter's misbegotten contemporary progeny. While Eagleton's work has supplied the occasion for this article, it should be clear that its broader purpose is to suggest that the concept of criticism is so massively encumbered with an ineradicable ideological burden as to render its appropriation by Marxism problematical. Like the commitment to developing a Marxist aesthetics, the project of a Marxist criticism with a singular function - no matter how complexly laminated that function might be - should perhaps be laid finally to rest.

NOTES

5 Eagleton, *Function of Criticism*, 123.
6 ibid., 124.
8 ibid.
9 ibid.
10 ibid., 139.
12 F. R. Leavis, 'The responsible critic: or the function of criticism at any time', *Scrutiny* (Winter 1953), 178.
13 ibid., 178-9.
15 ibid., 43.
17 ibid., 12-13.
18 ibid., 18.
19 ibid., 76-7.
20 ibid., 123.
21 ibid., 118.
22 ibid., 112.
23 ibid., 114.
27 ibid., 199.
29 ibid., 7.
31 ibid., 153.
36 ibid.
37 Baldick, op. cit., 148-55.
41 Leavis, op. cit., 181.