

Post-Theory: Theory and ‘the Folk’

A true idea must agree with its object

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The Coming Crisis of Theory?

A number of humanities scholars are beginning to wonder whether the recent intellectual movement that has come to be known as ‘Theory’¹ might have finally run its course. Although the ‘reflexive problem’ of how to ‘do Theory’ in full awareness of its white, patriarchal and western cultural origins was first posed in the 1980s, and has been something of perennial concern for the contemporary Theorist,² several recent publications and conferences have begun to pose this question in a different way. In its more contemporary manifestation, the aporetic self-questioning of Theory has been enlivened, deepened and made more appealing to contemporary intellectual sensibilities by a large pinch of post-Derridean philosophical spice. Thus the seemingly perennial doubts about the status and scope of the realm of the ‘the Theoretical’ have recently taken on a quasi-Heideggerean ‘epochal’ aspect; amounting to something like a new ‘proglomenon’ to an intellectual inquiry into

¹ The list of Theories involved here is almost coextensive with the list of ‘important’ intellectuals in the West; and the bewilderment that typically ensues when faced by the sheer glut of different Theories produced in the humanities in recent years is recognised as an understandable reaction by some scholars (see Featherstone, M. *Postmodernism and Consumer Culture* London: Sage 1991). However, ‘Theory’ is generally associated with the ideas the Frankfurt School along with those of feminist, post-colonialist and post-structuralist approaches.. ‘Theory’ thus does not refer to a philosophical self-consistent body of ideas. What unites these seemingly disparate approaches is a certain shared set of ‘critical’ values that guide them in their ‘questioning of the presuppositions’ of ordinary life.

² See Bhabba, H. ‘The Commitment to Theory’ in *The Location of Culture* London: Routledge 1988.

whether intellectual life in a variety humanities disciplines – especially English, Film Studies and Social Theory – are currently entering a new ‘post-Theoretical’ phase.³

For Lacanian Theorists such as Zizek, the emergence of ‘the post-Theoretical’ is indicative of a deep crisis within humanities scholarship. In his view, ‘the antagonism between Theory and post-Theory is a particular case of the global battle for intellectual hegemony and visibility between postmodern, deconstructionist cultural studies and, on the other hand, cognitivists and popularisers of the hard sciences’.⁴ In Zizek’s analysis, the current sense of intellectual crisis within the humanities is symptomatic of the exhaustion of the post-68 political project as well as being the logical and inevitable reaction to postmodernism’s facile jargonising of Theory (where Theory is seen as ‘totalised’ to such an extent that ‘even’ bus tickets and Tupperware parties take on the status of ‘literature’ and ‘culture’). In his view, Post-Theory’s response is to advocate theoretical approaches that stand in a freer and more open relationship to the particularities of ‘real life’; typically by means of ‘clear theoretical classification and gradual generalisations based on careful empirical research’.⁵ In an intellectual context impoverished by postmodern approaches to Theory, Zizek suggests that it is easy for someone like Sokal to satirise Theory and expose Theory’s pretentiousness and lack of ‘real world relevance’.

However, the question of what kinds of discourses and modes of intellection are likely to emerge ‘after Theory’ - as the discussion below should make clear - is not simply a

³ See Bordwell, D. and Carroll, N. (eds.) *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies* Madison: Wisconsin: Wisconsin University Press 1996; McQuillan, M., Macdonald, G., Purves, R. and Thomson, S. *Post-Theory: New Directions in Criticism* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. 2000; Zizek, S. *Between Theory and Post-Theory* London: BFI 2001.

⁴ Zizek, p2.

⁵ Zizek, p16.

question of how to Theorise in the wake the re-emergence of ‘two cultures’ antagonisms. In opposition to Zizek, this paper argues that the emergence of the post-Theoretical can be broadly seen in developmental terms: as part of a more general ‘democratising’ set of intellectual trends within the Theoretical disciplines themselves. Thus in what follows, I draw on recent literature that directly addresses the question of the post-Theoretical, as well as examples of what might be termed ‘New Theory’ that address the issue implicitly by advocating modes Theorisation founded upon alternative discursive styles and different philosophical orientations.⁶ My overall aim is to bring these two trends together – and in my view the term ‘post-Theory’ refers to the broader cultural and intellectual context that is informing both of these trends - and to show that in their summation a new philosophical style and mode of address is the offering: a form of Theory with interests and concerns that demand a relocation of Theoretical work outside of the *scholarum* of the traditional academic community. For in the context of mass higher education, the Theorist is increasingly forced to recognise that the ‘subjects of Theory’ are increasingly knowledgeable about a range of intellectual concerns: not the least of which are the ‘broad outlines’ of the Theoretical enterprise itself. In an age when ‘Derrida’s mind’ is now arguably as significant a cultural icon – and almost as much a part of popular mythology – as ‘Einstein’s brain’ – Theory is no longer a purely esoteric concern but an increasingly widespread popular conversational idiom. It is in this way that Theory has been central to a new kind of everyday *Bildung*. Thus as Theory becomes disseminated as a ‘new *doxa*’, so the question of how Theorise ‘in the popular’ emerges as an important concern. And one intellectual response to this question is to advocate a new *gelassenheit* of Theory when faced with the popularisation of the Theoretical and the

⁶ See Agamben, G. ‘*The Coming Community*’ Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1993
Maffesoli, M *The Time of the Tribes: The Decline of Individualism in Mass Society* London: Sage 1996,
Hardt, M. and Negri, A. ‘*Empire*’ Cambridge Ma: Harvard 2000.

encroachment of everyday meanings onto the humanities scholars' traditional intellectual terrain.

Moments in Theory: Traditional, Contemporary -and Post?

Although any attempt to clearly differentiate discrete stages in the history of Theory would be a somewhat arbitrary typological exercise, a useful distinction can be drawn between what might be termed *traditional Theory* – the Freudian, Positivist, Marxist, Weberian, Symbolic Interactionist, Structuralist ‘grand’ or ‘macro’ forms of Theory that dominated the Anglophone academy prior to the late 1970s - and what might be termed *contemporary Theory*⁷ - the later poststructuralist ‘discursive’ and ‘aestheticist’ variations on these themes that were generally concerned with more micro-political struggles centred on questions of ontology, power and representation. The former is generally politically radical, yet philosophically conservative (tied as it is to the modern philosophical canon that divided the world into separate ontological classes). The latter is politically more circumspect but philosophically more radical (calling into question the validity of many of the basic concepts of the modern philosophical canon). One way of conceiving of ‘the post-Theoretical’ is to see it as nostalgic call for a return to the less ideologically contested ‘pre-Theoretical’ world; a world of neo-positivistic ‘factual simplicity’ and methodological ‘rigour’. However, another way to conceive of the post-Theoretical is to see it as standing in the same relation to contemporary Theory as contemporary Theory stands to traditional Theory.

⁷ The philosophical lowest common denominator to all forms of Theory has been a commitment to a Kantian and Hegelian ‘strong evaluation’ of their respective object domains: a form of evaluation that involves a second order (re)ordering of first order everyday concepts. See Wolin, R. *The Terms of Cultural Criticism: The Frankfurt School, Existentialism, Post-Structuralism* New York: Columbia University Press 1992.

That is, post-Theory can be seen as an intellectual development from within the space of contemporary Theory itself that proceeds via a further philosophical radicalisation and a heightened political circumspection of the Theoretical enterprise itself.

Leading the way in discussions of the post-Theoretical are some of the most 'Theory-saturated' areas of inquiry in humanities. Three disciplines in particular have stood out: film, literary and social studies. In film studies, Bordwell has criticised the grand Theoretical aspirations of what he terms 'subject position theory' and 'culturalism' (coded meta-theoretical terms for traditional psychoanalysis and contemporary post-structuralist Theory). According to Bordwell a 'post-Theoretical film studies' ought to focus upon 'more localised film-based problems' such as how audiences make sense of particular films in particular cinematic settings.⁸ In opposition to the Theoretical approaches to film 'framed within the schemes which seek to explain very broad features of society, history language and psyche', Bordwell advocates a quasi-empiricist 'middle level' approach to film research.⁹ In his view, this implies that film scholars ought to be more eclectic, flexible and pragmatic in their modes of Theorisation; Theorising in a more instrumental way in order to achieve specific goals (and thus the post-Theoretical moment in film studies is coincidental and often associated with the emergence of models of filmic reception derived from cognitive science. However, this is not the only possible response). In general terms, the post-Theoretical moment in film studies amounts to a call for a new Theoretical pluralism dedicated to offering answers to 'particular questions' of 'real significance'; questions such as: 'how does a film arouse emotion?' and 'how do audiences make sense of

⁸ See Bordwell, D. 'Contemporary Film Theory and the Vicissitudes of Grand Theory' in Bordwell and Carroll p

⁹ Bordwell, p3

films?’ and so on. In one sense this represents a call for return to the ‘reliable strictures’ of positivism. But in another it represents something else: a call for a more ‘engaged’ and ‘reality oriented’ form of Theorising.

This same questioning of ‘grand’ Theory can also be seen in those disciplines where traditional forms of Theory have held sway. In Social Theory for example, The Theoretical enterprise also seems to be taking something of a post-Theoretical turn. Here, those Theorists more sensitive to reflexive problem of the cultural conditions of possibility of Social Theory now increasingly recognise that sociological Theory needs to find a level more appropriate to the articulation of more relevant and worldly issues and concerns. For these post-Theorists, this means the development of a Social Theory that recognises that much traditional and contemporary Theory has treated its various ‘Others’ - everyday and ‘non-western’ subjects - as mere ‘data’.¹⁰ In the light of this, certain contemporary social theorists are striving to develop a form of Social Theory that is more fully engaged with the social context from which it emerges and strives to conceptualise. Zygmunt Bauman and Tim May for example, have recognised that the ‘subject matter of sociology is already embedded in our everyday lives’ and so ‘sociologists cannot break off completely from the knowledge that they try to comprehend’.¹¹ Strikingly, for them, the only difference between the professional and the lay sociologist is that the former is in possession of humanistic *eloquentia*: the professional sociologist, unlike the lay, obeying ‘the rules of responsible speech’.

¹⁰ See Sakai, N. ‘Modernity and its Critique:: The Problem of Universalism and Particularism’ in ‘*The South Atlantic Quarterly*’ Summer 1988, 87(3) 387-399.

¹¹ Bauman, Z. and May, T. ‘*Thinking Sociologically*’ Oxford Blackwell 2000 p7.

In literary studies too the 'reign of Theory' has recently been brought into question. Here, the post-Theoretical is seen as a demand for new, more 'worthwhile', less self-consciously clever, yet still unspecified forms of Theory. This sentiment is clearly expressed in the work of McQuillan et al., for whom '[p]ost-Theory is a Theory 'yet to come'¹² For these post-Theorists, post-Theory represents a call for new vibrant, relevant, and readily understandable Theoretical discourses. As they put it:

Post-Theory rejects the dead hand of a self-satisfied and hypostasised 'Theory', a theory in love with and, finally, indistinguishable from its own rhetoric. It rejects the sclerosis of theoretical writing, the hardening of Theory's lexical and syntactical arteries. The words and phrases which are combined in over familiar ways and thereby banalised, degraded, wielded like a fetish (the 'always already' whose precise critical function has been reduced to a vacuous and impotent gesture of would be mastery, a yawn-inducing yawn; the paronomasia which was once deployed as a strategy in a wider argument but which now appears to make 'puns for puns sake', the text as a kind of Brownian motion for phonemes, and so on) in order to semaphore that 'Theory' is taking place are the surest sign that anything worthwhile *just is not*.¹³

Thus at the most general level, the post-Theoretical can be seen as a consequence of the 'the de-centring of the dominant culture, *via* the postmodern condition':¹⁴ a condition that, in Derridean manner, has de-essentialised and nominalised many of the most cherished conceptions of the modern western academy and set them adrift on a shimmering populist symbolic sea.¹⁵ Nietzschean philosophy is an important influence here; but it is the Nietzschean-inspired politics, philosophy and poetics of Deleuze and Guattari's work that are seen by some to exemplify the current post-Theoretical ethos. For it was Deleuze and Guattari's attack on Freudianism, and their

¹² See McQuillan et.al. p, xv.

¹³ McQuillan et. al. xii.

¹⁴ De Toro, F. 'Explorations on Post-Theory: New Times' in De Toro, F. (ed.) *Explorations on Post-Theory; Towards a Third Space* Frankfurt: Vervuert. p, 10.

¹⁵ In fact, for some, such as Don Ihde, contemporary Theory represents something of a metonymic substitution for the postmodern itself. (see Ihde, D. *Postphenomenology* Evanston Illinois: North Western University Press 1993 p, 154).

exposure of psychoanalytic Theory as a tool of political repression, that opened the way for a wider critique of the social political function of Theory itself. With Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*, Theory began its long and arduous journey of critical self-examination that raised quasi-Kantian questions of the epistemological and ontological 'limits to Theory' as currently conceived as well as the approach required for a politically non-repressive form of Theory. Deleuzian Theory has not been content simply to engage in a reflexive questioning of Theory but has had the confidence to make some bold post-Theoretical assertions of its own. For Christopher Norris, Deleuzian Theory represents a definitive and assertoric dimension of the post-Theoretical as it presents itself as 'resolutely *post*-Theoretical, a rhetoric of schizoid (polymorphous) desire supposedly beyond all reach of explanatory concepts'.¹⁶ One can only concur with this analysis: for Deleuzian thinking points us towards an idea that *life* - life lived in its embodied and emotional everyday rawness - lies somehow beyond the reach of Theory as currently conceived. But the Deleuzian post-Theoretical involves more than a neo-Nietzschean critique of what Nietzsche might have termed the 'mummification of Theory', for standing behind Deleuze is another philosopher whose ideas have become increasingly prominent in recent Theoretical developments: Spinoza.¹⁷ In general terms, Spinoza's philosophy has helped frame attempts by many 'New Theorists' to go beyond the limits of Theory - in its contemporary sense - and to view Theory as something that operates on the same ontological plane as the everyday realm. It is in this sense that post-Theory demands for a relocation of Theory on a Deleuzian 'plane of immanence' such that Theory is seen as an expression of an ontological commitment - 'Spinoza's God' - that holds

¹⁶ See Norris, C. 'Versions of Apocalypse: Kant, Derrida and Foucault' in Bull, M. (ed.) *Apocalypse Theory at the End of the World* Oxford: Blackwell p.230.

¹⁷ See Goodchild, P. *Deleuze and Guattari: An Introduction to the Politics of Desire* London: Sage.

the Theorist *in common with* the everyday realm that the Theorist, in turn, strives to comprehend in more universal terms.

Theory's Immersion in the Everyday

Thus one way of conceiving 'the post-Theoretical' is to view it as based on a recognition that the everyday realm is now 'always and already' a highly 'intellectualised' realm - contemporary Theory having had a significant part to play in this process – to the extent that the highly self conscious intellectualist approach of the Theorist is called into question. Seen thus, the everyday realm is understood to be a repository of Theoretical knowledges that increasingly allow everyday subjects to make fuller sense of the complex object-terrains and social relations that constitute their worlds. Giddens' claim that Theory stands in a 'doubly hermeneutic relationship'¹⁸ to the everyday realm, re-entering ordinary the lifeworlds as new 'theoretical common sense', only partially illuminates what is at stake in this issue. What Giddens did not – and possible could not - recognise is the extent to which everyday discursive styles, forms of understanding and ontological commitments have now been 'Theoretically empowered' by this process; entering into a multiple hermeneutic relationship with Theory that amounts that is calling the very distinction between Theory and everyday life into question (such that it is the discourse and orientations of everyday life that are now increasingly returning to inform the same Theoretical discourses that have traditionally taken up a hermeneutic position 'over and above' them).

¹⁸ See Giddens, A. *The Constitution of Society* Cambridge: Polity.

For the traditional Theorist however could not have foreseen these developments (such that the everyday realm remains associated with an epistemologically and politically moribund ‘common sense’ for the traditional theorist). In contrast however, contemporary Theorists have been more sympathetic to everyday ways of life in Theoretical articulations of everydayness. Thus, according to contemporary Theorists Gergen and Semin for example - writing in 1990 - ‘social scientists’ are always ‘in the process of generating everyday understanding within the profession, and the results of our work may play a vital role in fashioning the future contours of everyday life’.¹⁹ They go to point out that in recognising the epistemological significance of everydayness, contemporary social scientists have ‘[b]egun to speak in new ways, both persistent and disquieting’²⁰ showing the extent to which certain strands of contemporary Theory recognise their conceptual dependence on vernacular modes of everyday understanding. However, for the contemporary Theorist this dependency is seen as ‘disquieting’; typically because the contemporary Theorist still strives for a form of conceptual autonomy from the everyday realm. But for the contemporary Theorist, the epistemological elevation of everyday understanding creates its own self-defeating *aporias* (of relativism and paradoxes of reflexivity that simultaneously affirm and deny an privileged epistemological position for Theory). For the post-Theorist however, these *aporias* vanish by accepting the more radical horn of the contemporary Theorist’s dilemma: that the Theorist can possess no privileged position with respect to everyday understanding. Seen thus, the everyday realm is creating new demands for Theory to ‘go native’ and give up its traditional epistemological concerns. For certain post-Theorists, such as Michel Mafessoli, this problem demands new ways of understanding what we mean by Theory. For him,

¹⁹Gergen, K. and Semin, G.R. ‘Everyday Understanding in Science and Daily Life’ in Semin, G.R. and Gergen, K.J. (eds.) *Everyday Understanding: Social and Scientific Implications*’ London: Sage p, 1.

²⁰ Semin and Gergen p, 2.

recognition of the ‘knowingness’ of everyday life requires the development of Theories that are not only more open and sensitive to the emotive and cognitively complex particularities of everyday life, but also Theories that allow for a sympathetic engagement with what he terms the *connaissance ordinaire* underpinning the highly social *sensus communis* of everyday life. Thus for him it is the very ‘commonness’ of everyday understanding – especially the fact that is held ‘in common’ by both Theorists and non-Theorists – that is precisely its interest and its strength.

The suggestion that Theorists ought to search for epistemological and ontological commonalities with the subject under investigation can also be seen in Hardt and Negri’s recent work. For them, any adequate Theoretical approach must begin with a notion of what they term “the commons”. For them, this means that key Theoretical terms must be first and foremost be those “common names” that ontologically link the new intellectualism with the latent agentic powers of the everyday realm (as manifested in what they term – after Spinoza – “the multitude”). As they put it, in any new articulation of the Theoretical:

[a] new notion of the commons will have to emerge on this terrain. Deleuze and Guattari claim in *What is Philosophy?* that in the contemporary era, and in the context of communicative and interactive production, the construction of concepts is not only an epistemological operation but also equally an ontological project. Constructing concepts and what they call “common names” is really an activity that combines the intelligence and the action of the multitude, making them work together.²¹

This represents something new: a move away from the Hegelian tradition Theorising – with its taste for viewing the world via the logic of the concept (*Begriff*) – towards a more ontological approach to Theory – in the widest sense of then term – where a

²¹ See Hardt and Negri p,302.

Theory is deemed adequate to the extent that it offers a language for turning the still largely passive intellectualism of everyday life into a more active and creative popular intellectualism.

For traditional Theorists however, a suggestion that the reified “moronic inferno” – to use Saul Bellow’s phrase – of *la vie quotidienne* should be anything other than *object* of research would be tantamount to intellectual heresy (perhaps the final ‘heresy of all heresies’). Following Hegel, Theory has viewed the everyday discourse - without illumination from the language of Theory - as the ‘mere prose of the world’; ‘a world of finitude and mutability, of entanglement in the relative, of the pressure of necessity from which the individual is no position to withdraw’.²² Theory is seen as the antidote to this condition: the instrument of an angelic light sent down ‘[f]rom an intellectual heaven’ allowing critical thought to of ‘descend into everyday life’ and stand as its critical judge.²³ For such traditional Theorists what is needed is a Theory *of the everyday* that studies ‘the local production of social (or socio-technical) solidarities and orders, but to do so under a self-denying ordinance that excludes “the everyday” and “everyday life” as rubrics for inquiry’.²⁴ However, post-Theory denies that this kind of self-denial is now possible given that the primary experiential and thus intellectually significant world – even for the contemporary intellectual resident within the academy – is now, inescapably, the everyday world itself. The post-Theoretical is indicative of a growing awareness that everydayness (Heideggerian *Altäglichkeit*), not only resists such reordering, but also represents a challenge to the very idea that such a reordering is even possible or desirable. This requires a new

²² Hegel, G. *Hegel’s Aesthetics* Oxford: Oxford University Press p, 148.

²³ Lefbvre, H. *Critique of Everyday Life* London: Verso p, 142.

²⁴ See Crook, S. ‘Minotaurs and Other Monsters: ‘Everyday Life’ in *Recent Social Theory*’ in *Sociology*’ Vol. 32 No. 3 pp 523-40.

kind of Theoretician: one that feels ontologically 'at home' in the everyday realm. As Maffesoli has argued, in the context of sociological Theorising, this requires a less scholastic approach - more 'vagabond' - approach to Theory where the Theorist is forced to venture into what he terms 'deeper waters'. As he put it:

[t]he antinomy of serious scholarship and common sense seems to be a given. Naturally, serious scholarship has tended to regard common sense as infirm: when it is not qualified as 'false consciousness', it is at best defective. The scorn heaped on the *anima candida* is the touchstone of the intellectual attitude...I would now like to show how it can account for our failure to understand what, for lack of a better term, we shall call life. To refer to life in general terms carries with it a certain amount of risk. It can lead, in particular to vague illusions; in so far as we can flesh out this consideration of tangible perceptions it will be possible to explore a concrete existence far removed from disembodied ratiocinations. At the same time it is important to preserve the ability to venture into deeper water; we will thus be able to invent new lands by applying the general principle. These are the stakes of the synergy in question: to propose a vagabond sociology which at the same time is not deprived of its object.²⁵

But any rejection of Theory as 'serious scholarship' immediately raises the question of what is meant by 'Theory'. One way to grasp what is at stake here is via a kind of 'thought experiment' - or test - that draws out the lines of tension and affinity between Theory and everyday understanding. Imagine being given the task of explaining the meaning of what you think is the most important - or powerful, illuminating, insightful and so on - social, literary or cultural Theory to a friend or member of your own family unacquainted with this and preferably any other mode of Theorising in the humanities. We can hopefully imagine an individual who at least approximates to this ideal type of the 'theory-empty' subject (even if this type, as I have already claimed, is now less of a cultural commonplace). In more practical and mundane terms, everybody should have attempted something like this, and, if you have, you should appreciate how difficult it is

²⁵ Maffesoli p,3.

to turn your favoured Theoretical discourse into another – more simplified - discourse that expresses a more ‘easily comprehensible’ set of ideas. When explaining Theory - especially those Theories that have not yet been hermeneutically re-inscribed into the everyday as common Theory, such as recent ‘post-structuralist’ Theory - to the ‘Theory-empty’, ‘the uninitiated’, those ‘lacking theoretical self-reflexivity’ and so on - one is typically met with a certain look of incredulity if not downright hostility. Seen from the point of view of the ‘Theoretically unenlightened’, any attempt to Theorise the ‘folk’ wisdom that intellectually sustains the everyday realm can strike as silly and irrelevant. Interestingly, hostility towards theory is not always due to lack of a liberal education. Witness the reaction of American ordinary language philosopher John Searle – arguably someone imbued with more than their fair share of ‘Theoretical Enlightenment’ - in a television interview with Guayati Chakravorty Spivak. In reply to a long verbal articulation of her theoretical position he exclaimed: *‘you really believe that!’* Moreover, anyone who has attempted to write popular texts covering rather abstruse Theoretical issues should also have experienced the same problem from its reverse side: the feeling of profound dissatisfaction that ensues when it dawns on you that your popularising narrative necessarily vulgarises and does not do justice to the cognitive complexity and philosophical subtlety of its subject matter. Clearly, as things currently stand, Theory and ordinary everyday forms of knowledge still, to some extent, stand in mutually antagonistic relationship to each other. But more and more the everyday realm is ‘open to Theory’. There is now increasingly a sense of discursive overlap between Theory and its everyday Others; suggesting a new space within which these two competing worlds - with their rival ‘cultural ontologies’ – can be recognised as sharing a common hermeneutic horizon. Thus any new form of Theory capable of resolving these tensions requires a new attitude to the everyday realm where Theory is

seen as driven by something other than an orthodox explanatory, hermeneutic or critical cognitive interest – to use Habermas tripartite configuration of the space of the Theoretical²⁶ - but by a more ontological – ‘world-sensitive’ - mode of intellection that works with the lines of hermeneutic tension and manifest points of affinity between everyday and Theoretical realms.

Post Theory and The Separation of Theory and Philosophy

One of the key questions opened up in the above discussion is the question of the relationship between the Theory and philosophy. Many contemporary Theorists²⁷ recognise that one of the distinguishing features of contemporary Theory is its entanglement in questions that were once the province of the modern philosopher. In fact, one of the problems involved in giving philosophical sense to the idea of the post-Theoretical is that the relationship between Theory and philosophy is itself difficult to disentangle.²⁸ For Giddens, the fusion of Theory and philosophy in contemporary Theoretical discourse has led to a recuperation of Theoretical insights out of established philosophical discourses. In his view, this highlights a recent intellectual trend: that contemporary forms of philosophical inquiry are now following an intellectual agenda set by Theory. When the rise and reign of Theory are understood in this way, Theory becomes seen as the agent of disenfranchisement of established philosophical discourse – at least within the academy – aiding and abetting the a contemporary ‘crisis in

²⁶ See Habermas, J. *‘Knowledge and Human Interests’* London: Routledge.

²⁷ See Giddens, A. ‘Social Science and Philosophy- Recent Trends in Social Theory’ in *‘Social Theory and Modern Sociology’* Cambridge: Polity.

²⁸ Giddens’ observations are useful in that they bring to the surface an important phenomenon (a phenomenon that is key to understanding the wider intellectual significance of the ‘age of Theory’). This is the often neglected fact that many Theorists can easily be seen as philosophers - Foucault’s status is unclear in this regard – and there are many philosophers - Wittgenstein for example - who can easily be read as Theorists.

philosophy’.²⁹ What this view correctly points out is that - in the contemporary intellectual scene - the philosopher no longer has sole disciplinary property rights over questions of meaning, value and understanding. In such a context, the ‘advent of Theory’ can perhaps be seen as the final act of a much longer intellectual drama; of philosophy’s long historical process of diminishment and replacement by the so-called ‘special sciences’. Seen thus, Theory represents a further – perhaps final - breaching of the boundary between the formerly separate spheres of *philosophia* and *theoria*: effectively re-articulating contemporary philosophy as ‘anti-positivist Theory’ and marshalling the new hybrid as an antidote to what was seen as an ‘uncritical’ intellectual orthodoxy within the humanities.

Hence one way of reading the post-Theoretical moment is to see it as inaugurating a new disarticulation of Theory from philosophy. There are two possible scenarios here. Firstly Post-Theory could mean Theory divorced from philosophy *per se*; perhaps because with the demise of positivism, Theorists no longer perceive any need of legitimating support from the synoptic powers of the philosophical imagination. But the post-Theoretical also suggests ‘new forms of Theorising’ where Theory is set free from its *familiar* philosophical bearings. It is this, latter, sense that has been prominent in recent attempts by New Theorists to move beyond contemporary Theory’s ‘philosophical canon’ (and has already been touched on above). For these Theorists, the move beyond Theory into the post-Theoretical represents a move towards the philosophical ‘refounding’ of Theory and, in particular, a rejection of the ‘dialectical concept games’ of the German idealist philosophical tradition: preferring instead those ‘early-Enlightenment’ philosophical discourses untainted by the transcendental

²⁹ See Cohen, A. and Dascal, M. (1989) ‘*The Institution of Philosophy: A Discipline in Crisis*’ Lasalle: Open Court.

charades of the modern ego. Thus according to Hardt and Negri, contemporary Theory's critique of the fundamental precepts of Enlightenment rationalism moves the grounds of Theory back onto the terrain of concerns of the Renaissance humanists: a terrain where questions of ethics, autonomy and the *Bildung* of ordinary consciousness promise a new set of openings through which Theory can reconnect with everyday life.³⁰ For them the context for any viable form of Theory has to be 'the very unfolding of life itself' requiring a form of Theory that does no longer proceeds 'through ideal forms, but within the dense complex of experience.'³¹

However, this is, again, only one possibility. The other option, the one preferred here, is to view Theory as something rather distinct from philosophy. For once the modern epistemological conception of philosophy is rejected – where the philosopher is viewed as the cultural guardian of 'knowledge' – then philosophy can be left to return to its classical role as a discipline primarily concerned with questions of ethics and the evaluations of different 'ways of living'. Theory, in encroaching upon these philosophical traditional philosophical concerns, is seen as having overstepped its 'proper bounds'. But how is the Theorist to delimit the 'proper bounds' of Theoretical inquiry? And moreover, what role could such an ethically neutral and culturally non-evaluative mode of Theorising have? Without a 'philosophically rich' form of Theory, are we not left with only one option: the positivist option that denies Theory a critical role?

³⁰ Hardt and Negri p, 140.

³¹ See Hardt and Negri p, 30.

Against The Cult of the Theorist

One way of answering this question and refuting this suggestion, is to view post-Theory as Theory operating in the space between the Theoretical articulation of the everyday and Theory's re-inscription within the everyday as 'common Theory'. When viewed in this way, Post-Theory is Theory that engages in a dialogue with the everyday realm without need of the mediating skills of the Habermasian 'philosopher-interpreter'.³² Moreover, the fact that the everyday realm now contains new intellectual spaces conceptually augmented by Theory suggests that everyday life that is no longer simply the realm of the Sartrean 'practico-inert' but a realm infused with the – albeit latent and under-exploited – critical curiosities of intellectual life. Consequently, another version of post-Theoretical thinking is possible; one that recognises and celebrates the new everyday intellectualism as a new context within which Theory can be re-constructed and re-articulated as a popular intellectual discourse capable of 'ontologically bridging' everyday and academic worlds . This requires a form of Theory that operates on the terrain of ontology (thus showing extent to which post-Theory is not epistemologically orientated Theory but a practical metaphysics of everyday life). As Hardt and Negri point out, the means to get beyond the current crisis of Theory lies in rejecting Theory's claim to 'know more and better'; requiring the development of Theoretical discourses that provide new means for the 'ontological displacement of the subject'.³³ Thus the moment of post-Theory represents an awareness of new possibilities for Theorising in a different cultural space. It is a mode of Theorisation that draws on the new Theoretical orientations of the everyday realm but without giving up on traditional and contemporary Theory's

³² See Habermas, J. 'Philosophy as Stand in and Interpreter' in Baynes, K., Bohman, J. and McCarthy, T. (eds.) *After Philosophy: End or Transformation?* Cambridge Ma: MIT Press.

³³ See Hardt and Negri, p,384

anti-authoritarian and *avant-garde* postures. Thus post-Theory can be seen as working with Tolstoyan *epistemological* criteria – where the criteria for Theory choice are determined by the broadness of its appeal - but with a *political* strategy that is surrealist in that it calls for an end to the drab institutionalisation of Theory and advocates a return of Theory to ‘life’.

Conclusion: Post-Theory as Theory’s ‘Return to Life’

Contemporary Theorists - for example Baudrillard, Virilio, Foucault, Levinas, de Certeau, Lyotard and so on - gave us a host of distinctive Theoretical visions. But did it really matter to the Theoretical enterprise which one spoke ‘a truth’ or created ‘new values’ and ‘wider significances’? The ‘age of Theory’, looking back, seems an age that turned Theory into an intellectual fetish protected by a taboo protecting it from much needed critical scrutiny. The appeal of much contemporary Theory lay in the perception of an intellectual charisma exuded, not only by the individual Theorist – who functioned as an ego-ideal for the Theoretical community – but also by the great ‘scriptural’ Theoretical text itself. Thus as Martin Jay has pointed out, it is hard to conceive of how one might do Theory without recourse to ‘name dropping’, for Theory is deeply associated with idea of the ‘name of the great Theorist’.³⁴ Post-Theory however, holds no truck with any Theorist’s claim to charismatic authority. For when seen in terms of the version of post-Theoretical developed here, the significance of any Theory lies in its ability to speak to the everyday realm in order to practically bring about significant ontological effects. Recognising this, however, raises some difficult questions for anybody taking up this kind of post-Theoretical

³⁴ Jay, M. ‘Name Dropping or the Dropping of Names?: Modes of Legitimation in the Humanities’ in Kreisworth, M. and Cheetham, M. (eds.) *Theory Between the Disciplines: Authority, Vision, Politics* Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press 1990 pp 19-34.

position. Many contemporary Theorists - such as Marcuse for example - simply assumed that the 'alienated position' of Theoretical gaze was readily available and offered a viable vantage point from which to pose critical questions about the world. But what happens when intellectuals become so worldly and 'univoried' that the 'standpoint of critique' – the standpoint that supports the traditional theoretical attitude – appears odd, indulgent, something for the dilettante, but not for those serious about engaging with the world? For Theorists such as Marcuse, such a post-Theoretical world would be the ultimate 'one-dimensional nightmare' in that there would be no point of view left from which the world can be criticised, no standpoint of critique. In this case, not only has art become affirmative but thinking itself has become enmeshed in the everyday world. In this case thinking itself would have 'fallen in the quotidian' and, according to this view, we must resist any such 'becoming ordinary' of intellectual life. Marcuse follows his mentor Heidegger in this regard in viewing the post-Theoretical as a 'philosophy of the doxic path' – 'the path 'where only opinions prevail'.³⁵ But need this be so? Might Theory's liberation from modern philosophy – as Wittgenstein thought – mean the liberation from the plague of 'thinking to no purpose'? Might not Theory freed from the modern philosophical tradition represent a rejection of the needless *aporias* of meaning and subjectivity that have plagued it, and the recovery of - and return to - 'worldly thinking'? Might we ask of contemporary Theorists - such as Marcuse - that in posing critical Theoretical questions, to whom he is putting these questions to?

Thus perhaps a tentative conclusion can be drawn. For the post-Theorist, the only way out of the *aporias* of the Theoretical is to make Theory more relevant to everyday

³⁵ Heidegger, M. 'An Introduction to Metaphysics' New Haven: Yale 1978 p, 112.

concerns but without sacrificing Theory's abilities to transform everyday understandings and object relations (and, *ipso facto*, the ontologies of everyday worlds). This is a high tightrope to traverse but it is traversable if we return to the question of *pedagogic praxis*; of how intellectuals are to forge a link between Theory and everyday life such that Theory becomes appealing, interesting and of a piece with the everyday realm, yet still critical and transformative of it. This is a different version of the post-Theoretical; one where Theory has some business in speaking for its Others by carrying its Others with it as equal epistemological partners. To make Theory appealing, informative, relevant and stimulating to everyday audiences; yet remaining challenging, provoking and unsettling of the ontological rigidities of the everyday, is the *radical* challenge of the post-Theoretical.

Post-Theory represents the moment when Theorists in the humanities finally give up on the Kuhnian dream of an overarching theoretical paradigm – the great *a priori* 'Theory of Everything' - and attempt to return the tree of Theoretical knowledge to 'life'. In this case, the role of the Theorist – to invert Adorno³⁶ – is to remove the obscuring splinter from eye of the everyday subject by offering up Theoretical discourse as an instrument of intellectual optics capable assisting those with 'impaired sight'. This amounts to more than re-conceiving Theory as an instrument of ideology critique for Theory in this case is striving 'do more' than simply 'change consciousness' and 'ways of communicating'. In this case, the purpose of Theorisation is to use everyday 'common Theory' as the basis for a displacement of everyday subjectivity; enticing it to engage with another ontology and thus demonstrate, at the level of concrete experience, the possibility of another world.

³⁶ See Adorno, T. '*Minima Moralia*' London: NLB 1974, p50.

Thus the role of post-Theorist is thus to engage in Theoretical *Bildung* but in a more radical and ontologically significant way. Many contemporary Theorists have criticised the everyday realm for its lack of ‘ontological security’ in the hope that a thoroughgoing Theoretical critique of the everyday realm can show the kinds of social structures needed to create more secure, autonomous and rational individuals. Post Theory, on the other hand, views the ontological insecurities of the everyday realm as an opportunity for everyday subjects to use Theory in order (re)create new and different ontological orientations (thus the post-Theorist accepts the world is now, ontologically, a radically pluralized affair, that may converge on a new unitary world at some point in the future). For the post-Theorist ontological insecurity may breed psychopathologies: but it can also breed *ontological curiosity* and it is by operating immanently on the ontological terrain of everyday life that Theory can assist this curiosity in opening up the paths to different – and hopefully better – worlds.