

What Happened to Theory?

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The fate of Theory may be discussed from many angles. In terms of history of ideas, we can trace the evolution of notions and terms that defined the era. In terms of history of philosophy, we can discuss the major issues that preoccupied theoretical pursuits. In terms of epistemic genealogy, we can define the discourses that dominated inquiry. In terms of sociology of the profession, we can look at campus practices and the emergence of a new professoriate. In terms of ideology, we can demythologize scholarly and philosophical claims. Since this is a position paper meant to open a conversation among us, rather than a research one, I will try to be eclectic and combine some of the possible approaches I just mentioned.

Theory represents a great moment of rejuvenation and reaffirmation of the humanities, and it has had the same effect not only in the US, where it originated, but also wherever in the world it spread. For a quarter of a century, let us say between 1960-85, the Western legacy that had been shaken during the 1940s was re-energized in a thorough, creative way as the torch was passed from Modernism (e.g., phenomenology, existentialism, Marxism, analytic philosophy, modernist literature) to Postmodernism.

Theory also affirmed the centrality of the humanities within campuses and beyond. Its academic influence reached everywhere, from the social sciences to the arts and from the hard sciences to professional schools like law, architecture, and medicine. Its vocabulary entered everyday language as people started using words like paradigm, discourse, deconstruction, semiotics, closure, and of course political correctness. Critiques made headlines in the press, and

theorists like Bourdieu, Althusser, Eco, Rorty, Eagleton, and Cornel West became celebrities on the basis of their ideas and public appearances.

Radical though as it truly was in its intellectual pursuits, theory did not threaten any of the major edifices of education, research, culture, or public sphere. Like earlier major movements, it assumed the continuity of intellectual tradition, the centrality of the literary canon, the eminent mission of the university, the primacy of philosophy, the universality of fundamental issues. Of course it made certain important adjustments, for example, by admitting to the pantheon avant-garde artists like Artaud, thinkers of color like C.L.R. James, and female critics like Kristeva. But the foundations of the pantheon as we have known it since the Romans were not shaken.

Let's also take a look at campuses. Theory was the time when Humanities Centers and Institutes were established and the whole movement of "studies" emerged – gender, media, science, museum, disability, American, and Classical studies. These developments reconfigured the disciplines in a radical way by connecting fields of study in new ways but did not affect institutional structures and divisions like the department, the college, the course, or the conference. Scholars and other intellectuals were excited to be part of a large-scale revisionist project, felt challenged by the world around them, and were inspired to write about many and diverse things – pop songs, experimental films, soap operas, political speeches, fashion codes, and other cultures. Theory deserves credit for this extraordinary stimulation.

Theory also deserves credit for its sharp reflexivity. When it felt that, due to positivist claims by schools like generative grammar, structuralism, semiotics, and pragmatics, it was pursuing mastery over all phenomena and slipping into totalization, it developed a systematic self-criticism and changed from a linguistic to an interpretive project, denouncing its nomothetic

ambitions and instead concentrating on conditions of understanding. Post-structuralism, the second phase of Theory, arrived as a combination of Kantian self-criticism of reason with a Left Hegelian interest in politics. The latter empowered differently those who by the early 1970s had felt that 1968 had been defeated, betrayed, and abandoned. They now felt reassured that, until totality could be again achieved in the streets, it could be at least beholden in the special afternoon experiences of the seminar and the lecture. They had not changed the world but they could certainly interpret it.

What has happened to Theory since that time? If a broadly shared academic practice is any indication, Theory has triumphed not only nationally but globally. I am referring to our explicit and ubiquitous awareness about methodological assumptions and disciplinary biases. Every day in our writing, teaching, committee participation, and organization membership we all exhibit an unprecedented sensitivity to the words we use, the way we argue, the audiences we address, the power we yield. We may no longer do Theory as such but we are all theoretical now (even people who disliked or simply bypassed Theory), having incorporated terms and principles of intellectual integrity and academic responsibility. Nobody today can speak or write as if Theory had not happened. This is a remarkable achievement.

Despite this successful integration into our daily practices, most people I think would agree that the moment of Theory has passed and that it was too short, and they will do so with certain nostalgia. There were some things that Theory made possible and we seem to miss – speculative exercises, revisionist projects, passionate gatherings, teaching experiments. Whether we view its eclipse in a positive, negative, or mildly amused fashion, there is little doubt that something changed in the 1990s, signaling the end of an era. I think what happened is that the interpretive model, the post-structuralist one, was superseded by a therapeutic one that is still

dominant, turning critique from semiology to symptomatology. From an epistemological perspective, the turning point was a certain literalization of otherness, a literalization that enabled individuals to claim otherness individually, that is, to appear themselves as others, rather than to theorize difference.

Here I would like to take things a step back and propose that the literalization of otherness was a consequence of the dissolution of the aesthetic realm in the 1980s. For about two centuries, this realm provided a unique sense of stability, balance, and rectitude. Individual artworks were bearers of form in an age of production. Canons provided shared codes of learning and conduct in a secular world. Museums and concert halls offered spaces of disinterested contemplation. Geniuses and sages functioned as personifications of wisdom and purity. Literary circles and art movements worked as models of democratic freedom and equality. Although Jan Patočka, Jürgen Habermas, Cornelius Castoriadis, Gianni Vattimo, Charles Taylor, and Bernard Williams may have had serious philosophical disagreements, they shared the same admiration for the monuments of Western culture, and they knew them intimately. They and their readers could together relish the unalloyed beauty of the aesthetic realm. The last universal value we cherished was not a religious, moral, or metaphysical one; it was the aesthetic – a physical and egalitarian value available to everybody regardless of origin, class, or gender. And it is now more or less gone. When Derrida (a virtuoso of semiology) juxtaposed on opposite pages Hegel and Jean Genet, readers shared his assumption that the latter's writing might be offensive but it was great literature. Today, when Žižek (a virtuoso of symptomatology) juxtaposes Hegel and advertising, readers share his assumption that both are cultural constructs whose relevance is contingent and contested.

Following the dramatic dissolution of the aesthetic realm, the dialectic understanding that was first launched by the Romantics lost its moorings in form and became experiential, that is, it was taken literally, and personally. This literalization swept aside all theoretical critiques of presence, bringing to the fore a new ontology. Thus Lyotard's otherness became others, Deleuze's minor literature became the literature of minorities, Foucault's power became oppression, Gramsci's hegemony became imperialism, and Derrida's deconstruction became destruction. Some might call this change simplification but I believe that it reflects the therapeutic view of critique based on the idea that modernity "others" people, and that this change responds to the desire for an ethnographic study of communities of otherness. Let us look at some basic elements of our current, post-theoretical situation.

1. The return of empiricism, this time committed to the particular. We work on case studies that portray incidents and refuse to take them for anything greater. The singular reigns supreme and judgment is considered intolerant. Analysis is resolutely microscopic. It is usually presented in the form of story telling, which rejects the grand narratives of traditional humanism and takes as its model the opening of *Discipline and Punish*, with the detailed description of an execution in all its unique horror. Taking the critique of presence for granted, we tell anecdotes of representation.

2. The return of close reading, this time as the telling of an anecdote. We apply interpretive techniques taught by theory not to works but to situations and events, learning from Foucault (so to speak) who had earlier interpreted Velazquez's painting *Las Meninas* in the opening of *The Order of Things*. Thus we read occasions. Even when we write books of an introductory or encyclopedic character, instead of giving definitions, outlining classifications, or

tracing evolutions, we chose the anecdotal approach which lets something that happened speak for itself in its own terms, and we leave it at that.

3. The return of place, this time as space. Since the anecdote is not part of a history, an occasion does not take place but unfolds in space. As history has been eclipsed by the historicized incident, the sense of space in the understanding of that incident becomes paramount. Much more than the history of a people in a place, we tell stories about the movement of people in space, hence our tremendous interest in displacement, borders, and nomadism. That is also why, while High Theory was postmodern, Low Ethnography (the study of the others of modernity) is post-colonial.

4. The return of the happening, this time as performance. Together with the eclipse of history and place, we are witnessing the disappearance of the individual cultural items such as the painting, the music album, the monograph, maybe next the newspaper. These items are being replaced by the physical space of the installation, the aural space of the iPod, and the virtual space of the digitized word, spaces that again are open to the occasion and the event. If Theory textualized everything, reading the world as a Bible, the therapeutic gaze dramatizes everything, understanding life as performance. With the change from textuality to performativity, we have moved from the open work of the postmoderns that, while available to infinite interpretations, still remained one and elicited aesthetic awe, to the unique event of the performance that dispenses completely with the tyranny of the work and each time it happens, it becomes a work itself (as well as the symptom of an otherness).

4. The return of the subject, this time as identity. As otherness acquired a biographical authenticity (individuals are constructed by being excluded), difference was identified as a cultural symptom. Thus not only did people turn themselves into the others of modernity, they

also defined their difference in cultural terms consistent with the prevailing cultural constructivism. The broad trend of cultural studies expressed the growing interest in faith, race, gender, or language as cultural markers that make us who we are. Students joined Paul de Man's seminars as members of an interpretive community that served humbly great works and ideas. Some years later, many of these students had acquired an identity, and were teaching students who were born into one. For sure those identities were impure and hybrid but they would be irrelevant, indeed meaningless, back at that legendary Yale seminar.

5. The return of biography, this time as experience. If identities are created by culture and othered by modernity, their only defense is the fashioning of their experiences. Consequently we scholars have the responsibility to respect and record their testimonies of self-fashioning. That is why we try to avoid the positivist tendency to objectify and the idealist one to essentialize with our steadfast commitment to circumstantiality. We want to honor the unrepeatable that resists iterability. Hence the recent interest in feelings and emotions, in fleeting moments of pleasure and the lingering pain of trauma. Total respect for the uniqueness and integrity of each and every human experience is the basis of all scholarly work today.

6. The return of ethics, this time as politics. For Modernists and Postmodernists, the aesthetic represented the purest ethical realm. To be specific, I think it would be accurate to say that, regardless of their huge differences, around 1930 all major philosophers (and there were many!) would agree that true art, in addition to possessing greatness, provided an unalloyed sense of the good. Some fifty years later, at the conclusion of the twentieth century, with the dissolution of the aesthetic realm and the collapse of the universal under the weight of the singular, a great ethical void emerged. For example, searching for norms that would help us oppose the next holocaust, some people turned to Levinas's ethics. Most American scholars,

though, declared critique itself a political intervention, starting with academic work itself. This is how we still operate. We call everything cultural political, and we base our ethics in the conviction that consequently all our interventions in the domain of culture are by nature political too. If Kafka is considered Minor Literature (so the logic goes), not only is his fiction that of a minority but by teaching or writing about it we too can become both minoritarian and oppositional. Hence our highest political ideal: in our post-revolutionary world, all progressive politics is resistance politics.

Does Theory as such survive? There is some work done here and there though it has neither momentum nor shared goals. Right now, there is no vision to theorize, and therefore no major theoretical agenda. (*Empire* by Negri & Hardt does not sustain our interest for long, the appearance of much Walter Benjamin material for the first time in English does not affect what we already think of him, we like Jacques Rancière a lot but do not exactly know what to do with his thought, and we have let nearly all our journal subscriptions lapse. We read more but finish fewer books. We go to conferences more for social & professional reasons.) We all live now After Theory in that we are also witnessing the recuperation by our post-aesthetic world of earlier views, held before the skepticist onslaught. Old essentialisms return to comfort people who have lost the ultimate consolation of modernity, the aesthetic consolation. Some who still desire a larger framework have turned recently to various revivals like the new formalism, the new religiosity, and the new utopianism. Others look for a balance between universalism and particularism, and study the kind of the specific that is not ascetically unique, the specific that enables us to join more inclusive conversations again. Yet others work in niche corners of the academic and intellectual work, often recovering fascinating stories about silenced individuals and oppressed groups. In one way or another, most of us continue to do wonderful ethnographic

work studying the marginalized local in the age of the global, our global age or earlier ones, salvaging records of courage and endurance. Theory was a particular school of thought with its own institutional discourse, apparatus, and network that reached its historical end. At some point theoretical thinking of some kind will appear again, no doubt under a different form and system. But it will take some time, as it will require (as the last one did) entirely new ideas about the kind of life and society we want, ideas that are probably not on our horizon right now. Till then, we will continue sorting with profit through theoretical works of earlier centuries, enriching our work with their insights.

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