

Critical Thinking

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I believe that critical thinking has been an existential parameter in my life. Hence my obsession with this topic, for it helped me survive and thrive in five countries on three continents.



The British philosopher **Francis Bacon** (1561 – 1626) defined critical thinking as follows:

Critical thinking is a desire to seek, patience to doubt, fondness to meditate, slowness to assert, readiness to consider, carefulness to dispose and set in order; and hatred for every kind of imposture.

Critical thinking and criticism are not synonymous. Critical thinking is based on judgement and continuous analysis of one's environment; in the process, it can incorporate finding faults and flaws, but its emphasis is on questioning and examination. Criticism, on the other hand, focuses on finding fault with something or someone. Critical thinking seeks to bring a situation or relationship to a logical conclusion. Criticism is insouciant to the outcome.

I believe I witnessed critical thinking in my native Soviet Bloc country, where my parents were preoccupied with analyzing and comprehending the political milieu of our land. They/we lived a double life, one of complete obedience to the system outside the walls of our house, and another one of perpetual investigation once we reached home. *The Voice of America* and other sources perceived to be as factual provided us with an alternative to the propaganda disseminated via Pravda-style newspapers. In my opinion, the reality of living under dictatorship, forced us to plant the seeds of critical thinking in order to survive.

Eventually, my parents and I escaped the Soviet Bloc country, hoping to find liberty outside our place of birth. I took with me, however, a comprehensive luggage of critical thinking. I did not criticize, for I wished to adapt and integrate within the local societies of my sojourn but investigated and studied the local cultures using my Soviet Bloc

experience. I looked at my surroundings with a degree of tolerance and desire to comprehend the different peoples, for I wished to put down roots.

Here, I would like to explain the connection between critical thinking and the spirit of liberty. After all, liberty is the reason why we left our place of birth. To explain my thesis, I will summarize a speech given by the American judge **Learned Hand**. In 1944 he spoke in Central Park, New York, to a million and a half newly sworn-in American citizens. The name of the speech: "*The Spirit of Liberty*." Learned Hand was voicing my inner thoughts. He talked about Americans as people who had the courage to break with the past and brave the loneliness and dangers of a new land. Then, the speaker uttered the following words: Liberty lies in the hearts of men and women; when it dies there, no constitution, no law, no court can give it to us. At that point, Learned Hand added a few words that had been on my mind for many years: Liberty is not the will to do as one likes, it is not the unbridled behavior that deprives others of their freedom. The genuine liberty is the spirit which is not too sure that it is right, rather, it is the spirit which attempts to understand and respect the minds of other men and women. The spirit of liberty seeks to manifest itself without bias.

I had been seeing the world around me through the judge's eyes for many years. I had been looking at the world through the eyes of an individual who experienced dictatorship at a young age, and had escaped, together with her parents, to a place where they hoped to find liberty.

Is it possible to fully understand what critical thinking is about? Is this characteristic attainable by human beings? What does it take to acquire it? At such times, when I ponder on the issue of critical thinking, I recall the characters in a play by **Eugene Ionesco** entitled *The Chairs*.



In it, the two protagonists, an old married couple, claim that their critical thinking acquired during their long existence of trials and tribulations can teach humanity how to avoid mistakes. In order to pass on their life experience to humanity the couple hire a speaker to transmit this important message to the audience. After their death, a pale, feeble-looking man appears on stage, babbling incoherent syllables, only to collapse a few moments later. I always thought that the old people's critical thinking did not suffice to salvage the world. We are not receptive to others' teachings. We prefer our own mistakes and experiences.

I think that life teaches some of us to tolerate and respect diversity of opinions, despite the fact that thoughts may not coincide with the local mores. After all, critical thinking is the enemy of group-think / cliché conventions.

