

6.2 Editorial: A New Dawn Fades

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In a world speeding up so fast that time has evaporated into disconnected instants, nothing seems more anachronistic than ‘theory’. Theory calls forth connotations of the inert, the retarded and the passé; indeed in today’s world, theory resembles death. It is inert because it is too old, retarded because it is too slow, passé because it is always out of fashion, and it is death because it always arrives too late. Theory embodies the allegory of a crippled, senile old fool, lost on his way from the nursing home to the morgue. Theorists are people who spend precious time ‘thinking’ about complex but artificial problems and end up arguing that the problem may not have a solution because it was not part of the design.

In this world of instant gratification, instant credit, instant results and instant coffee, theory has been outperformed by a specific technoculture, that is, the culture of performativity, which itself thrives under a philosophic ethos of pragmatism (Lyotard, 1979; Robins and Webster, 1999). The question of truth, the quest for truth, which has always been theory’s preoccupation, has turned into a question of ‘what works?’ Truth is irrelevant to such a technocratic logic. For example, the meaning of ‘justice’, in most western societies, does not depend on the disclosure of the truth of a crime being committed by someone, but on getting ‘sufficient evidence’ to pinpoint allegations onto any individual who might be successfully inculcated irrespective of his or her ‘guilt’. Recent ‘discoveries’ of miscarriages of justice in the UK and US show that ‘justice’ requires not an absolute truth, but a pragmatic truth of ‘passing a sentence’. Of course, caution is required with a historicist line being taken (exemplified in words such as ‘now’ and ‘no longer’), as perhaps, and Lyotard (1988) has presented a strong case to support this, absolute truth has never been a preoccupation for

justice within modern societies. What has changed, however, is the technology with which to secure a pragmatic truth. Today's technology is so vastly more complex than that of fifty years ago, that our dependence on its performative logic of revealing particular versions of 'what works' no longer includes a readily accessible 'counter-logic' (Beck, 1995, 2000). To be able to develop a counter-logic, we need to become 'experts' first, that is, we need succumb to the particularity of technology without any recourse to either generality or singularity (Van Loon, 2002).

The technocratic principle of pragmatic performativity has flourished in a world whose complexity has become so intense, that any attempt to understand it in its totality is doomed to failure. Today, there are very few among us who believe that we can achieve anything more than partial knowledge. We live in an age of specialists and experts whose engineered machines operate like 'black boxes'. Following a Christian rhetoric, we could call such technocratic engineers the angels of darkness; they dwell in the obscure by revealing the partial, which in itself is so complex that such revealing is at once a concealing. They are the operators of what Deleuze & Guattari (1988) have termed 'the abstract machine' - a total performative apparatus whose modus of operation remains beyond the grasp of that which operates (in) it.

However, it has not always been like this. Not too long ago, theory symbolized the highest state of the human mental faculty of cognition. A word whose simplest etymology reveals traces divine pedigree, theory stands on level par with meditation in securing access to knowledge of the Divine. Even with the death of God, at the advent of the modern age, theory kept this calling, albeit now in the service of 'man' and 'his' quest for the total domination of nature and 'his' own destiny. It is this spirit of enlightenment in which 'classic' (but still modern) and contemporary theorists have cultivated their profession as part of academia, as

well as beyond the ivory towers of the university, into the arts, the professions and even politics.

It would be a bit too simplistic to suggest that enlightened theorists are completely overtaken by the performative pragmatics of technocracy. The majority of those who today still respond to the calling of theory are definitely and positively associated with the spirit of the enlightenment, if not because of its ethos of emancipation (mostly in the social sciences and humanities), then because of its charming appeal to logic and rationality (natural sciences). However, those who hold a strong view of theory, that is, one marked by a quest for absolute rather than pragmatic truth, are no longer those who take up the most prestigious positions, including their financial rewards and political purchase. A simple exercise to check this would be to trace where most of the money from national research councils or other national and international public or private funding bodies goes to.

If we depict the trappings and pitfalls of contemporary theory simply as a struggle of operators of black boxes versus marginalized dwellers of enlightened ivory towers (lighthouses would perhaps be a better metaphor), we would however, have very little to add to legions of text- and course-related books for and against the enlightenment, research methods, postmodernism, chaos- and complexity theory etcetera. We would simply add our voice to a binary framework that is perhaps as old as Spinoza: that of the general and the particular and face the ultimate binary question whether to join the general and glow in irrelevance or become subject to the particular and vanish in the black (w)hole of insignificance. If we were to join the generalists, the questions we might ask are (a) what has happened to theory on the way from light to darkness? and (b) how can we get theory 'back on track'? The sociologist Nicos Mouzelis (1991) has found the answers for both questions for his discipline, which are paradoxically, to be found in re-articulating the significance of that same discipline (back to sociology; also see Archer, 1995; Layder, 1997; and Waters, 1994). In short, if that is the kind

of 'solution' we need, we might as well forget the whole quest for the general and obey the rule of the particular, for which there are no general questions apart from one: 'how can we make 'it' (whatever it is) work?' Forsaking the 'it' is essential to the particularist strategy because it is never the 'it' but always a specified, substantiated 'it'. 'It' as such does not exist. Hence, because the particularist question as such is impossible, one has to pragmatically suspend disbelief and embark on the attempt to make whatever 'it' is, work. 'Working' can refer to a variety of processes, but what really counts are its 'effects'. Hence, like many other national research councils, the United Kingdom's Economic and Social Science Research Council (ESRC) applies a particular criterion called 'end users' as a central device in its strategy for determining the allocation of its research-funds to proposals. The value of whatever it is that the research promises to deliver, is therefore, partly (but importantly) determined by its assumed 'effects' on what is referred to as 'end users'.

However, we would argue that there are more options than just the nostalgia for a lost light and a cynical embrace of instant gratification. There are at least two places where one might look for such alternatives: beyond and between. Beyond could be seen both in Hegelian terms (as a synthesis, *Aufhebung*, of the present thesis and antithesis, which is the emergence of a new spirit) and from a Nietzschean perspective, as in *Beyond Good and Evil*, where the beyond is an accomplished annihilation of the opposition which holds us at bay and forces us to think in its own terms. Derrida termed this accomplishment 'deconstruction'. The result is not so much a new spirit, but a leap of joy (or relief) upon the disclosure of the irrelevance of the old oppositional dogmas. The other place, that of the 'between' is perhaps less ambitious and more pragmatic. Within the spirit of the opposition between light and darkness we can introduce it in terms of 'liminality'. Liminality is a twilight zone in which one spirit sets as the other fades; but it is neither one nor the other. As with beyond, there are two forms. Either it refers to an ascending light and a descending darkness (dawn) or the ascending darkness

and descending light (dusk). Whereas Chaos Theory would be a between of a dusk-type (the more knowledge, the less we know), Complexity Theory is a dawn-type of liminality as it holds out the promise of better knowledge in a foreseeable future.

One might say that from its inception, *Space and Culture* has been concerned with a journey through the between into the beyond. However, whereas we might have such ambitious ideals, our ways will be very modest and close to 'home' so to speak. In focusing so much on everyday life, we do foreground an interest in the little things, the nuances and shades that make a slight difference from the current fashions in what is still known as social and cultural theory. Hence, we work more on 'in-between' and leave the 'beyond' beyond our scope for the time being. We aim to work through issues that have marked some of the more interesting recent developments in socio-cultural theory (without suggesting they are the only ones worth looking at).

In this issue of *Space and Culture*, there is a thematic section on papers which all focus on 'movement' in an age of technological performativity. Attempts to conceptualize mobility must necessarily highlight the problem of space. As Thomas Williamson writing on the Malaysian highway, suggests, ethnography has always worked on the assumption of a fixed place; there is perhaps nothing more antithetical to the ethnographic imagination (Atkinson, 1990) than the perpetual movement of traffic. Similarly, Justine Lloyd, writing on airport terminals as non-places (following Augé, 1995), equally stresses the ephemeral nature of movement and its inherent problematization of a sense of place. It is not surprising that both highways and airport terminals have been subjected to such intense levels of commercialisation, as the accumulation of exchange value as sign value thrives on an aesthetics of disappearance (Virilio, 1991).

In a tradition that follows the writings on modernity as estrangement by, for example Benjamin and Kracauer, Lloyd invokes the work of Le Corbusier as architect of modernist urban planning *par excellence*. His emphasis on ‘circulation’ (as the fourth function of the city) is a direct precursor to Virilio’s writings on mobility and interconnectedness. Most interesting, however, is the realization that unlike the other functions of a modern city, circulation is uncontainable. As the one function that could not be differentiated, circulation is the most purely technological. As a result, it is also that which produces the greatest force of estrangement.

Le Corbusier, however, is a rather contentious figure, as Jasmine Rault’s essay on Eileen Gray’s major architectural work E1027, shows. The arrogance and certainty with which he ‘took over’ the architectural ownership is indicative of the way in which modernism is always paired with the inscription of paternity into the products of human creativity. The ‘trauma’ imposed upon Gray by this inscription is easily corporealised into another trope: that of bodily violation or rape. Such violation, however, is endemic to modernity and not to be reduced to any individual psychopathology. Modern man is by definition a megalomaniac.

Whereas Le Corbusier’s urban design advocates the aesthetics of disappearance (or voyeurism), this was still to a main extent limited to a configuration of a dialectical relationship between place and non-place. However, it can be argued that in today’s world, that dialectical relationship has imploded and has become usurped by a dedifferentiation between mobility and connectivity. This process has taken on seemingly irreversible tendencies in the way in which commerce has been able to write itself into all forms of movement.

The commodification of non-places is in essence an extension of speed. This becomes most visible in the notions of ‘comfort’ and ‘customization’. Mark Andrejevic’s brilliant analysis describes the way in which M-commerce entails a new turning within telematics towards full

mobilization and individuation. In the modern age, both travel and ICT have always operated the banner of convenience and comfort. Always implicit in this is speed as the desire to capitalize on time that is otherwise lost. 'Gaining time', by enlarging the scope of possible (commercial) actions whilst being 'under way', is what motivates the inauguration of non-places.

If our aim is to understand theory as an inert and obscuring practice that none the less holds out a particular promise, or value, for those who allow themselves to postpone the questions of totality and instant pay-off, then we must take the challenge of Le Corbusier head on. We need to refrain from nostalgic lament over the loss of familiarity or place-ness. We must allow theory to circulate; to se itself free from the shackles of academic normative conventions; we must stop playing the game of preserving the mystery of Pandora's box. With this issue of *Space and Culture*, we aim to understand contemporary socio-cultural theory as part of a much broader movement in metaphysics away from modern thought, both in its grandiose and bombastic spirit of the enlightenment and self-defeatist, cynical, technocratic-pragmatic performativity. Our objective is to cultivate a sense of theory-as-practice, that valorizes independent creative thinking as well as rigorous logic; a practice that seeks not the truth of the scripture but the mystique of revelation and experience; a practice that circulates and gauges its own appearance/disappearance in transit.

We accept that this will inevitably be at odds with the traditional calling of academia and that the advocates of this calling will find much of our theorizing 'obscure' and 'idiomatic'. Indeed, reading the works of Deleuze & Guattari, for example, the word 'obscure' would certainly spring to mind but this is only the case because one is already cultivated within a particular mode of obscuration. Kant, Hegel and even Marx were and are still no less obscure in this respect. The allegation of 'idiomatic' language use is of a similar kind. Most sociologist for example still accept Parsons' particular usage of terms such as 'culture',

‘society and ‘socialization’ as disciplinary sound, exactly because it was idiomatic and not vernacular. Whereas theorists such as Parsons and Giddens, and more recently perhaps Alexander and Archer, spend many words on defining other words, we argue that only a few terms need definition (namely those that are problematized and those that are conceptualized) and the meaning of the rest emerges first from the specific context in which they are being used to support this problematization and conceptualization. We argue that exactly within this ambivalence between the idiomatic and the vernacular, there emerges a space for theory-practice.

Theory-practice is the art of slowing down; of making-sense differently; of obscuring the light so as not to rely on black boxes. In the shadows of liminality, the simulacra so hated (or feared?) by Plato, we can discern forms that we may recognize, but whose indeterminate ‘reality’ allows for creative thinking and articulation, as well as experience and response. In between the liminality of ascending light and ascending darkness, there emerges a new dawn that fades.

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