

The Future of Theory

Jean-Michel Rabaté

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The Future of Theory

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Introduction

Traditionally, philosophy starts with a sense of wonder. Then theory steps in with heavy tread to explain the sources and reasons of the glorious wonder. I will take as my point of departure my own sense of wonder, or rather the sharp jolt I experienced a few years ago as I came across a remark by Judith Butler in an essay originally read at a 1989 conference, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” and then published in 1991 – all these dates are not indifferent, as we will see. Judith Butler, whom I had always identified with the “cutting edge” of contemporary American theory and admired for her groundbreaking analyses of performative gender, her intense dialogues with philosophy and psychoanalysis, evinced a worried ambivalence facing the very notion of theory:

I do not understand the notion of “theory,” and am hardly interested in being cast as its defender, much less in being signified as part of an elite gay/lesbian theory crowd that seeks to establish the legitimacy and domestication of gay/lesbian studies within the academy. Is there a pregiven distinction between theory, politics, culture, media? How do those divisions operate to quell a certain intertextual writing that might well generate wholly different epistemic maps? But I am writing here now: is it too late?¹

The sense of an extreme urgency, of pressing historical considerations, of a brisk calendar whose agendas risk being stale, underpins

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almost all recent essays on the state of theory, and it should be heard echoing – although in a more ironical way – in my own title for this book.

If one does not want to say just that tomorrow the blind will not see and the deaf will not hear, one can hardly write a book about the “future” without taking stock of past events and inscribing oneself in a historical mode. And as we will see, the peculiar history of Theory, like that of fashion, tends to describe loops and circles; in short, if one takes enough distance, it is possible to see it as rather cyclical. What remains “future” should be contained in the sense of an agency, of agendas, of tasks to prioritize, of dead ends to acknowledge for what they often are, the forced awareness of one’s limits. The sense of a similar urgency pervades Butler’s self-admonitions: “If the political task is to show that theory is never merely *theoria*, in the sense of disengaged contemplation, and to insist that it is fully political (*phronesis* or even *praxis*), then why not simply call this operation *politics*, or some necessary permutation of it?”² If I wish to be true to my half-serious claim to be writing for the future, I will have to sketch a genealogy of that loaded word *theoria*, a genealogy highlighting particularly strong moments of incandescence and dissemination, of confrontation and misunderstandings. If I may anticipate slightly, one of the points I will try to make is that *theoria* has never been “disengaged contemplation,” and that even when Theory was depicted at its most ludicrously abstract and oblivious of material contingencies through the famous anecdote of Thales who fell down a well because he was gazing at the stars, one cannot forget that Thales was not only a philosopher and an observer of the heavens, not only the first name who can be credited with a systematic attempt at separating philosophy from myth, but also a statesman with political ambitions. In a very interesting parallel with our times, he clamored for a need to go beyond the limited model of the early nation-state or Greek *polis* and thus suggested the creation of a supranational and totally rational league of Ionic cities. In an early note, Nietzsche drew attention to this apparent contradiction: “*Thales’ league of cities*: he saw the fatal destiny of the *polis* and saw that myth was the foundation of the *polis*. If he broke down myth then perhaps he

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also broke up the *polis*. Thales as a statesman. The struggle against the *polis*.”³

Should theory be called politics? Rather than stress the disingenuous nature of such dismissive reduction of theory to absent-minded star-gazing when it comes from a very visible theoretician of gender and sexuality, moreover from a scholar who began her remarkable career by writing an authoritative Ph.D. on the reception of Hegel by major French thinkers like Kojève, Sartre, Lacan, Deleuze, and Foucault⁴ – a starting point which has its importance, as I will show in chapter 1 – I wish to meditate on Butler’s symptomatic aloofness and wonder whether it signals a new consensus, a spreading reluctance to either “do” or “let do” theory. Even if in the first quote we may assume that theory refers only to “gay/lesbian theory,” the assessment fits very well with a pervasive feeling that “theory” has been too one-sided, the mere half (in the best of cases) of a whole in which the missing element is by definition truer, more vital, more essential. Such a radical incompleteness would be heightened by an illusion of autonomy generating the monster: not “theories of this or that” but Theory *per se*. I will henceforth capitalize “Theory” when I mean theory in general, leaving the lower case to refer to particular theories.

Whether we call the missing half “praxis” as in the days of Althusserian Marxism, when “Theory” meant the “true” philosophy of dialectical materialism and “praxis” day-to-day militancy (i.e., being busy with tracts, meetings, demonstrations) in a curious continuation of Sartre’s *Critique of Practical Reason* by other means; or whether we call it just “politics,” as in the American universities of the 1990s, when the phrase “the politics of –” could apply to everything from high cuisine to low culture, without forgetting Desire, possibly the most pervasive myth of the twentieth century; the problem with Theory seems to be that it is always accused of having missed something. Theory is missing out on “life,” real life that is, as in the expression “Get a life!” about “real” sexuality, “real” politics, and so on. Prophetically, Rimbaud had written “True life is elsewhere.” This post-Romantic yearning for an unattainable Other construed as more real and more alive has never sounded so true as when dealing with Theory.

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One can easily notice a curious paradox today, a paradox which stems from attitudes close to that of Judith Butler's: Theory's demise has been repeatedly announced, the reign of Theory is embalmed in a catalogue of past or post- movements neatly labeled, like those kings or popes who are only remembered by two dates (we can then say that Theory reigned supreme between 1975 and 1991, in the USA at least), yet there have never been so many guides, anthologies, critical readers, symposia, gatherings of new approaches, launchings of methodological recapitulations issued by major academic presses. What Elizabeth Bruss gleefully described in her incisive book *Beautiful Theories* (1982) was the sudden irruption of an "Age of Theory": "*Suddenly, an Age of Theory . . .*" She describes how American universities felt the "invasion" of foreign (mostly French) theoreticians in the early 1970s, how the annual bibliography of the Modern Language Association only listed "aesthetics" and "literary criticism" until 1967, then created a new category called "Literary Criticism and Literary Theory" – a double heading still relevant today – whose listed publications grew from 200 to 600 in 1975, while a spate of new journals (she mentions almost twenty of these) gave regular columns to debates generated by all these new essays, books, conferences. It is a great pity that Elizabeth Bruss died before her own book was published, not only because of the remarkable sensitivity she displays, but also because she would have been an ideal witness to assess what has taken place since then, in the first decade of a new millennium in which Theory has lost its charms; it is not Beautiful any more, but, if not downright ugly yet, a little embarrassing, like a distant cousin full of outdated dreams of grandeur, silly daydreams more adapted to those far away countries in which one still finds students' dorms displaying posters of Mao, Marilyn, or Che Guevara.

Take a recent article published in the *New York Times* about the new buzzword in Theory, which would be "Empire." Emily Eakins's "What Is the Next Big Idea? The Buzz is Growing"⁵ begins symptomatically with a recapitulation of these earlier carefree days contrasting strikingly with current anxieties; these anxieties generally stem from the fear of having missed the new wave, whatever it may be. To be sure, the article is not about the publication of a totally new book, but takes stock of a Freudian after-effect when analyz-

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ing the emergence to fame of a book published more than a year earlier, in March 2000:

It comes along only once every decade or so, typically arriving without much fanfare. But soon it is everywhere: dominating conferences, echoing in lecture halls, flooding scholarly journals. Every graduate student dreams of being the one to think it up: the Next Big Idea.

In the 1960s it was Claude Lévi-Strauss and structuralism. In the 1970s and 1980s it was Jacques Derrida and deconstruction, Michel Foucault and poststructuralism and Jacques Lacan and psychoanalysis, followed by various theorists of postcolonialism and New Historicism.

And now scholars are wondering if the latest contender for academia's next master theorist is Michael Hardt, a self-effacing, 41-year-old associate professor of literature at Duke University and the co-author of *Empire*, a heady treatise on globalization that is sending frissons of excitement through campuses from São Paulo to Tokyo. (B7)

If Jameson and Žižek, two main voices among the theoretical opinion-makers, earlier praised the book, announcing it as “the first great new theoretical synthesis of the new millennium” or comparing with Marx’s *Communist Manifesto*, Hardt’s own opinion is more measured. Refusing the idea that he might be the “next Derrida” (these titles are often conferred upon you by total strangers, as one is chosen to be the next Buddha), he says, alluding to his co-author, Toni Negri:

Toni and I don’t think of this as a very original book. We’re putting together a variety of things that others have said. That’s why it’s been so well received. It’s what people have been thinking but not really articulated. (B9)

Such candor is rare, and may betray a rare and reassuring modesty – a previous book by the same authors, Hardt and Negri (the latter

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was not yet serving a sentence in an Italian jail), *Labor of Dionysus*,⁶ had been launched with some fanfare seven years earlier but did not do nearly as well as *Empire*, perhaps because it begins by presenting its conceptual instruments as Theory's Jurassic Park, immediately posing the bland question, when laying on the table from the outset its conceptual starting points (labor, exploitation, class conflict, proletarian struggles, the need to elaborate a Marxist theory of the state): "Do dinosaurs still walk the earth?"⁷ This is the point when most hurried graduate students put the book back on its shelf. Moreover, what was lacking from this interesting and original contribution to Marxist scholarship was, precisely, the new buzzword of "globalization" – a term tellingly absent from the index in the 1994 book, but which has become the central issue in *Empire*.

On the other hand, the *New York Times* article was quite timely, appearing just a few days before the Genoa Summit of the eight leading industrialized nations which opened on July 21, 2001 and closed on random arrests, savage beatings, and the haunting image of one young man shot to death, which shattered lots of well-meaning illusions. Accordingly, Negri and Hardt were able to confirm the self-fulfilling prophecy of the article praising their book: they found a tribune in the Op-Ed tribune of the *New York Times* for July 20, not only explaining "What the Protesters in Genoa Want"⁸ but also showing that it would be absurd to simply oppose globalization. While *Empire* advocates a very abstract "Revolution" whose contours are strategically blurred, Hardt's and Negri's actual program sounds quite moderate, more in line with the idea of "constituent subjects" with which they concluded *Labor of Dionysus*:

The protests themselves have become global movements, and one of their clearest objectives is the democratization of globalizing processes. This should not be called an anti-globalization movement. It is pro-globalization, or rather an alternative globalization movement – one that seeks to eliminate inequalities between rich and poor and between the powerful and the powerless, and to expand the possibilities of self-determination.⁹

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Where would one find, one might ask, the rabid right-wing Scrooge who would refuse to subscribe to such a generous and universal program?

Let us then try to understand the role played by Theory in this simple example. As the first article quoted explains, what made the popularity of a philosopher like Jacques Derrida such a sudden and modish phenomenon was less due to his ideas than to a certain timeliness in the introduction of a new style of discourse. Michèle Lamont observed in 1987 that Derrida's popularity in American campuses was generated above all by a specific mode of writing, and also by the way he would pose the complex or essential questions to academics at a time when a disciplinary crisis was rampant in the humanities.¹⁰ Lamont refers to Derrida's French accent and stylish clothes – which, although distinctive enough, do not go to the heart of the matter. It is indeed an issue of “style,” but here style is the “man himself” as Buffon and Lacan were wont to say; in fact “style” leads to a rethinking of fundamental issues in times of institutional or definitional disarray. Hence, it goes deeper than the superficial layers represented by clothes, no matter how important they are (since, after all, deconstruction is credited with having given birth to a certain fashion in clothes): it touches on the body. By which I do not mean that we should look for hidden tattoos, but that the eruption of fashionable discourses in the academic scene has always been accompanied by the creation of a new corpus. Theory is thus a *Sartor Resartus* in progress, transforming an apparently futile miscellany of transcendental thoughts in a new writing that is at the same time a self-conscious reflection on writing that will “excite us to self-activity” to quote Carlyle's own words.¹¹

Just as the rise of Lévi-Strauss in the 1960s opened wide the doors of new linguistic and anthropological libraries, the fame of deconstruction was marked by the fact that every student was forced to discover pell-mell Plato, Levinas, Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger, Bataille, Mallarmé, to name just a few of the authors Derrida made popular overnight. Derrida's success owed thus not a little to the fact that most Anglo-Saxon readers had not been exposed to the kind of history of philosophy that is still taught at high-school level in France and Italy, where most undergraduates will have read a selection of

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canonical texts by, say, Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Kant, and Hegel. When he added to this, with a virtuosity that is so characteristic, a number of apparent non-philosophers like Artaud, Mallarmé, Valéry, or Joyce so as to “read” them along the lines of a philosophical investigation probing the function of language, more precisely the repression of rhetoric or “writing,” Derrida radicalized and systematized a gesture already performed by Heidegger. Heidegger, it is true, commanded over a much smaller literary corpus, limited essentially to three poets, Hölderlin, Trakl, and Rilke, names which would appeal above all to students of German literature but would lose their appeal for all others, while Derrida not only opened wide the doors to another library but also paved the way to a joyous and seemingly infinite “inmixing” of literary and philosophical texts. It was thus not a coincidence that Derrida and Paul de Man, when they met in 1966, discovered so many affinities: they had both been marked by the reading of Heidegger, Nietzsche, and Blanchot, and were bringing to bear a rhetorical inflexion both to “pure” philosophical problematic and to “pure” literary criticism. On the other hand, Theory is not just philosophy and it should not stray too far from the humanities, by which I mean it has to keep a bond, however flexible and dialectical it may be, with literature. Or Theory *is* literature, if you want, but literature raised to the power of speculation, literature when the term includes the “question of literature” or “the thinking of literature.” Some periods have delegated their writers to the front of burning political issues, in such a way that the distinction between philosophy and literature has been blurred. Just think of Dante and the politics of Florence, or of Confucius, whose thwarted political ambitions left him time enough to prepare a famous poetic anthology of Chinese folk-songs.

It is thus not enough to say that Theory should by definition address contemporary issues like globalization, or the various attempts by superpowers to regulate the more and more asthmatic well-being of the inhabitants of the planet. Using different means than demonstrations, fundraising, or lobbying, means that remain closer to the status of a text, Theory functions as a witness in an ongoing trial, and its necessity arises from the moment one realizes that there is precisely such a trial, be it in the field of the humanities or of justice, politics, bioethics, the environment, and so on.

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Facing these issues, Theory is supposed to ask difficult, foundational questions that all somehow entail revisionary readings of culture and its foundational texts. While it does not necessarily have any answer, at least it knows where to appeal. My main contention in these pages is that Theory should not be ashamed of its double Greek origins, which point both to a “pure” intellectual contemplation and to ritual witnessing in the framework of the city or policy – as I will show in more detail in a later chapter. This is why Theory is never compromised enough and why Heidegger is one of its favorite authors. Unlike Kant’s reason, Theory can never be pure because it is always lacking, and this weakness is in fact its strength. What I see, however, as Theory’s main effect in the production of knowledge and the dissemination of discourses can be described as a process of hystericization. As Michael Hardt willingly confessed, the success of *Empire* might be due to its giving people what they already wanted without knowing it exactly. The “buzzword” in this case was true to its name: two weeks after the publication of the article, the book had sold out, the last copies had disappeared from bookstores, and it was then immediately reissued as a paperback.

If Theory plays the trick of the “globalizing” gesture without really being able to define itself, this lack of definition is alone capable of questioning huge monsters like “globalization” and should send us on historical parallels with a similar theoretical fading effect: across the centuries, hysteria could never be adequately defined by medical knowledge as a positive disease with clear symptoms and a detailed nosography. Charcot and Freud after him attempted to surround it with a new theater, from the literal amphitheaters at La Salpêtrière where Charcot exhibited his patients in front of a fashionable crowd, to the more secluded setting in which a bourgeois couch, deep with pillows and carpets, will restrict movements and limit interactions to speech. To illustrate my analogy, rather than reopen the fascinating but labyrinthine volumes of Charcot, Janet, Freud, and Breuer, I choose to return to André Breton’s and Louis Aragon’s joint manifesto in praise of Hysteria published in *La Révolution surréaliste*, in order to assert, as Lacan declared some forty years later, that hysteria gives birth to a discourse and maintains a quest for truth that always aims at pointing out the inadequacies of official, serious, and “masterful” knowledge.