Futures for Theory

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1. Statement on Theory Prospects[1]

I was involved in the early development of the Society for Critical Exchange founded in 1976. I recall taking part, for example, in a debate during the 1977 SCE/Modern Language Association Convention session on "The Function of Controversy," which was taped and printed in SCE Reports #4 (June 1978). In 1980, I organized an SCE/MLA session "Deconstructive Criticism: Directions," with a keynote lecture by Barbara Johnson and responses from five scholars, among whom were Andrew Parker, Joseph Riddel, and William Spanos. The proceedings appeared in SCE Reports #8 (Fall 1980) along with a separate Supplement—*Deconstructive Criticism: A Selected Bibliography* (Fall 1980), complied by Richard Barney. At the time, I was completing my book, *Deconstructive Criticism* (1983), and the SCE session and publication played a productive part in that process. I recall also that during this period I set up formal links between SCE and the South Atlantic regional MLA with assistance from Ralph Cohen of the University of Virginia. I served on the first SCE Board of Directors from 1978 to 1983 and again from 2007 to 2011.

In its early days, the Society was a meeting place for the rising generation of North American literary and cultural theorists, providing emotional support, networking opportunities, conference and publication outlets, and a sense of mission. It also constituted an open space within the relatively closed shop of the MLA. In addition, state university and small college faculty (like myself at the time) were welcomed along with more privileged private and Ivy League university intellectuals. Among its main outcomes, in retrospect, were the professionalization, dignification, and mainstreaming of theory in the university world. The preferred approach was and remains critical exchange and collaboration. This SCE ethos culminated for me personally during the six years I worked as general editor with a team of five other editors on the *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (2001). The aims of this large-scale project included the consolidation and monumentalization as well as pedagogical dissemination of theory in the context of the conservative culture wars, which in the US fulminated against theory starting in the mid-1980s and continuing today.

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Looking to SCE's prospects from my current vantage point, I would want the organization to continue five projects valuable for the future of theory: 1) retain its long-standing formal affiliations and Convention sessions with the national and regional MLAs and the Conference on College Composition and Communication; 2) maintain its occasional conferences focused on pressing topics of the day (going on since the early 1980s); 3) keep its commitments to collaborative research and critical exchange; 4) expand its online presence first set up in the early 1990s; and 5) remain active in selected crossdisciplinary research and publication ventures initiated by the membership. There are, of course, many other possibilities, goals, and futures.

SCE might consider a formal project of institutional history. As I imagine it, this would entail compiling an archive of the Society's 30-plus-year history and depositing it in a library, for example, at the University of California-Irvine where so many theory archives exist. It might extend to interviews, online perhaps, with key people as well as collecting letters, files, publications, records, and reminiscences. My point is that SCE has played a symptomatic and important role in the development of theory as an academic specialty and new interdiscipline of postmodern times. Future historians can be expected to write about it. There may be grant support for such a scholarly undertaking.

Adapting the innovative model of Harvard University Press's *New History of French Literature* (1989) and *New History of German Literature* (2005), a written history of SCE might take the form, true to its spirit, of a collaborative assemblage. This would consist of year-by-year brief narratives that profiled selected happenings, publications, people, meetings, and controversies. Many authors could contribute. In the event, the sequence of multi-authored micronarratives would need to be accompanied by a second band, a bottom margin, for responses and critical exchanges. A related project might be an "SCE Reader" or a "Best of SCE" book collection that combs through past issues of *SCE Reports* (1976-82), *Critical Exchange* (1982-1990), the *Electronic College of Theory* (1991-99), and maybe past conference proceedings.

Given the strong antitheory currents inside and outside the profession, the Society might contemplate ways to insure the long-term survival and health of the specialty, which itself keeps developing. Perhaps hold an annual or biennial one-week Summer Institute for Critical Exchange—half conference, half training school for both graduate students and postdocs (maybe offering Continuing Education Units or academic credits). This is based in part on the model long employed each June by the Marxist Literary Group. Unlike the well-funded six-week summer program of the Ivy League-identified School of Criticism and Theory (also founded in 1976), an SCE Institute would be, speaking comparatively, a shoestring operation. It is a matter, in any case, of creating opportunities for rising generations of scholar-teachers seriously interested in criticism and theory.

Perhaps SCE should establish an online journal or annual, for instance, a graduate student-oriented and -directed enterprise, with staggered short-term editorial boards composed of theory-oriented students from around the US, Canada, and the globe. That would be a productive way to initiate a future. It might publish a commissioned, perhaps coauthored, biennial or triennial report on the state of theory.

Theory is popular not just in the US, but increasingly across the world, notably in Europe, East Asia, India, and parts of the Middle East. Outreach is warranted. As was the case with the regional MLAs, SCE might encourage autonomous or semi-autonomous regional and national outposts around the globe. It might also set up formal affiliations and annual sessions with related professional organizations like the International Association for Philosophy and Literature, the International Comparative Literature Association, etc. Also sections for independent scholars should be constituted to include not only the growing ranks of retired academics, but also and especially the swelling reserve army of nomadic casualized and contingent scholar-teachers, who have become so commonplace during the current era of disposable workers.

As far as new SCE-designated research projects, conferences, and publications, there are plenty of possibilities depending on the membership and its interest groups. Topics like fundamentalisms, low-brow literatures, cognitive poetics, academic labor, and the disaggregation of national literatures come to mind. Opportunities will arise and need encouragement and support.

What lies in the immediate future for theory? I'll make three predictions aimed at veteran theory teachers and SCE members. To begin with, theory will continue to be disseminated through innumerable specialties, periods, subspecialties, disciplines, and national contexts to the point of losing its identity in various settings. So be it. At the same time, challenges can be expected in North America to the now standard three graduate and undergraduate theory course offerings and requirements, namely Introduction to Theory, History of Theory, and Modern/Contemporary Theory. Let us be prepared to defend while continuously transforming these bread-and-butter courses. Lastly, theory must soon go global. It needs to include materials from Arabic, Chinese, Indian, Japanese, Persian, and other traditions, reaching back to ancient times and recontextualizing theory's lingering Eurocentrism. Such an opening should not aspire to bring an end to national identities, regional affiliations, and local distinctions. Quite the opposite.

2. Address to Aspiring Theorists in Precarious Times[2]

Allow me to elaborate a key claim, a prediction, directed especially at aspiring theorists. The future for theory in higher education, in the humanities and social sciences, looks good despite appearances. To use the dominant *laissez-faire* market language of the day, I am bullish. This is with the long- as well as the middle- and short-term in mind. There are some caveats and complications, of course. But I am offering a buy signal. And theorists may well wonder why.

For starters, the demand for research and publication in higher education is not going away. On the contrary, it continues to seep out from major research universities into colleges and community colleges. This has been going on in North America since the 1950s and 60s. Within many humanities and social science disciplines, theory answers the call. It provides new topics of inquiry, new approaches, new objects for investigation. Here I would cite the continuous productivity, for example, of feminist, gender, and queer theory; of Marxist, poststructuralist, and postcolonial theory. Antitheory and post-theory sentiments of recent decades only make sense in the context of theory as a dominant paradigm. Inside higher education, theory appears an empire to some of its strongest opponents. Amen.

Large numbers of undergraduate and graduate students are required to take one or two courses of introductory theory, contemporary or classical. In addition, there are usually optional courses beyond these. Various institutions offer minors, certificates, and specializations in theory. There are numerous guides, dictionaries, glossaries, and anthologies covering theory. And their numbers keep increasing. All of this is what I think of as Theory Incorporated.

In recent years I, like others, have been invited as a theorist to teach and lecture in foreign countries: Finland, Hungary, and China in my case. The textbook I worked on, the *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, makes 50% of its annual sales outside the US. Theory has gone global. It may be expected to continue going global by incorporating "foreign" elements, both classic and contemporary. At present theory in North America does not include Arabic, Chinese, Indian, Japanese, Persian, or other non-European traditions. In the future, it will doubtlessly do so.

In a nutshell, the way I see it, theory provides many resources: cultural capital, canons and traditions, essential tools, a professional *lingua franca*, plus ample materials and new perspectives for research, publication, and teaching. This has motivated innumerable franchising operations—each part of Theory Incorporated.

Now if aspiring theorists ask me which theory in particular to invest in today, we have to face some complications. Up until the mid-1990s contemporary theory—for example, in literary studies—was configured as a set of schools and movements, both major and minor. This picture, of course, changes with different academic disciplines and departments. In North American literary studies and English departments in particular, the sequence of contemporary theories covers, to recite the standard list: Marxism, psychoanalysis, formalism, myth criticism, existentialism and phenomenology, hermeneutics and reader-response theory, structuralism, post-structuralism, feminism, race and ethnicity theory, new historicism, gender and queer theory, postcolonial theory, personal criticism, and cultural studies. Despite this abundance, the dominant forces over these years were during the 1950s and 60s formalism, the 1970s and 80s poststructuralism, and the 1990s to the present cultural studies. Coherence exists amidst a growing plenty.

Starting in the 1970s, however, crossovers and fusions, postmodern pastiches, assemblages, began to appear. I would mention first as an instance the pioneering Marxist feminist deconstructive post-colonial work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Many other examples could be listed. Closer in time, since the early 1990s North American cultural studies has rather quickly branched out from its more or less coherent British forerunner into several dozen autonomous subfields or studies areas. I have in mind subculture studies, whiteness studies, body studies, trauma studies, border studies, disability studies, porn studies, subaltern studies, working-class studies, and so on. Each of these areas has its own history and theoretical configuration. None is in a position of dominance. Quite the contrary. So my thesis is that twenty-first century theory in the North American academy is both unmasterable and, strictly speaking, unknowable. Still, it remains roughly recognizable as theory in its current disseminated late postmodern form.

Like any investment or purchase today, this one that we are entertaining—to invest in theory and in which one or ones—faces a proliferation of choices. We all regularly face this type of problem whether we are looking to buy a six-pack of beer or a bottle of wine, a breakfast cereal, a new car, or a mutual fund. Innumerable choices confront us accompanied frequently by muted feelings of bewilderment, dismay, and astonishment. Not surprisingly, I have had graduate students ask me whether to buy, sell, or hold theory and cultural studies—and in just these terms.The deep structure of our late capitalist market society consists precisely of abundance and disorganization typified as gaudy dispersion. Neither higher education, nor theory, have escaped this form.

Everywhere there are guides, top ten lists, books for dummies, self-help manuals and media. If you are recognized today as a professional theorist or a serious devotee of theory, you are unashamedly positioned from time to time as an investment counselor, a futures advisor. People want very badly to know what are the newest approaches to the arts, society, and culture. What is the latest thing? In these times market vanguardism is insistent. Given this context, theory gets swept up in fashion. There is a queer theory approach, a postcolonial approach, various hot cultural studies approaches. Some areas or niches are very hot and some not. That is part of what I think of as the Theory Market. We live in a world of commodities, abundance, advertising, competition, speeded-up obsolescence, utilitarian choices, and calculated investments. It is no surprise that theory—as well as scholarship, research, and academic publishing—resides there. This goes for the arts and humanities as well as the sciences, social sciences, and professions.

But there is a further complication. Can one choose feminism, critical race theory, postcolonial theory or, for that matter, cultural studies as an attractive commodity preferable to others? These theories stem from certain experiences, histories, oppressions, and values. In this sense, theory is rooted in standpoints, world views, and situations. The category “consumer choice“—construed as a

human right and citizen's responsibility, according to today's neoclassical theory of *homo economicus*—doesn't begin to explain how one comes to theory.

A great deal of what counts as theory has a critical edge and cuts across the grain of contemporary society. The tools of the trade today bear me out: ideological analysis, feminist critique, deconstruction of traditional binaries, history from below, hermeneutics of suspicion, race-class-gender inquiry, rhetorical analysis, close reading, Foucaultian genealogy, and so on. This gear is now part of the DNA of many humanistic and social scientific fields. It complements the usual and expected traditional street smarts, self-reflection, and methodological prudence. If we look around, much criticism needs to be done. Theory is well positioned and predisposed to do it. This is why in considerable part conservative cultural warriors condemn it. They have kept on the attack for several decades. Theory represents continuous challenge. That to me is reason enough to recommend and defend it.

The situation today of newly minted PhD theory specialists seeking work in North American higher education differs tellingly from that of the high water mark during the 1970s and 80s. In the seventies theory broke away from its long-standing subordinate role and became a free-standing specialty and major paradigm, at least for various disciplines, certainly literary studies. Nowadays theory has permeated most of the specialties and subspecialties of various disciplines to the point that everyone, it seems, is doing theory of some sort. That includes the local Shakespearean, Victorianist, and ethnic literature specialist. So there is no apparent need to hire any theory specialist per se. Today's applied theory has innumerable local habitations and names. Consequently, stand-alone theory has fallen by the wayside. It is not a preferred specialty, but a secondary backup one, playing supporting roles.

Beginning card-carrying theorists, therefore, need a professional identity linked to a more venerable specialty or recognized subspecialty, not this recent upstart field alone. To give a few examples, early Cold War American women's confessional poetry, or Romantic celebrity literary culture, or globalization in Renaissance travel literature would nicely complement and moderate primary investment in theory. Here, and everywhere else evidently, well-attested historical periods, genres, and themes reassert the mid-century structure of the discipline. It is not that theory is dead now. Not at all. It is ubiquitous and thriving, but quite suddenly in the back seat of an old vehicle.

The various reconfigurations of theory charted thus far are tied to the postmodernization of higher education. It is a matter of uneven development. On the one hand, the North American university is a modernist institution in which early twentieth-century disciplines and departments constitute its perdurable infrastructure and its very architecture. On the other hand, these modern disciplines have lost their autonomy. It is a new era of interdisciplinarity and cross-disciplinarity. Think of all the new fields built up since the 1960s such as gender studies, ethnic studies, semiotics, cultural studies

with its dozens of branches, cognitive studies, narrative studies, media studies, and globalization studies. I have not even mentioned all the new fields in the sciences.

But where are these new postdisciplines housed? Rarely in their own departments, rather in skimpily funded and casually staffed programs or centers. Are there teaching jobs in these exciting and productive fields? Well, no, not exactly—not directly. They have to be camouflaged to fit into the accredited prepostmodern disciplines and specialties. If, for example, you are an English professor interested in punk—punk music, dress, dancing, cultural location—you need to find a literary tie-in such as punk slang, lyrics, or zines. You position yourself as specializing in late twentieth-century literature and culture, with a focus on subcultural vernacular aesthetic discourses. Not surprisingly, many jobs seekers in this age of late theory and interdisciplinarity are in disguise. On the one hand, the North American university, its departmentalization and staffing, appear frozen in an earlier mid-twentieth-century configuration. On the other, offshoots and crossovers proliferate like crabgrass. Theory is part of this growth and deterritorialization. It has gone viral in the *fin de siècle* and continues to do so in the new century.

So here is what I or probably any veteran theorist would say to a PhD student aspiring to be a theorist. Invest in theory. Just be aware that cosmetic finessing will be required to your résumé and your professional image. Makeovers are necessary. Flexibility is the watchword. Have a traditional profile, fit in the old framework, be instantly recognizable to the oldest of old timers. Yet appear innovative, creative, smart, committed to the new, even to the newest of the new, but again within the old frame of recognized disciplines and specialties. Face the fact that less than half of new PhDs will secure a tenure-track job after an average of nine years of PhD study and tens of thousands of dollars in student debt. Moreover, part of your makeover routine is to look suitable as well for the insecure Macjobs that nowadays constitute more that 60% of the academic work force in the US. Be aware that this degraded job category calls for trimming back obvious theory inclinations in favor of robust basic education.

At this point I want to own up to a fantasy of mine. Sometimes I feel theory should be part of basic education like composition and mathematics. In this scenario there ought to be a course or two of interdisciplinary theory required of all undergraduate students. It would doubtlessly be staffed by faculty in the humanities and social sciences, consisting of core and optional modules, drawing from contemporary and perhaps classic sources. But then I vacillate, thinking theory should be reserved for certain majors and only in their upper-division course work. In the former scenario, theory is tantamount to critical thinking in its various contemporary modes. In the latter, theory is advanced critical and creative thinking within the delimited contexts of recognized disciplines and their traditions. A great deal is in question here: the place of critical and creative thinking in higher education; the future of Theory Incorporated and the Theory Market, including the theory job market for PhDs; and the mission of higher education in today's society.

There are those who say theory is past. They generally mean post-structuralism or the broader interdisciplinary configuration of theory in the 1980s and 90s. They are right. But theory in the sense of methods and approaches as well as perennial texts and intellectual problems is alive and well. It is indispensable for those in humanistic and social scientific fields, students as well as faculty. It shapes professional discourse, consciously and unconsciously. What is past and missing just now is the general sense of excitement sometimes approaching hysteria that accompanied the theory renaissance during the *fin de siècle*. The current stage of market society, casino capitalism, solicits quick fashion changes, rapid obsolescence, and hyper excitement, both manufactured and real. Theory is caught up in these shifting currents for now.

Notes

[1] This statement was delivered at a session hosted by the Society for Critical Exchange during the Convention of the Modern Language Association held in Philadelphia during December 2006.

[2] This address was delivered in April 2007 at Santa Clara University for a Symposium on the Precarious University hosted by Marc Bousquet. It was presented again in October 2007 to the graduate student organization of the English Department at Oklahoma State University.

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