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11. BOOK NOTES: THEORY'S EMPIRE

Tim Burke

So, OVER at The Valve, they're talking about the new anthology *Theory's Empire*, and I was asked to join in the fun. Beware of what you ask for: I may have achieved true Holbonian length here, at 3,000 words or so.

I'll start, like the book itself, with Jeff Reid's cartoon "Breakfast Theory: a Morning Methodology". ("Pretty dry and flavorless, isn't it?" "Your question is informed, or should I say misinformed, by the conventionalized bourgeois cereal paradigm ...") I was one of the thousands of academics in graduate school or newly hired in 1989 who cut that cartoon out and put it up on a bulletin board. I remember showing it to my wife, saying it was the funniest thing I'd seen. She read it attentively and smiled politely.

The cartoon stayed funny but it also started to become an emblem of something else for me, a growing awareness of distress. In 1989, I was well into graduate school. I'd actually had a lot of exposure to "critical theory" as an undergraduate major in history and English in the mid-1980s. I'd even had a class with Judith Butler on Foucault while she was at Wesleyan. I liked theory, even when I felt I didn't have the faintest idea what was going on, because if nothing else you could sense the energy behind it, that the theorists we read were urgently engaged by their work, the professors who taught the theorists were among the most exciting and skilled teachers at the college, because in the backwash of the 1960s and 1970s, many of us had a restless sense that the next intellectual and political step was waiting to be taken, but none of us knew what that might be. Theory made you feel almost like you were in the dream of the Enlightenment again, everyone speaking the same language with disciplines and specializations set aside.

The cartoon was funny for those of who spent time reading, thinking, speaking theory at a very particular moment in the institutional and intellectual history of American academia. For anyone who didn't, the cartoon is mildly amusing in another way: as a kind of pre-Sokal confirmation that the eggheads in the humanities had gone deep into

the swamps of nonsense and pomposity. And this is how the cartoon wormed its way into my head: both as a funny satire of things I did and said and as a salvage operation dredging up an intellectual self already alienated by the distance between what I found myself doing as an academic-in-training and the underlying desires I'd brought with me when I signed up to get a Ph.D.

Which is still how I feel now about "theory" and its alleged overthrow. I warm to the talk that it was an empire, but I'm equally aware that my sense of it as such is a direct personal consequence of my individual experience of academic careerism. I warm to the various critiques and denunciations of theory in the volume but to some extent because I get both the insider and outsider version of them, the same way I could read the cartoon in two idioms—and for the same reason, the glee of some contributors can be a bit off-putting. This is why I tend to bristle on one hand at know-nothing denunciations of theory, like E.O. Wilson's in *Consilience*, but also at circle-the-wagons defenses of it, or even those defenses which argue that the problem with theory was only its occasional excesses and over-zealous acolytes.

The main point, and it is one made again and again throughout the anthology, is that theory was above all a professional consciousness, a way of feeling and being academic that was native to a past time and place (the 1980s and early 1990s). You can't just separate out some of the chief manifestations of the era of theory, like the star system, as unrelated epiphenomena, or insist that we just talk about the actual texts. (Though at the same time, the volume could really use an ethnographic retelling of a conference or conversation from the late 1980s or early 1990s. Anthony Appiah comes closest in his short essay, and maybe there's nothing that really fits the bill besides a David Lodge novel.)

This is not to say that theory's moment is done and gone, with no harm to anyone. There was lasting damage done in a variety of ways.

A number of contributors observe that one thing that the theoretical moment did which has had lasting effects on academic writing in general is not so much the feared disfigurements of jargon but the escalating grandiosity of scholarly claims, the overinflation of argument, the Kissinger-joke ramping up of the presumed stakes in scholarly writing and speaking. Theory, particularly but not solely in literary studies, withdrew from an imagined relation to public discourse which apportioned it a mostly modest role but in exact inverse proportion

to that retreat developed a more and more exaggerated sense of the importance of its own discourse.

You cannot just make this a folly of the theorists, or talk about it in isolation from the economic and institutional changes in the academy itself. Academic literary critics in 1950, like most professors, made poor salaries while working for institutions which were still relatively distant from American mass society. Professors in 1989, particularly those employed by selective colleges and universities, were working for institutions which were relatively wealthy, paid good salaries and offered good benefits, and which were now a familiar component of the American dream. Most research university departments in the humanities and the social sciences at that time also had to confront the seismic shift in the internal budgeting of their institutions, that external grants not only kept the sciences going but also funded the whole institution in major ways. The scientists weren't usually being modest about the usefulness of their research in their grant applications, and a good deal of that spilled over as a pressure on the rest of the academy.

This inflation has a lot to do with explaining the relation between the first wave of high theory and its evolution into historicism and identity politics of the race/class/gender variety, much discussed in the anthology. (In many ways, this mutation is the central issue under discussion.) On paper, this relation is hard to explain: it is not an easy or natural evolution of argument from the initial round of continental postmodern or poststructuralist philosophy, much less so from the first wave of the high priests of deconstruction in the United States like Paul de Man. The contributors to the anthology hammer on this point again and again, but it's worth emphasizing: whatever "theory" began as, it quickly metastasized into a much vaguer way of being and acting that could be found in most corners and byways of the academic humanities, and a way of being and acting that was often a new and virulent practice of academic warfare which left a lot of casualties and fortifications in its wake.

It's true that a response to the volume that insists on reconfining theory to a properly constrained set of texts and authors has a valid point. If nothing else, it leads to taking the actual content of actual writing seriously, rather than just a marker of academic sociology. Saussure, Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, and even many of the various American academic superstars who dominated the era of theory like Fish, Jameson, or Spivak had important, substantive arguments to make that can't

just be waved away or ignored. (Nor does this anthology: it collects some smart detailed ripostes to the substantive arguments of Derrida and many other theorists.) Still, I agree with many of *Theory's Empire's* authors: the *Geist* and historical moment of theory is an equally important part of the subject.

Which may be best known experientially, by those of us who lived through the sometimes-subtle, sometimes-blatant transformations high theory brought to academic practice and consciousness. Many are right to say that is a perilous claim, not to mention a potentially narcissistic one: it's a short step from that insistence that "I lived it, so I know it", to blasting everything you don't like as "postmodernism", to ignoring the things that made various mutations and permutations of theory attractive and productive, to alienating your present intellectual self from the self that found it all very exciting and generative.

It's also dangerous because you begin to overread the theoretical moment as the causal agent behind every problem of the contemporary academy. Valentine Cunningham, for example, attributes almost every novelty in the vocabulary and practice of humanistic scholarship since 1960 to theory's conquest. There are deeper drivers here, and they not only survive theory, but predate it. Among them is academic careerism itself. Theory sharpened its knives, but aspirant scholars in the humanities and elsewhere must still today present an account of themselves as more brilliant, more original and more important than any others of their cohort while also pledging their fidelity to reigning orthodoxies in their discipline. Theory's overthrow hasn't changed any of that, nor did theory cause it to happen. Too many talented people chasing too few desirable jobs did. Cunningham argues that "criticism always claims newness", but really, all humanistic scholarship since modernism or so does, and in this, is really only following on the lead of literature itself, as Morris Dickstein notes in his essay in the volume.

This is not to underrate the particular forms of self-interest that theory serviced in very particular ways. J.G. Merquior's essay "*Theorrhea* and *Kulturkritik*" notes this by commenting: "That a deep cultural crisis is endemic to historical modernity seems to have been more eagerly assumed than properly demonstrated, no doubt because, more often than not, those who generally do the assuming—humanist intellectuals—have every interest in being perceived as soul doctors to a sick civilization" (245). In many ways, theory was the ultimate careerist maneuver, because its normal operations conferred upon the theorist a

position of epistemologically unimpeachable, self-confirming authority (in part by claiming to abjure authority) while also freeing the theorist from having to know *anything but* theory in order to exert such authority. I can't be the only person who was subjected in graduate school (or later) to the peculiar spectacle of a dedicated, philosophically rigorous postmodernist proclaiming that only those who had thoroughly read the entire *corpus* of a particular theorist's work should be permitted to speak about it. Indeed, such gestures of intellectual hypocrisy—some of them more subtle, some less so—are a particular target of mockery and anger from the authors in *Theory's Empire*, and with some justification. It was hard not to see Derrida's infamous assertion of conventional authorial rights over his interview on Heidegger as one of many such moments of contradiction.

One of the other oddities of the anthology is that almost no one gives a convincing account of their own survival of colonial domination by theory (including those essays contemporaneous with theory's rise, which already adopt the posture of defeated defiance.) I suppose you could say that some paint themselves as autochthonous survivors who dug themselves into the institutional *maquis* for a long guerilla struggle and are now celebrating as the colonizer's regime collapses. Others set themselves up more as members of a lost Stone Age tribe who were never contaminated by the colonizer's modernity, or as archaeologists digging into layers of criticism that lie below the theory strata. A few are positioned as latter-day nativists reaching back to the precolonial era for renovation, and still others, as nationalists who worked with the empire, have assimilated the colonizer's ways but are now ready to renounce him and declare independence. (Pretty close to my self-presentation here.)

What's important in this regard is that because the anthology collects many older essays as well as recent ones, it gives rise to some suspicion that theory's empire was considerably less imperial than its most strident critics tend to claim, that it was always less influential and powerful than either the lords of theory or their enemies suggested. Perhaps I'm only inclined to think that because that's what I think about other empires, too, but I think many academics simply amiably went about their business in the era of high theory, borrowing a bit from such work here and there, but hardly worshipping at its altars or angrily burning its fetishes. Certainly that's the way Foucault was commonly appropriated by many historians, as a practical device for

identifying new subjects to research (said historians then, as often as not, debunked Foucault's concrete historical claims in consequence.)

There are some other points that emerge along the way in the book that strike me as important. One is the amnesia of theory at its high-water mark, which I think was both a substantive feature of theoretical argument and sociological feature of the reproduction of the humanistic academy in those years. So when John Ellis observes of Stanley Fish's work that it ignored the past, that in Fish's work, "philosophy of science begins with Thomas Kuhn, serious questions about the idea of truth and the positivist theory of language begin with Derrida, jurisprudence begins with the radical Critical Legal Studies movement" (105). I think he's exactly right, and not just about Fish.

I think this became a feature of how many of us were trained and how we trained ourselves, a part of the ordinary discourse of conferences, reading groups, and so on. Theory began with the last person who was commonly authenticated as its progenitor, and that was good enough—largely because it helped younger academics frame themselves as making original gestures or "interventions" into various debates. I had a senior colleague in anthropology who used to fall into amusing rants every time he and I went to hear a presentation by a young anthropologist, and with some reason, because in the vast majority of such presentations, the author would proclaim, often citing critical theory, that they were beginning for the first time to reflexively consider the role of the anthropologist himself or herself in generating anthropological knowledge. He was right, this is a silly gesture: such concerns have haunted anthropology all the way back to its origins. The same affliction affected us all across a wide swath of disciplines: we reinvented wheels, fire, alphabets and chortled in satisfaction at our own cleverness. Theory dropped into our midst like commodities drop into a cargo cult, and our reaction was roughly the same, right up to eagerly scanning the skies for the next French thinker to drop down and inventing our own crude substitutes when the interval between drops grew too lengthy.

This makes me think that another issue which gets discussed here and there but whose importance is underappreciated is the role of theory in shaping the average or ordinary work of scholarship. Almost all the hue and cry in the essays is either about the foundational or canonical theorists or about various academic superstars. While I think it's true, as I suggested earlier, that many scholars only had a pass-

ing and pragmatic relation to theory, I also think theory was a kind of attractor that pulled a wave of “ordinary” scholarship towards it. I remember being paralyzed by one of the first scholarly book reviews I wrote, holding on to it for months, because I found when I had finished that I’d written a very hostile review, largely because of the way that a work which might have had some workaday, craftsmanlike value as a monograph about the history of European representations of African bodies had wrapped itself in a rigid Foucauldian straightjacket and used theory as a justification for its chaotic and empirically weak arguments. (I was paralyzed because I felt bad about roughing up the author so much, but I got over it and published it eventually.)

This would be one of my acute criticisms of the subspecies of theory that became postcolonialism, that the ordinary work of postcolonial scholarship takes the already deeply problematic arguments and style of the dominant superstars like Spivak, Prakash and Bhabha and operationalizes it as yeoman-level banality. There’s a kind of missing generation of monographs as a result, an absence of substantive, minutely authoritative, carefully researched and highly specialized knowledge that serves as a foundation for more sweeping syntheses and broadly argued scholarship. As I look over my shelves, I spot numerous works in history, cultural anthropology, critical theory, literary studies, cultural studies, whose only major lasting usefulness is as a historical document of a theoretical moment, works that you literally wouldn’t consult for any other purpose. As Erin O’Connor notes in her essay, the problem here in part is the dissemination of formulas, of totemic gestures, and more frustratingly, of a scholarship which is consumed by an understanding of its own impossibility, or as M.H. Abrams says of Hillis Miller, of a deliberate dedication not just to labyrinths but to dead ends within labyrinths.

Though once again, it’s also important to remember that some of the deeper driver here is not the boogeyman of theory, but the whole of academic careerism. Our bookshelves still groan with books and articles that need not have been written, but they will continue to be written as long as they are the fetish which proves that the academic apprentice is now a worthy journeyman who can step onto the tenure track. But at least if we must write unnecessary books, it would be nice if those books might add minutely to knowledge of some specialized subject. In fact, one of the good things that came out of the moment of theory was the legitimate expansion of academic subject matter: I

was pleasantly surprised to see that the bitching and moaning about cultural studies, popular culture and “trivial subjects” from scholars who superficially call for a return to a high literary canon as the proper subject of literary criticism was kept to a minimum in the volume, indeed, the longest specific criticism of cultural studies, by Stephen Adam Schwartz, never indulges in this vice. (I especially liked Schwartz’ observation that cultural studies is actually governed by methodological individualism, and thus a form of ethnocentrism: my principal answer would be to say that for me that’s a feature rather than a bug.)

It is a straightforwardly good thing that historians now write about a whole range of topics that were relatively unstudied in 1965; a straightforwardly good thing that literary critics read and think about a much wider range of texts than they once did. As Morris Dickstein notes, the era of high theory in the 1980s was not the first to discover the problem that there might not be a hell of a lot left to say about literary works that people had been reading and interpreting for centuries. This is why it makes me all the more regretful that theory dragged so much of the workaday business of academic writing towards its own forms of epistemological blockage and vacuity, because there were at least a great many new things to write about.

I suppose if I had one hope from this volume, it’s that people who read it and take it seriously won’t be the kind of lazy Sokolites that Michael Bérubé justifiably complains about, because nowhere in the volume does anyone claim that doing literary analysis or humanistic scholarship is easy or straightforward. If this is a roadmap to the future, it does not go from point A to point B, much to its credit.

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