

### **A Euphoria for (the Neoliberal Politics) of Theory**

Why, take the case of Thales, Theodorus. While he was studying the stars and looking upwards, he fell into a pit, and a neat, witty Thracian servant girl jeered at him, they say, because he was so eager to know the things in the sky that he could not see what was there before him at his very feet. The same jest applies to all who pass their lives in philosophy. — Socrates

A euphoria for speculation, generalization, and abstraction swept through the American academic humanities in the late 1960s and the 1970s. “Suddenly, an Age of Theory,” Elizabeth Bruss observed.<sup>i</sup> To be sure, defining “theory,” most felt, was futile. But this did not stop scholars; Gerald Graff postulated: “‘Theory’ is what erupts when what was once silently agreed to in a community becomes disputed, forcing its members to formulate and defend assumptions that they previously did not even have to be aware of.”<sup>ii</sup> Theory, for Graff, denoted the paroxysm following the post-sixties breakdown of the appearance of consensus, in the American academy and the wider culture. Topics such as language, society, gender, and the literary canon became objects of (renewed) investigation. Theory, though, was also “a way of interacting with objects...which does justice to the mission of the university to produce new knowledge and not conserve traditions.”<sup>iii</sup> By the 1980s, academic humanists were using theory to produce knowledge that unsettled the cultural hegemony of white, male, and heteronormative privilege. By way of classrooms, at institutes, centers, and conferences, and in publications, theory had long become a “cognitive good,” an epistemic tool of “knowledge-making disciplines,” circulated “with the purpose of knowledge production” and “transferred across disciplinary boundaries.”<sup>iv</sup> In almost all the pronouncements, theory, it was assumed, was superior to previous views or to any antagonists; recalcitrant adopters

refused this new high-tech good at their own risk. Despite disparate “methods, concepts, models, metaphors, formalisms, principles, modes of representation, argumentative and demonstrative techniques, technical instruments, institutional arrangements, and intellectual, theoretical, and epistemic virtues,” the theoretical enterprise undertaken in American academic humanities during the last three decades of the twentieth century stressed ideology as a primarily vehicle for and medium of power, mistrusted modern “grand narratives,” and challenged meaning’s solidity and stability.<sup>v</sup> Taken together, the research programs and practices of theorists, a distinct group of historical actors, was thus anti-foundational or anti-metaphysical.

The theoretical enterprise in America developed in a split-screen fashion. Scholars who embraced theory during the 1980s and 1990s deployed theoretical cognitive goods as an anti-foundational form of cultural politics, a way of interpretation that sensitized readers to how claims of “consensus” were veiled acts of cruelty and domination, that affected sites of American life, including culture war debates about art, science, the “crisis of the humanities,” and public education’s role.<sup>vi</sup> Conservatives, meanwhile, cast theory and the “barbarians in tweed” who practiced it into objects of culture war derision, vilifying professors and education in general.<sup>vii</sup> From Reaganite 1980s and immediate post-Cold War 1990s vistas, theory’s incorporation of new voices, whether ethnic, religious, sexed, or gendered, became a synecdoche outside academe for tenured radicals’ post-sixties destruction of a common culture.<sup>viii</sup> An acknowledgement of the post-sixties fracturing of American culture and society thus united theory’s opponents *and* defenders.<sup>ix</sup>

In addition to tracing how theory was materially produced, circulated, and received as a cognitive good, this essay is a chapter in the history of “critique,” part of the modern experience of social acceleration that rewards individuals for the accumulation of resources and maintenance of an antagonistic confrontation with the world.<sup>x</sup> For, like the modernists who sought freedom

from conformist attachments, theorists, by way of using theory as an anti-foundational cognitive good to interpret art's power to destabilize social bonds seen as cruel and repressive, performed an intellectual labor that subverted the "ties that bind."<sup>xii</sup> The progressive political effects of the trading of theoretical cognitive goods were legion. Coming intellectually of age after the post-sixties breakdown of "consensus," theorists' anti-foundational subversive acts, above all, extended the period's broader artistic critique of culture's stress on individualism, imagination, antiauthoritarianism, and freedom.<sup>xiii</sup>

The rise and uses of theory as an anti-foundational cognitive good also came to firmly fit and exemplify a hyper-individualist work ethic shaped by the "new spirit of capitalism," a post-sixties "*ideology that justifies engagement in capitalism.*"<sup>xiv</sup> Theorists' professional-intellectual lives, in a variety of ways, were coordinated by this novel form of contemporary capitalism—theory was (a) *good*, after all.<sup>xv</sup> While the emergence of theory fits with the moment of welfare state capitalism, theory, in other words, augured the new spirit after that, of neoliberal entrepreneurialism. The "industry of high-tech theory," Camille Paglia dryly observed, was a business "as all-American as the Detroit auto trade."<sup>xvi</sup> Indeed, the neoliberal ethos and disposition animated theory and possessed theorists, as well as spaces that circulated theory, such as the Theory and History of Literature book series, Theory journals, and the School of Criticism and Theory. Such spaces: (1) were shaped by the 1970s voiding of the compromise between capitalism and the liberal welfare security state; (2) provided ostensibly meritocratic environments for careerist pursuits of theoretical critiques of culture; (3) tapped into an entrepreneurial attitude, employing the principle of market segmentation to promote theoretical goods to invested consumers. Significantly, spaces of theory were market-based, but university-mediated, and thus market-cushioned, a hybrid of sorts.

Meanwhile, capitalism disarmingly incorporated the nature, scope, and social effectiveness of critique by way of theory in American higher education. Theorists and theory were entangled—though not commensurate—with the logics of neoliberal capitalism, such as the capacity of post-sixties neoliberal capitalism to instrumentalize relationships, blur distinctions between work and leisure, and commodify things. The lure of theory also often outweighed the communicative dangers of specialization. It was nevertheless not primarily an issue of theorists “selling-out,” but of theorists working in a university where neoliberal forces increasingly saturated and directed professional and intellectual protocols. The academic humanist Left’s promotion of theory as an anti-foundational cognitive good, for instance, facilitated, however unintentionally, the formation of the “university” as a theater for culture war conflicts, shifting attention inside and outside the academy away from underlying changes in capitalism. (Figure 1. Theory de-territorialized on the “Global Campus”; Joyce/Zürich). Put differently, capitalism’s absorption of critique via theory in the academy not only focused professional-intellectual energies and expectations away from total or grand analyses and assessments of society, but had extra-academic political consequences as well, for it colluded with the dramas performed by the “university” in the public sphere.

Understanding this history of theory as a cognitive good produced, exchanged, and advanced through specific sites in the last three decades of the twentieth century advances the fields of American intellectual history and the history of higher education, and, by homing in on interactions at organs of theory, reveals historical patterns usually “not straightforwardly captured” in micro- or macroscopic narratives.<sup>xvi</sup> Identifying the underlying mechanisms and the movements of theory as a cognitive good at specific sites discloses these high-tech goods as “grounded in the collective epistemic endeavor of the many, [and] not reducible to the historical agency of a few individual actors.” This study’s narrative is hence an example of a “mesoscopic historiography.”<sup>xvii</sup> In an

alternative formulation, this essay is metatheoretical, offering a theory of theory: it not only uses the idea of theory as a cognitive good to show how and why commonalities of disparate anti-foundational intellectual phenomena that comprised the theoretical enterprise were intertwined with the neoliberal ethos that infused post-sixties America. Working with theory as a cognitive good as the key narrative element, a historical approach can also reveal theory's shared anti-foundational epistemic endeavor as opening and foreclosing certain interpretive assumptions, protocols, and conventions that "underlie the surface variety of disciplines and subdisciplines."<sup>xviii</sup> Tracing and analyzing the cross-disciplinary trajectory and flows of theoretical cognitive goods can help explain the functioning and development of the anti-foundational episteme and may reveal a perspective on the evolution of the system of disciplines in America, contributing to our understanding of disciplinary identities and the process of specialization.

### **Briefly Before the Theory Boom: A Transformation of Capitalism and Critique**

"The Sixties"—the civil rights movement, urban uprisings, second wave feminism, antiwar protests, assassinations—provided the immediate political context for the liftoff of theory in America. And this political context was *in part* fashioned by the New Left, whose opposition to the U.S government's broad support for war in Vietnam ended their relationship with the Old Left, many being of a classical Marxist stamp but, after Stalin, endorsed a foreign policy of anti-communism. The New Left, in contrast and after launching critiques of capitalism in the 1960s, crusaded for an array of social issues, including civil rights, feminism, gay rights, and drug policy reforms. They also came to feel, by the early 1970s, that "the structure of American society makes it almost impossible for criticism of existing policies to become part of political discourse."<sup>xix</sup> As social critique experienced a revival among working classes in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the New Left eventually rejected the idea that they themselves were citizens with civic responsibilities.

Self-isolated from the public sphere, the radicals renounced their Leftist parents' faith that government could combat social and economic injustices and revolted against traditional forms of political engagement, many becoming enthusiasts of the artistic (and Hippie) critique of culture, valorizing individuality and creativity in a manner that was vaguely anti-authoritarian but certainly opposed to the liberal welfare state.

The New Left's "fashionable" refusal of an extra-university politics coincided with and was informed by the post-1960s dissolution of any veneer of political consensus—the demands of women, gays, and ethnic groups helped subvert that façade created by white, male, and heteronormative privilege in the public sphere. The New Left's shift from (traditional) political radicalism (parties, unions, etc.) towards cultural radicalism also overlapped with a transformation of the relationship between capitalism and critique across the North Atlantic world. In fact, at the end of the 1960s and throughout the 1970s, challenges to capitalism, New Left or otherwise, transubstantiated capitalism's operations and mechanisms: capitalists *either* acknowledged critiques' validity and tried to appease critics (such as by offering autonomy and flexibility to workers) *or* eluded critiques without having addressed them.<sup>xx</sup> In the post-sixties American academy, capitalism would circumvent and convert critique by way of an emerging academic Left's development and uses of theory as an anti-foundational cognitive good.

Swaths of the post-sixties academic Left normalized the New Left's rejection of an extra-university politics. The New Left's crusades for social issues were, firstly, sublimated into post-sixties struggles in 1970s academe to establish new fields in the humanities. These post-"consensus" struggles resulted in the founding of women's, black, ethnic, and later in the decade, gay studies. While these fields devoted to ignored social groups were not rooted in formalized theories per se, the new knowledge produced therein was aligned with the university's charge. The

new knowledge was also part of the emerging theoretical moment in the humanities in which these social groups, as both subjects and objects of study, were, now that the illusion of “consensus”—of grounds, of foundations—was shattered, legitimated and seen as equals. Such new knowledge at the very least implicitly critiqued and at most explicitly aimed to undermine the white heteronormative (Christian) male upheld in the humanities as an ideal, a foundational symbol that had long centered fields and disciplines.<sup>xxi</sup>

This rapid multiplication and diversification of fields of study that reformed the humanities in the 1970s dovetailed with and received a degree of formalization by a subgroup of the post-sixties academic Left. This subdivision profited from the “academic revolution,” a Cold War-inspired transformation of American higher education that entailed support for tenure-track positions, grants, the founding of journals, research centers, symposia, conferences—basically, entire institutional networks and ecosystems for the pursuit of careers and knowledge production.<sup>xxii</sup> The aforementioned subgroup of the post-sixties academic Left had jelled a decade or so after the Ford Foundation funded the 1966 Johns Hopkins Symposium, which propelled French structuralism and its heretical offspring into the halls of American humanities departments. The informal group wielded “High Theory”—the texts of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, and others—in publications, graduate seminars, and at lecterns. In contrast to a constituency of intellectuals, journalists, and activists who continued to advocate for Old Left-style political agendas and social critiques of capitalism in the 1970s, theoretical academic humanists, the first anti-foundational wave of which subverted structuralist theories that pledged themselves to realizing complete clarification of society, followed, satisfying desires for the artistic critique of culture that merged with cultural traditions of American rugged individualism and emphasis on personal vision.

There were many moving parts to this academic revolution-supported and eventually full-blown anti-foundational theoretical reorientation of the American humanities toward “culture,” such as the use of a deconstructive Saussurian model of the sign to highlight conceptual complexity and linguistic high jinks and stress the tentativeness and speculative character of any reading. This anti-foundational subversiveness of theory, however, ironically resulted in a collective evasion of a certain type of critique of capitalism. As a collective and distinct collection of historical actors, theorists unintentionally, in fact, would in a number of ways make common cause with capitalism, while vocal opponents of capitalism remained disoriented, eventually even ignored. The theoretically-inclined subdivision of the academic Left rose to institutional prominence in the early 1970s just as there was a general move away from German philosophical influences, including the existentialism of Martin Heidegger and phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, and toward anti-foundational post-Hegelian, post-Realist, and post-Philosophical critiques. Part of the post-sixties displacement of New Left energy in American academia, the crystalizing theoretical enterprise helped turn attention away from the large-scale mobilization called for by social critiques at the end of the 1960s and in the 1970s. For theorists, occupied with post-academic revolution, neoliberal-inflected professional demands to innovate, to modernize, above all to publish, focused on the production of interpretive styles of nonrepresentational oppositionalism, knowledge progressively concentrated on questions about the nature of interpretation and cultural issues. Such professional-intellectual energy helped to register and spoke to the diversity and difference of post-sixties America in the academy but also helped build an anti-foundational epistemic endeavor that introduced and foreclosed certain interpretive commitments, such as the prohibition of final readings and stable meanings and the inculcation of a mistrust in “master narratives.”



## The Theory Journal as Vessel and Vehicle

Each generation experiences the fashions of the one immediately preceding it as the most radical anti-aphrodisiac imaginable.

—Walter Benjamin

Humanists of all stripes in American universities noticed and, in an accordingly professional manner, responded to, the “invasion” of foreign (mostly French) theoreticians in the early 1970s. Until 1967, the Modern Language Association’s yearly bibliography only listed “Aesthetics” and “Literary Criticism;” but within several years, it featured the category of “Literary Criticism and Literary Theory,” a list that grew from 200 to 600 titles. Yet what shortly came after in America—the High theoretical endeavor—occurred by way of new professional opportunities, including many organs that used the principle of market segmentation to “sell” theory as a *cognitive good* to clients: consider theory journals, of which about twenty were founded in the 1970s, such as *New Literary History* (1969), *Diacritics* (1971), *Feminist Studies* (1972), *Critical Inquiry* (1974), *Semiotext(e)* (1974), and *Social Text* (1979). (Figure 2. Year-end “Performance Review” of *Critical Inquiry*, December 20, 1993 part III: Distribution by Key Customer Groups) These publications, Jeffrey Williams has observed, “carried out the aims of advanced research and flourished under the terms of the academic revolution.”<sup>xxiii</sup> Themselves promoting the most exciting and innovate work in the humanities through the act of publication, these journals became key sites for the formalization and circulation of theory as cognitive goods. They were avenues for academics to hone and hawk their intellectual wares, to amplify projects and profiles expanding and intensifying due to the post-academic revolution ratcheting up of publication requirements.

For all the professed cultural radicalism of their contributors, though, the post-sixties neoliberal ethos and disposition, the “new spirit of capitalism,” which cheered on and *justified* engagement

with capitalism, possessed theorists' professional lives and work and animated theory journals. These all not only prospered in the 1970s and 1980s on university funds, even after the early 1970s retrenchment directed monies away from higher education, pulling the rug out from under the academic job market (and, more broadly, the liberal welfare state that underwrote the "academic revolution"). This theoretical enterprise also circumvented and transformed (social) critique by merging anti-foundational formalized employments of the artistic critique of culture (theory) with the American ideology of productivity and individualism. The latter was an ideology that the vast majority of theorists saw themselves as not believing in, but which clearly galvanized the aims of theoretical organs as much as contributors and readers. Formalized high-tech theory raced through the hallowed halls of ambitious academic humanists just as the U.S. abandoned, in 1971, the gold standard, in part due to control inflation caused by the printing of money to finance the Cold War and the Vietnam War. The quick spread of theory signaled how formative post-Fordist logic and pressures, such as the de-funding and reduction in scope and scale of big government programs, permeated the theoretical enterprise. Intertwining with the neoliberal ethos that saturated post-sixties America, the shared anti-foundational epistemic endeavor contained in and advanced by theory (journals) also released *and* barred particular interpretive options, reinforced emerging university protocols and conventions, and came to motivate a variety of disciplines and subdisciplines.

(Figure 3. *Critical Inquiry* September 1974 Volume 1, Number 1) Take *Critical Inquiry*, published by the Journals Division of the University of Chicago Press, "the most highly regarded of all scholarly journal publishers in the United States."<sup>xxiv</sup> Bearing a title that signals both its literary-critical and "criticism as artistic critique" goals, *CI*, viewed by heads at the UChicago Press journals division as "the most difficult journal that [they] have ever published," was, almost from

its inception, the foremost journal of theory in the world. “The ‘stars’ in philosophy, criticism, art history, and music” sent *CI* their work because of “the scrupulous attention paid to their writing,” the lifeblood in a publish-or-perish system.<sup>xxv</sup> (Figure 4. Financial Sheet – tabulating sales, from 1974 to project 1978). Subscriptions to *CI* started at 4,732 in 1974, jumping to 49,772 in 1975; by 1978, they were at an estimated 72,000.<sup>xxvi</sup> This precipitous surge indicates a pattern: many early to mid-career humanists, entering their profession during the post-1973, post-Golden Age of Higher Education, sought theory as cultural capitalization, as self-packaging, as crucial for proliferating signs, accruing evidence, of just how modern, how important, one’s penetrating interpretations of phenomena were—a key for prospering as a sophisticated member of the academic humanist Left. Being market-cushioned—university-supported, though this was a university gradually entangled with neoliberal rationalities—*CI* (and other theory journals) opened a hypercompetitive intellectual space not wholly dictated by post-sixties market forces, a space where interpretive expectations and protocols that once matched the moment of welfare state capitalism now matched the new anti-foundationalist capitalist disposition.

*Critical Inquiry* for instance published papers presented at the first ever session of the annual meeting of the Modern Language Association devoted to philosophical approaches to literature. Contributors to this 1976 session, “The Limits of Pluralism,” included deconstructionist J. Hillis Miller and Humean literary historian and critic M. H. Abrams. Part of a larger post-sixties political wave that crested with the appearance of new “social movements” in the second half of the 1970s—feminist, homosexual, ecological, and anti-nuclear—the limits of (interpretive) pluralism debate in *MLA/CI* indexed not only the fracturing of the façade of “consensus” in America. The *MLA/CI* debate was implicated in the changing neoliberal-modulated character of critique, as

contributors' anti-foundationalist pluralisms transmuted the different and discordant voices seeking participation in public life into different and discordant voices in theory.

By the early-1980s and amidst the Reagan Revolutionary years, University administrations placed budgets under ever more increasing scrutiny and sought to decrease operating costs, calling on staff to justify expenses. Dovetailing with a new spirit of capitalism and engaged in its broader splintering trends, theory journals—like the epistemic theoretical enterprise in general—ostensibly operated on meritocratic principles, not only serving as paths for career advancement, with rewards based on talent, effort, and achievement, but also giving prestige to a university decreasing its (financial) support. An all-round faculty hiring freeze at UChicago went into effect by mid-decade, while proposed cuts by the journals division were fiercely resisted; the *CI* editorial team viewed potential cuts as potentially leading to the “destr[uction of] the very thing that has made *Critical Inquiry* the leading critical journal in the humanities.”<sup>xxvii</sup> Nonetheless, though its circulation by issue was in a steady decline (the contemporary situation of most scholarly journals), *CI* continued to publish and promote high-tech theory, those anti-foundational artistic-cultural critiques that undid ties that bind, a communal enterprise that further freed *and* prohibited specific interpretive possibilities.<sup>xxviii</sup>

The most innovative, hyper-modernizing segment of the American humanist professoriate was willing to oblige, having less time for reformist efforts and thereby less time to challenge the market forces that encouraged and reinforced their own separation from the public sphere. Periodically issued articles in middlebrow publications like *Newsweek* and *Time* began to lend credence to the Right's view of university culture as advancing (post-)Sixties-inspired destructive aims. To be fair, it must have been difficult to see the forest for the trees, as the mantra “publish or perish” terrifyingly turned into “publish *and* perish”; contingent faculty, to an extent correctly,

saw publication in theory journals as a path to success—that is, fabled tenure-track positions. Why spend precious hours fighting for the public good? What’s more, there was also the matter that theorists’ epistemological commitments often precluded definitive solutions and actionable agendas.

Others offered a less charitable reading of the fashionably anti-foundational theoretic endeavor: Camille Paglia, in the late 1980s, characterized the kinds of “conferences [on Theory], used as administrative marketing tools by colleges and universities,” as producing “a diversion of professional energy away from study and toward performance, networking, advertising, cruising, hustling, glad-handing, back-scratching, chitchat, groupthink.”<sup>xxxix</sup> Though starting in the theory-based discipline of literary study, theory became, according to a medley of critical voices, essential to the most superficial aspects of academic humanist enterprise. To be a theorist was, it seemed to them, to be a careerist. Even without adopting this unsympathetic position, neoliberal capitalism—by discovering a new energy and vehicle in theory, by cultivating theoretical pursuits among “professional intellectuals”—disarmed critique, recuperating some of the oppositional themes articulated in the late 1960s.

(Figure 5. *Critical Inquiry*. The Politics of Interpretation. Volume 9, Number 1) Consider the essays that comprised the 1982 special issue, “The Politics of Interpretation,” first presented as lectures in the fall of 1981 at UChicago.<sup>xxx</sup> These essays reflected the post-sixties’ diversification of higher education and the shattering of assumptions about harmony and meaning rooted in white, male and heteronormative privilege—that is, “consensus.” They also registered the palpable tension between the interpretive opportunities that theory as a cognitive good presented and foreclosed. “The general goal of this issue,” editor W. J. T. Mitchell explained, is “to make the observation that there is a political bias in some interpretive practice the occasion for starting rather

than ending a discussion.”<sup>xxxii</sup> Two examples of the interpretive labor: (First) Literary critic Wayne C. Booth, by way of Mikhail Bakhtin’s dialogical criticism and feminist criticism, considered how “any kind of ideological criticism *must* struggle” with “the kings” (major intellectual figures) of the past<sup>xxxiii</sup>; (Second) philosopher Stephen Toulmin argued that all “scientific explanations and critical readings start from, embody, and imply some interpretive standpoint, conceptual framework, or theoretical perspective.”<sup>xxxiii</sup> For contributors, theory was an inter- or cross-disciplinary artistic critique of culture that unveiled hidden signs. “[T]he articulation[s],” Mitchell wrote, “of a positive sense of the politics of interpretation” in contributions means not simply detecting “bias, prejudice, and unprincipled manipulation,” but also formulating “a conception of interpretation as the liberation of suppressed or forgotten meanings, or as the envisioning of new meanings which may give direction to social change.”<sup>xxxiv</sup> Here, innovative meanings—new imaginative analyses of the assumed ties that bind, of common aims, identities, and principles—*could* orient social transformation. And yet, these theoretical texts were not—and not intended to be—social programs or advocations of large-scale changes; rather, they were, when compared to Old Left-style political agendas, freed forms of *intellectual* oppositionalism, reading practices and procedures that offered new possibilities in and which echoed the post-sixties fractured America.

When the 1970s slid into the 1980s, the anti-foundational epistemic enterprise’s ever-unfurling subversive tasks to identify and practice a politics of interpretation intersected with the post-Golden Age emphasis of “interdisciplinarity.” Interdisciplinarity became not simply an asset for members of the academic humanist Left, especially those interested in working beyond the confines of their disciplinary or specialized foci, a way to advance their careers via innovative scholarship (that is, the cognitive goods of theory). Mirroring the new, post-Fordist, economy, which dispersed manufacturing away from “home” to newly industrializing countries,

interdisciplinarity became a virtue promoted (and soon a demand issued) by economizing administrators, a managerial tactic to extract more from faculty while giving them less and less. And while instigating dialogue and debate between disciplinary silos by distributing speculative systems built around language, reading, or gender, such as structuralism, deconstruction, and feminism, theory journals became oriented to the production and consumption of the transformed character of critique: intellectual work driven by the “new spirit of capitalism.” Publications’ content certainly mattered—specific theories affected different fields and disciplines—but the overall goal was to develop and deploy theory to liberate subjects from ties that bound. Freed from a disciplinary home, theory and its interpretive possibilities seemed limitless and boundless, as long as said theory did not claim access to a foundation, ground, or essence.

For example: *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, established in 1975, stressed its stance not to *conserve* but to *subvert* traditions, to generate interdisciplinary knowledge about women. The journal quickly positioned itself at the vanguard of new (modern) directions in feminist scholarship—*Signs*’ title denotes how it “points,” not necessarily establishes, knowledge freed from a field or discipline. The very title of the journal, in fact, indicates the free-floating, anti-essentialist/anti-foundational nature of the interpretive approaches it promoted. Discovering a dynamism in Feminist Theory, capitalism thus recaptured the feminist challenges of the late 1960s and early 1970s, disarming its social critique, thereby regaining the initiative. Nevertheless, the culturally progressive nature of the theoretical enterprise, for example its interdisciplinarity, as Eric Hayot has noted,

affected not only literature departments but units across the humanities and social sciences as well, changing patterns and practices of teaching across the schools, colleges, and programs.

Theory also affected the structure of the university itself, not only within departments, but across them: most programs in ethnic studies, women's or gender or queer studies, or science and technology studies originate in the Theory era of the 1980s and 1990s, and owe something to its influences.<sup>xxxv</sup>

In other words, while theory cooperated with capitalism, this collaboration had beneficial intellectual effects, especially those enjoyed and learned by the future professional managerial class member in such courses and programs. Entangled with the neoliberal ethos and disposition as it was, theory as a cognitive good unlocked the initiated to latent multiplicity of meanings, identity, and culture; at the same time, the anti-foundational endeavor banned any permanent interpretive supremacy. Disciplinary rivalries, as a consequence, lost a good deal of their rationale, although this also meant that no discipline could claim the privilege of contact with the truth.

### **The Business of Theory**

The “new spirit of capitalism” animated university presses in the post-Golden Age of American Higher Education as well. These market-cushioned venues *in toto* helped form a collective theoretical enterprise, one that foregrounded the artistic critique of culture, with synergies between organs constructing a complex and multifaceted network for the elaboration and diffusion of theoretical cognitive goods. While the translated writings of luminaries of French Theory—Jacques Derrida et al.—often appeared in the pages of theory journals, head editors of not only such venues but new books series worked in concert with one another to foster this epistemic theoretical initiative and establish standards of theory for theoretical communities. For instance: In an October 16, 1980 letter to Tom Mitchell, Lindsay Waters, Editor-in-Chief of the wildly successful Theory and History of Literature (THL) book series, established in 1977 at the



University of Minnesota, expressed his interest in joining “the Pantheon” at *Critical Inquiry*—that is, their “Editorial Board.”<sup>xxxvi</sup> Waters, implying the creative nature of circulating theory at *CI*, asked: “Is [the condition for joining “the Pantheon”] something you can quantify or is the only requirement that I write something like [M .H. Abrams’ foundational] *The Mirror and the Lamp*?”<sup>xxxvii</sup> Coyly, Tom Mitchell, in his September 29 1980 response to Waters, responded: “[T]he series on *Theory and History* looks wonderful....Keep up the fine work.”<sup>xxxviii</sup> The informal network of institutionalized theory-supporters grew, even if, despite the interdisciplinarity such supporters espoused, they in fact still hewed close to traditional disciplinary boundaries and definitions.

Waters and the THL series (like many theory journals) were nonetheless swept up in the constellation of forces during the second half of the seventies and then during the Reagan Revolution that strengthened neoliberal-adjusted commerce in theory. But Waters’ career as an editor was not his first choice. A Midwesterner who earned a Ph.D. from the Department of Romance Languages and Literatures at UChicago in 1976, he arrived at the UMinn Press when new programs, such as Afro-American studies, American Indian studies, Chicano studies, and Women’s studies, were founded in response to the diversification of the university’s student and faculty populations. This post-Golden Age, post-“consensus” period also saw “the bottom f[a]ll out of the market for scholarly books.”<sup>xxxix</sup> Where others saw catastrophe, Waters saw opportunity, telling Jochen Schulte-Sasse and Wlad Godzich, his co-conspirators at UMinn Press (and faculty in literature at the University), that he wanted to provide access to innovative ideas emerging from Europe not finding their way into the U.S. publishing mainstream. Waters hoped, firstly, to publish English translations of texts by prominent French and German philosophers and literary critics.

Waters, Schulte-Sasse, and Godzich founded the aforementioned THL series, which, in a manner similar to and in symbiotic relation with theory journals, extended the post-sixties decade-long shift in the Left's intellectual center of gravity to the academy by appealing to the expanding slice of the academy interested in theory (formalized artistic critiques of culture). By directing and cultivating the professional desire and need for theoretical cognitive goods—analogue to neoliberals' utilization of the principle of market segmentation—, the THL series became a prime example of a tension at the heart of the shared anti-foundational theoretical enterprise: the pull between the commodification of theory in the post-academic revolutionary age, a commodification that involved the exploitation of the increasing pressure among academic humanists to publish more and more prestigious publications, and the exhilaration at the rigorous and diverse interpretive opportunities theory presented. Whether disseminating translated or new works oriented toward the blossoming theoretical enterprise—texts came to include those by Americans inspired by European models—the THL's vision was also *interdisciplinary*; it was based around critical method and perspective rather than established scholarly disciplines and intended to meet the desires and needs of a sophisticated and ever-changing academic Left.

Therefore, as other organs of theory, the THL series' anti-foundational intellectual scope and the pragmatic “consumerist” model engaged Waters and company. However unintentionally, considering the editorial team's and their authors' Leftist commitments (each practiced a variety of “cultural politics” in their dissertations), the THL series worked hand-in-glove with the “new spirit of capitalism.” This was the case not simply because the THL series amplified the transgressive New Leftist-influenced ferment in the academy, which was simultaneously a refusal of an extra-university politics that nourished a larger intellectual shift away from discussions of massive social changes to questions of “culture.” This was also because the THL series aimed,

with its almost conveyor-like belt of exquisitely complex (and compelling) cognitive goods, to satisfy the insatiable market for theory, itself driven by the professional and intellectually legitimate demands of the “post-Golden Age,” that instigated interdisciplinary conversations between members of humanities and social sciences disciplines as well as intervened into debates and issues. The very design of the THL series, with its sparse uniformity, became an emblem displayed on countless academic humanists’ bookshelves, a mark of the depth of one’s (post)modernizing and innovativeness, a sign of the buying and selling of theory on the intellectual market, albeit a hybrid market cushioned from the brutal neoliberal capitalist rationalities slowly permeating university life and America more generally.

Themselves underwriting the wider epistemic theoretical enterprise, partisans in the “Theory wars” of the 1970s and early 1980s—whether Derrideans, Foucauldians, Althusserians, and so on engaged in mortal combat (or at least a struggle for top billings at the annual meeting of the Modern Language Association)—also procured the cognitive goods of THL texts in order to use them as arms to protect or expand intellectual fiefdoms. Now, the vast majority of these texts—assembled in the Midwest and then imposed upon the rest of the academic world—presupposed a “grand narrative,” even if only to critique such fantastical tales. And these theoretical cognitive goods, by subverting “grand narratives” of political and scientific progress, obliquely critiqued the liberal welfare national security state, and with it the big government programs and centralizing state apparatuses subsidizing educational institutions that employed humanistic curricula to construct national and normalizing models of identity. In other words, the THL series (and other organs of theory) helped create an anti-foundational discursive world in which political considerations moved from issues of comprehensive organization and shared social visions called for by liberal and radical critiques of the 1960s and the 1970s to more limited and parochial perspectives. While

foreclosing comprehensive assessments or diagnoses of social experience, Leftist opposition became textual, in a sense personal and individual.

(Figure 6. *The Postmodern Condition*) The first twenty or so publications in the THL series were, arguably, the most influential, but all intersected in these larger trends, registering the tension at work in the academic humanist Left's euphoria for anti-foundational theoretical cognitive goods. Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*, a 1979 essay (originally delivered as a lecture in Quebec) that became a celebrated THL text in 1984, foregrounded the "incredulity toward metanarratives," a post-Enlightenment and post-Marxist doubt instilled by technological advances, that many readers across the North Atlantic were experiencing.<sup>xl</sup> Lyotard argues that, instead of becoming *Subjects* through grand narratives of traditional myths and religions or their Enlightenment alternatives—those visions of liberal progress, scientific rationality, and the possibility of absolute freedom—human beings become *subjects* only through "local" (versus earlier "universal") constructions of an interpretative community's particular "story" of identity and difference. For Lyotard (and his innovative followers), the multiplicity of communities of meaning in and through which subjects make histories thus open space for individuals and groups marginalized by the telling of metanarratives. In this fragmented postmodern world, critics of metanarratives argued, broad horizontal solidarity must necessarily vanish, and the march of historical progress revealed as a dangerous illusion, as it masked dangerous impulses that, in the past, had led to the Gulag and Death camp.

As much a touchstone for postmodernists as a whetstone for theorists eager to sharpen their own ideas in the 1980s, Lyotard's text also became a target.<sup>xli</sup> German philosopher Manfred Frank, in 1988, argued that Lyotard fell prey to a performative contradiction: he depended on sharing with readers a form of rationality that he aimed to deny; he presumed but lacked an intersubjective plan

characterized by a shared linguistic system to communicate his message. Still, this Frankfurt School critique failed to catch on in America, where “[t]he writers, critics, and philosophers who dominated academic discussion in the Federal Republic [West Germany] were more or less ignored in America, and vice versa.<sup>xlii</sup> Even if it became a key moment in the debate that polarized modernist and postmodernist thinkers, Lyotard’s cognitive good, his theory of narrative meaning, was, by the 1990s, joined by Richard Rorty’s *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Paul Ricoeur’s *Time and Narrative*, and other theoretical texts—all to an extent espousing (and liberating) free-floating interpretive approaches detached from a transcendental ground or source, contributing to suspicion of metanarratives. (Figure 7. Not all were impressed: “In short the discussion is obscure, the problem is old, and the solution trite.” -- Ian Hacking, Referee’s report)

Other THL texts (often overtly) underwrote this emancipatory intellectual swing to micronarratives. In 1982, Lindsay Waters threw his support behind the translation of Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément’s *La Jeune Née*, published in France in 1975, and reflecting the cultural milieu of Paris at that time. (Figure 8 THL internal memo). The translation of *La Jeune Née* into English was years in the making) The title *La Jeune Née* has three intertwined meanings, each subverting metanarratives rooted in white, male heteronormativity, whether Hegelian/Marxist or Liberal used by the welfare national security state: (1) “newly-born woman” (“Là je une nais”); (2) a pun suggesting a feminine writing outlaw (“La Gente”); (3) and a non-existing feminine subject (“la je n’est”). Cixous and Clément’s thesis stages these multiple and poetically-inflected meanings: if women are to be subjects in and of history, they must write themselves into history, for entering history requires subjects speaking for themselves—that is, they must write their own story. The struggle for newly-born women, Cixous and Clément maintain, is that the prevailing culture is masculine, and because women cannot produce stories *ex*

*nihilo*, women must draw on masculine culture. Despite doing so and despite taking up the feminine subject positions constructed by men, innovative women dissolve the privileging of the phallus and the masculine in culture, literature, and language, inevitably telling their own stories and thereby charting a *different* history. This “cultural” story of newly-born women as diverse subjects of history will emerge, not through social associations, solidarity, or by virtue of a biological essentialism, but through writing (texts). Clément, for example, discusses women inscribed as hysterics and sorceresses in Freud’s, Michelet’s, and Flaubert’s texts; Cixous hopes to identify the heroic female in fiction, but finds only male heroes.

(Figure 9. Reader’s Report to Lindsay Waters, July 18, 1982). Cixous and Clément had established names in the theory journals, with essays translated and published in *Signs* and *Diacritics*, and the THL series’ *Newly Born Woman* went through several reprintings, with over 4000 copies sold from 1986 to 1989. However, while Cixous-Clément’s “cultural” story of the always-already newly-born women—that is, the never-ending discovery/invention of women from out of masculine culture and conventions—dissolved ties that bound normalizing (and oppressive) models of identity, the encouragement to employ vocabularies of structuralism, deconstruction, and Lacanian psychoanalysis in order to construct *subjects* through ever-proliferating “stories” of identity and difference made it difficult to identify any “concrete” political program. Cixous-Clément’s book was hugely successful in the academy, but a THL memo cannily recognized this theory’s inward-facing character: “The Cixous-Clément book...is—our referees argue—a very strong book, one of the strongest intellectual analyses of the feminist position in post-War France since Simone de Beauvoir’s *Second Sex* (1949).” “Nonetheless,” the memo continued, “this...is unlikely to have an immense impact beyond the academy.”<sup>xliii</sup> *Newly Born Woman*, the THL report seemed to acknowledge, was a cognitive good that underwrote—and helped normalize—

incredulity towards masculine metanarratives of, for example, human emancipation. Though unlocking anti-foundational feminist interpretive possibilities, Cixous-Clément's book also helped broaden the rift between inside and outside the American academy.

### **Marketing Theory**

Intellectuals...suffer from their inability to alter the course of events. But they underestimate their influence. In a long-term sense, politicians are the disciples of scholars and writers. — Raymond Aron

The constantly modernizing and micronarrativizing professional academic Left was inadvertently entangled with the American university's full-on embrace of the neoliberal ethos and disposition while working under and protected by the aegis of theory elsewhere as well. Consider the School of Criticism and Theory (SCT), founded in 1976 at the University of California-Irvine. (Figure 10 and 11. Photos of a SCT gathering/party) Like theory journals, in that they were initially beneficiaries of government largesse, in this case California state funds and a large federal government grant, the SCT was designed as a place for disinterested considerations of theory. "In the last decade or so," a SCT pamphlet read, "the recent variety of theory has not been situated, investigated, and assessed. Nor have the competitive relations among all the theoretical approaches been clearly enunciated since a continuing forum for dialogue does not exist. The School was created to provide such a forum."<sup>xliv</sup> The SCT, which due to California state budget cuts became peripatetic in the early 1980s (thereafter attached to private universities, such as Northwestern and Cornell), became an elite, protective, and ostensibly meritocratic space for not only careerist pursuits of the theoretic mode of existence, but also learning (and liberating) the most advanced

free-floating interpretive techniques of immaterial oppositionalism by way of producing “deep” readings of society, language, and other grand concepts. Partially cushioned from the capitalistic tendencies shaping tertiary education, the SCT remained to a large degree a “stable” site for living in and with theory, a safe space to rigorously enjoy theoretical cognitive goods.

For disciples at the SCT or elsewhere, the goal was cultural: dispelling the dangerous fantasy, conjured by an array of illusionists—certain favored races, males, property owners, the church, the literate, natives of the northern hemisphere—, that civilization was civilized. For some Baby Boomer academics, colleagues’ abandonment of Old Left commitments was due to the opium of the intellectuals, whether ingested at the SCT or not. (Figure 12. “Irvine Super-Critick,” written by graduate students in honor of Murray Krieger at the School of Criticism and Theory during the late 1970s.) In 1988, Lindsay Waters, summarizing Richard Rorty’s position, which compared the opium to the superficial impression of absolute knowledge/insight that it generates: “Theory is to the academy what crack cocaine is to the ghetto: it gets you high real fast. You feel like the King of the World up there on your throne, taking it all in. And then you crash. It makes you feel like you understand everything, if only for a moment, and the hunger for that feeling is insatiable. In the end, theory, like crack, is nihilistic.”<sup>xlv</sup> Other than satisfying a craving, theory, for Rorty, was intellectually and politically destructive. There were sympathetic outside observers of the SCT; in 1978, the *Los Angeles Times* portrayed the school as a version of Studio 54. Admission was “as zealously sought and jealously coveted by young academicians as boogie space at the New York nightclub is by marginal celebrities” (Morrison 4). If a minor scholar used the right dance moves, they might be able to make their way beyond the velvet rope, parlaying an SCT appearance in the previously “off-limits” area and among theory stars into a tenure-track job partly devoted to theory or major articles in a theory journal. Becoming a loyal customer/devotee of theoretical cognitive



goods at the SCT—that is, attending and learning theory at the SCT—was, the *L.A. Times* reported, a pilgrimage as well, because “literati returned each year to tango with ‘theoretical’ partners.” Nonetheless, for skeptical observers, advanced humanists’ profiting from the goings-on at the SCT also made the school embody the American entrepreneurial spirit in the empire of theory.<sup>xlvi</sup>

This entrepreneurial attitude can be seen in the ways that theorists invested their *selves* at the SCT and other sites and through other organs of the theoretical enterprise during the 1980s and 1990s. While the welfare national security state collapsed, and along with it the liberal humanistic curricula used to construct normalizing models of identity, the anti-foundational theorist became a neoliberal entrepreneur of themselves, their own producer, the source of their worth, of their own cultural capital. Willing to astonish, keen on gaining attention because of *who they are* and how they stage *who they are*, theorists’ neoliberal self-fashioning almost ran on post-Golden Age of Higher Education fumes as much as on media that projected an image of the postmodern university’s advanced guard as “tenured radicals.” While theorists blurred the difference between their personal magnetism and their merited intellectual power—a mix that itself helped to liberate interpretive potential—fantastic salary raises often followed the media splash one could make. In a sense, theorists became theoretical cognitive goods as well, a product that increasing numbers of advanced humanists felt deeply attached to and ownership of.

Take, as Martin Jay noted, the inventiveness and artistry of Stanley Fish, who became known as “Stanley Fish,” a privileged, shameless academic who performed increasingly like Morris Zapp, David Lodge’s fictional character, originally based on Fish himself, or consider Frank Lentricchia’s and D.A. Miller’s “beefcake” cover shots for their books, which occasioned an “earnest comparative discussion in *Critical Inquiry*.” A host of other star theorists joined Fish, Lentricchia, and Miller. Perhaps *because* of the extraordinarily exciting and explosive artist-

cultural critiques—the anti-foundational theoretical cognitive goods—they produced, and the dynamic collapse of the difference between “author” and said “good,” there was also “the clear dominance of women among” the “recent spate of academic performance artists” (Jay 138-39). Jay names a few of the obvious candidates: Judith Butler, Jane Gallop, Avital Ronell, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.” “Each,” he continues,

has an identifiable style: Butler’s streetwise, tough girl dyke, Gallop’s sexual predator, wearing her notorious skirt composed of men’s ties, Ronell’s exaggeratedly polite punk, Sedgwick’s straight woman writing about gay sexuality and ‘coming out of the closet’ about her weight problem and love for spanking, and Spivak’s Third World Woman (via Paris) with a score to settle. Each...has successfully disrupted the assumptions of traditional academic discourse.<sup>xlvii</sup>

Beyond disrupting the norms of academic discourse, feminist theorists, differently deconstructing false gender binaries and subverting heteronormativity, undeniably had progressive cultural effects that their students, texts, and “brand(ed) name” disseminated outside the university. The solidifying and intensifying public image and public performances of these innovative theoretical discourses also subsidized the postmodern turn, becoming models for aspiring theorists and ambitious humanists: it was the entrepreneurial way, or the highway; it was the buying, selling, and trading of theoretical cognitive goods, or interpretive traditionalism and conservatism.

### **From Theory Wars to (the Theater of the) Culture Wars**

All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his

relations with his kind. — Karl Marx and Friedrich  
Engels

During the first half of the 1990s, when cheerleaders cast capitalism as just and right, as democratic and practical, as the only option in the post-Soviet world, the anti-academic polemic became a politically-effective mode of writing in its own right: the (relatively insular) theory wars of the 1970s and early 1980s were replaced by (the very public battles of) the culture wars of the late 1980s and 1990s, with the university becoming a “theater” where the “new spirit of capitalism” unrelentingly moved intellectual focus in and outside higher education away from fundamental transformations in capitalism. Certainly, top academic Leftist academic humanists continued to expend “political” energy on high-tech theory, but this group’s devotion to theoretical cognitive goods, to formalized anti-foundational artistic-cultural critiques laden with complex vocabularies and philosophical speculation, deeply shaped the reputation of theory, often providing evidence, even if distorted and in some cases unjustified, for the Right’s anti-academic public-relation offensive at the “university” in the early 1990s.

Theory, notwithstanding its transgressive effects and its enmeshment with the professional-intellectual practices and demands of neoliberal-modulated university, ironically even threatened to become a hyper-specialized good sealed off from the uninitiated. Robert Merrill, Professor of English at the University of Nevada, in a July 22, 1991 letter to *Critical Inquiry* about its publication in Summer 1991 of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s “Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl,” wrote: “Recent theory is notorious for the jargon in which it is written, but this piece reads like an unintended parody. Would the editors accept this sort of stuff in a freshman writing course?” “Even if this essay,” Merrill protested, “were imposing as an argument, I think it would still be all but unreadable. In one essay Sedgwick manages to employ the following: ‘compaction’

(p. 821), ‘spectacularized,’...‘abstentation’ (pp. 828, 829, 832),’...‘specularized’ (p. 833), ‘policial’ (p. 834), and ‘pseudo-distantiating (p. 835).’<sup>xlvi</sup>

But in her 1991 text on Austen, Sedgwick, though her language challenging and argument admittedly a bit circuitous, makes a compelling case: “[T]aking [Austen’s] *Sense and Sensibility* as my example,” Sedgwick writes, “the dropping out of sight of the autoerotic term is...part of what falsely naturalizes the heterosexist imposition of these book, disguising both the rich, conflictual erotic complication of a homoerotic matrix not yet crystalized in terms of ‘sexual identity,’ and the violence of heterosexist definition finally carved out of these plots.”<sup>xl</sup> Sedgwick, here, argues that scientific, therapeutic, institutional, and narrative discourses’ erasure of masturbation from readings of bedroom scenes Austen’s text—in particular a scene with sisters Elinor and Marianne Dashwood—establishes a heteronormative framework from which to then read the entire text. The framework not only disguises the “unwavering but difficult love of” Elinor for Marianne, but also Marianne’s “erotic identity,” an identity is neither “a same-sex-loving one or a cross-sex loving one..., but rather the one that today no longer exists *as* an identity: that of the masturbating girl.”<sup>l</sup> And for Sedgwick, in fact, the “masturbating girl,” “the female figure of the love that keeps forgetting”—because its repressed—“its name,” is of important intellectual and cultural value.<sup>li</sup>

Merrill’s 1991 comments in *Critical Inquiry*—which, it should be noted, were made from the subject position of a white male professor at a mid-tier public university in the American West—reflected the growing frustration in the reception of theory throughout the second half of the 1980s. During this time, liberal humanists pushed back against the supposed needless jargon of theory: historicizing reading habits, reintroducing the significance of context and authorial intention, questioning the conditions of texts’ reception and influence—all were again deemed important

tasks for literary studies rather than catering to the tastes of specialist critics. But, as Gerald Graff suggested, even these authors, for professional as much as intellectual pressures, seemed more focused on demonstrating their “theoretical agility” than on helping readers understand.<sup>lii</sup>

To be sure, a slew of theorists attempted to put their cognitive goods in conversation with politics and (the) history (outside texts). Fredric Jameson’s *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991)—a number of chapters published in theory journals—was, in Rorty’s estimation, a “brilliant book.” But Jameson’s assessment of postmodern mass-culture from a Marxist perspective left readers with “views on practically everything except what needs to be [politically] done.”<sup>liii</sup> Even scholars sympathetic to post-“consensus” demographic and curricula changes in American higher education found theory’s opacity, its abstruseness, politically damaging. For example: In a much-cited *New Republic* essay, Martha Nussbaum would argue (1999) that the emancipation value of Judith Butler’s jargon and positions was *nil*. For Nussbaum, Butler’s work resulted in a hip “quietism” among a select group of academics whose ostensibly subversive acts of parody remained sequestered from issues of freedom in the public arena.<sup>liv</sup> By functioning on a “level of abstraction,” theory thus continued to make it challenging for adherents to initiate any precise political initiative. Such an enterprise also required interacting with state apparatuses that had funded postwar educational institutions that constructed normalizing models of identity—precisely the (often-implied) target of many theorists’ abstract oppositionalist work, whether they drew from Derrida’s or Foucault’s or Lacan’s anti-foundational subversions of the Liberal subject.<sup>lv</sup>

For the libertarian-conservative Right, theory was shorthand in the 1990s for the academic Left’s advancing (post-)Sixties-inspired destructions of rationality, capitalism, Western culture, and intellectual life. But, while “left academe,” as Michael Bérubé observes, “appeared to have

been hit out of nowhere by a flurry of attacks in 1990-91”—a December 24, 1990 article and then a April 22, 1991 column in *Newsweek* portrayed academics as the “Thought Police and a greater threat than Saddam Hussein”—“the truth is that the right’s public-relations offensive [against the university] has been years in the making.”<sup>lvi</sup> The Right (Irving Kristol, William Buckley, and so on) had in fact formed an early consensus in the 1960s, pushed in the 1970s in middlebrow magazines and newspapers, that the post-sixties university led to the decline of (mono)culture.<sup>lvii</sup> In a sense, this view was accurate, in that the academic Left, the academic humanities’ most sophisticated members, used theory as a cognitive good in the 1980s and 1990s to contribute to the broader subversion of the ties that bound white, male, heteronormative models of identity, a very conservative model indeed. Interwoven with the neoliberal policies taken up during the Reagan Revolution, the Right’s view of the culturally deleterious effects of the theoretical enterprise received “official” support in the late 1970s, with the establishment of the conservative funded Institute for Education Affairs (1978) and the Coalition for Campus Democracy. The organization of the Right’s forces on and off campuses built upon conservative backlash against “The Sixties,” working its way into more popular venues by the 1980s. That by 1990 and for almost a quarter century, generalist forums for academic humanist work had slowly disappeared—*Partisan Review*, the *American Scholar*, the *New Republic* basically stopped covering post-Golden Age academic developments—only helped the Right create space for a “common sense,” non-specialist assessment that theoretically-inclined academic humanists’ unmasking of literature, opera, and philosophy as a grand illusion masterminded by great white males had corrupted the university’s mission.<sup>lviii</sup>

So, when the well-funded and orderly Right, newly emboldened by Francis Fukuyama’s declarations of the (American) capitalist order’s worldwide triumph, launched post-Cold War

attacks on “the university,” attacks that cast it as symbol of intellectual corruption (by French thought or affirmative action or “political correctness” or canon revision or speech codes), these anti-academic polemics joined hands with theorists’ artistic-cultural critiques in a corporate labor to demolish and discredit the liberal welfare state and the educational institutions it once supported. In other words, theorists’ anti-foundational deconstructions of the Liberal, individualist, (American) capitalist “civilization” prepared to receive them as citizens uncannily intersected with the Right’s hyper-capitalist goals to dismantle public education, television, and arts funding. An array of examples can demonstrate this political convergence and the “materialist bad” that the theoretical epistemic enterprise furthered.

Many theorists in America, for instance, praised Jacques Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* (1993), derived from a lecture given at the University of California-Riverside for the colloquium “Whither Marxism?,” as an “untimely meditation,” because it was published after the fall of the Soviet Union and Fukuyama’s declarations. In *Specters*, Derrida offered readers a “new international,” a group that responded to the new geo-political (read: post-Soviet) situation and which was “without status...without coordination, without party, without country, without national community, without co-citizenship, without common belonging to a class.”<sup>lix</sup> Such a comfortably cosmopolitan collection of engaged, “identity-less” intellectuals was almost a parody of Lodge’s satire of theorists’ “jet-propelled peregrinations” and the global campus in *Small World* (1984). In Derrida’s text, theory was summoned—not to fulfill civic obligations or pursue any specific reformist (or even revolutionary) measures for the benefit of citizens—but to “deconstruct” the hierarchy between “political” and “non-political” in order to subvert any notion of sovereignty, individual, state, or otherwise. A Derridean Left in America was left without a concrete vision, and one that did not fundamentally oppose neoliberalism but was in some way aiding and abetting the liberatory

solvent it poured over social bonds that began to dissolve in the late 1960s. In Daniel T. O'Hara's assessment, Derrida, in *Specters*,

strips Marx of his pugnacious spirit, his terror, his Robespierre tendencies. Marx, after Derrida, is not threatening specter still haunting the future. He is, at best, at most, another childhood bogeyman of the Cold War starting to fade away, with the coming dawn of the new millennium. Derrida dissolves away all the aspects of Marx and his heritage—violent revolution, the dictatorship of the proletariat, wholesale class warfare—that led to Lenin and Stalin and Mao, as well as to the Gulags, reeducation camps, internal exile, and the slaughter of millions. Marx knew—and Derrida blots out this knowledge—that any systemic change in the ownership of the means of material and intellectual production must mean a form of war, most likely the worst and bloodiest form. But Derrida is committed to the deconstruction of ownership, of the proper, of possession, of property, in every sense. This is after all, what Derrida thinks deconstruction is.<sup>lx</sup>

Meanwhile, post-structuralists' defeat of academic Marxism in the 1990s—that is, the former's successful casting of the latter as foundationalists and therefore unable to deliver, produce, or properly consume cognitive goods—led academic Marxists to rename themselves as “materialists,” a semantic move that could not halt anti-capitalist forces within the university.

Moreover, various tempests in academic teapots in the late 1980s and 1990s contributed to the Right's effective use of theory as an emblem of mass cultural destruction, ironically used to justify attacks in the name of an unregulated free market that further gutted university support. All this, as much as theorists' jargon, careerism, *and* unleashing of rigorous and liberating anti-foundational interpretive options—all effects of being entangled with a neoliberal-oriented though still market-



cushioned professional-intellectual life—helped create the “university” as site of culture war battles. Regardless, what’s certain was that, compared to the Right, the academic humanist Left was, by the 1990s, disorganized and diverse, in principle opposed as they were to monolithic blocs.

While the “new spirit of capitalism” produces and plies pincers that shatter the “ties that bind,” it remains uncertain if, and if so how, theorists can, today, not simply throw a wrench into the motor of and vehicles for the post-Fordist ethos and disposition of capitalism, but reevaluate their own engagement in capitalism, how capitalism stirs and stimulates their work. Unquestionably, euphoric attachment to the idea and image of theory as a “pure” cognitive good, a reasoning machine without nuts and bolts, is unsustainable. But the threshold at which the practice of theory transforms into either abstract oppositionalism, reinforcing the neglect of the material conditions of the university and the communities it once robustly supported, or concrete action needs to be determined still. To identify that threshold necessitates theoretical consideration, a hard look at our complicity with professional protocols and intellectual procedures released during the “Age of Theory.” The core tension of the interpretive benefits that theory as a cognitive good offered and excluded endures.

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<sup>i</sup> Elizabeth, Bruss, *Beautiful Theories: The Spectacle of Discourse in Contemporary Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 1.

<sup>ii</sup> Gerald Graff, “What is Theory in the American Academy?,” Mieke Bal, and Inge E. Boer eds. *The Point of Theory: Practices of Cultural Analysis* (Holland; New York: Amsterdam University Press, 1994), 8.

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>iv</sup> Rens Bod, Jeroen van Dongen, Sjang L. ten Hagen, Bart Karstens, Emma Mojet, “The Flow of Cognitive Goods: A Historiographical Framework for the Study of Epistemic Transfer,” *Isis* 110:3 (2019): 488-89.

<sup>v</sup> *Ibid.*, 488.

<sup>vi</sup> For an exploration of the effects of the professional managerial class’ uses of (post-)structuralist thought, see Catherine Lui, *Virtue Hoarders: The Case Against the Professional Managerial Class* (University of Minnesota Press, 2021).

<sup>vii</sup> See Dinesh D’Souza, *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus* (New York: The Free Press, 1991). See also Christopher Newfield, *Unmaking the Public University: The Forty-Year Assault on the Middle Class* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

<sup>viii</sup> See Roger Kimball, *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990).

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- <sup>ix</sup> See Daniel Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2010).
- <sup>x</sup> In the decade or so, a number of literary scholars and critics have written on the history of critique; many have taken issue with the “prison of critique.” See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003), 150-151. More recent work that critically engages the history of critique includes: Bruce Robbins, *Criticism and Politics: A Polemical Introduction* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2022); Rita Felksi, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); and Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, “Surface Reading: An Introduction,” *Representations* 108 (2009): 1-21. For Hartmut Rosa’s thesis regarding the modern experience of social acceleration, see Hartmut Rosa, *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity*. Trans. Jonathan Trejo-Mathys (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).
- <sup>xi</sup> See Rita Felksi, *Hooked: Art and Attachment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).
- <sup>xii</sup> See Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello (*The New Spirit of Capitalism*. Verso, 2018), 41.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Boltanski and Chiapello, 186.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Bookshelves have begun to groan under the weight of books on neoliberalism. See David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Veronica Gago, *Neoliberalism from Below: Popular Pragmatics and Baroque Economics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), and Wendy Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019). For a sense of the varied approaches in the field of literary scholarship, see Jane Elliot and Gillian Harkins, “Introduction: Genres of Liberalism,” *Social Text* 31, no. 2 (2013): 1-17.
- <sup>xv</sup> Camille Paglia, “Junk Bonds and Corporate Raiders: Academe in the Hour of the Wolf,” *A Journal of Humanities and the Classics*, 1:2 (Spring, 1991): 186.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Bod *et al.*, 491.
- <sup>xvii</sup> *Ibid.*, 490-92.
- <sup>xviii</sup> *Ibid.*, 490.
- <sup>xix</sup> Christopher Lasch, *The Agony of the American Left* (New York: Vintage, 1969), 29.
- <sup>xx</sup> Boltanski and Chiapello, 167.
- <sup>xxi</sup> For an incisive historical analysis of literary studies as a “cultural technology” that emerged during the postwar period in America, see Jodi Melamed, *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).
- <sup>xxii</sup> See Christopher Jencks and David Riesman, *The Academic Revolution* (New York: Doubleday, 1968).
- <sup>xxiii</sup> See Jeffrey J. Williams, “The Rise of the Theory Journal,” *New Literary History* 40:4 (2009): 683-702.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Jean W. Sacks, Letter to W.J.T. Mitchell, 7 March 1983, Critical Inquiry Papers, The University of Chicago Library Archives, Chicago. Manuscript.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Mitchell, W. J. T., and Wayne C. Booth, Joel Snyder, Robert Streeeter, Francoise Meltzer, Robert von Hallberg. Letter to Jean Sacks. March 2 1983. Critical Inquiry Papers, The University of Chicago Library Archives, Chicago. Manuscript.
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- <sup>xxvii</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell and Wayne C. Booth, Joel Snyder, Robert Streeeter, Francoise Meltzer, Robert von Hallberg, Letter to Jean Sacks, March 2 1983, Critical Inquiry Papers, The University of Chicago Library Archives, Chicago. Manuscript.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Robert Shirrell, Letter to W.J.T. Mitchell. 16 September 1985. Critical Inquiry Papers, The University of Chicago Library Archives, Chicago. Manuscript.
- <sup>xxix</sup> Paglia, 187.
- <sup>xxx</sup> Contributors included Stanley Cavell, Julia Kristeva, Edward W. Said, Hayden White; respondents included Stanley Fish, Michael Fried, Walter Benn Michaels, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.
- <sup>xxxi</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell, “Editor’s Introduction: The Politics of Interpretation,” *Critical Inquiry* 9:1 (1982): v-vi.
- <sup>xxxii</sup> Wayne C. Booth, “Freedom of Interpretation: Bakhtin and the Challenge of Feminist Criticism,” *Critical Inquiry* 9:1 (1982): 46.
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> Stephen Toulmin, “The Construal of Reality: Criticism in Modern and Postmodern Science,” *Critical Inquiry* 9:1 (1982): 109.
- <sup>xxxiv</sup> Mitchell, “Editor’s Introduction,” vi-vii.
- <sup>xxxv</sup> Eric Hayot, 280.
- <sup>xxxvi</sup> Lindsay Waters, 16 October 1980, Letter to Tom Mitchell, Critical Inquiry Papers, The University of Chicago Library Archives, Chicago. Manuscript.
- <sup>xxxvii</sup> *Ibid.*

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- xxxviii Mitchell, Letter to Waters, Critical Inquiry Papers, The University of Chicago Library Archives, Chicago. Manuscript.
- xxxix Stanford Lehmborg and Ann M. Pflaum (The University of Minnesota 1945-2000, Minneapolis, 2001), 243, 305.
- xl Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Trans. Geoff Bennington, and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiii-xxiv.
- xli See Manfred Frank, *Die Grenzen der Verständigung: Ein Geistergespräch zwischen Lyotard und Habermas* (Suhrkamp, 1988).
- xlii Robert C. Holub, *Crossing Borders: Reception Theory, Poststructuralism, Deconstruction* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), viii.
- xliii Lindsay Waters, 11 August 1982, "For Action: Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément's *The Newly-Born Woman*. University of Minnesota Press records," The University of Minnesota Archives, Minneapolis.
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- xlvi Martin Jay, "The Academic Woman as Performance Artists," *Cultural Semantics: Keywords of Our Time* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), 139.
- xlvi Robert Merrill, 22 July 1991, Letter to W. J. T. Mitchell, Critical Inquiry Papers, The University of Chicago Library, Chicago.
- xlix Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl." *Critical Inquiry* 17:4 (1991): 826.
- <sup>1</sup> Ibid., 826-827.
- li Ibid., 837.
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- liv See Martha Nussbaum, "The Softness of Reason." *New Republic* (13 and 20 July 1992): 26-35.
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- lvi Michael Bérubé, *Public Access: Literary Theory and American Cultural Politics* (London: Verso, 1994), 63.
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- lviii Ibid, 59.
- lix Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (Verso, 1993), 254.
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