THEORY MATTERS

VINCENT B. LEITCH

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ROUTLEDGE
NEW YORK AND LONDON

Published in 2003 by
Routledge
29 West 35th Street
New York, NY 10001
www.routledge-ny.com

Published in Great Britain by
Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane
London EC4P 4EE
www.routledge.co.uk

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group.
Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.

Figures 2 and 5 appear courtesy of *Back Beat.*

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Leitch, Vincent B., date.
Theory matters / Vincent B. Leitch.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-415-96716-3 (HB : alk. paper)—ISBN 0-415-96717-1 (PB : alk. paper)
1. Criticism—History—20th century. 2. Literature, Modern—History and criticism—Theory, etc. I. Title.
PN94.L394 2003
801'.95'0904—dc21
2003007397

PREFACE

WHAT MOST CHARACTERIZES POSTMODERN CULTURE from the 1970s onwards is "disorganization," a word that suggests chaos, but in my usage means disaggregation, resembling geological formations with historical strata in disarrayed kaleidoscopic layers.[1] Neither economics nor politics nor culture today escapes this form. Recent political examples might include all the schemes implementing privatization and deregulation and the simultaneous antiquation of both the welfare state and large mainstream political parties, the latter in conjunction with the rise of numerous new social movements. Slogans depicting these phenomena are, on the political right, "small is beautiful" and, on the left, "coalition and micropolitics are best." Well-attested instances of disorganization in other domains range from the deconstruction of Western philosophy and the reconfiguration of identity theory as "multiple subject positions" in psychology to the incredulity toward metanarratives of historiography and the construal of tradition as infinite intertextuality in literary theory. Common words and phrases in the critical lexicon—difference, heteroglossia, contending interpretive communities, rhizome, polylogue, multiversity, and pastiche—all point to various kinds of disaggregation. In *Theory Matters* I argue that culture and in particular theory during postmodern times are marked by disorganization.

The progression in literary studies during recent decades from formalism to poststructuralism to cultural studies, from high theory to posttheory to cultural critique, marks a broad path of disaggregation, which to some implies the death of theory. To an earlier generation, recent theory often looks like advocacy rather than disinterested objective inquiry into poetics and the history of literature. There are a

number of "deaths" one can single out here: the death of theory as poetics and as *literary* criticism at the hands of various nonliterary tendencies (feminism, race studies, postcolonial criticism); the death of theory as objective disinterested inquiry in favor of cultural critique; the death of the theory of literature as high- or middlebrow aesthetic artifact undermined by lowbrow popular culture, media, and pulp genres; the death of theory as supplier of a professional lingua franca, a set of foundational principles and normative methods of analysis; and, most revealing, the death of theory as a coherent enterprise, field, or subfield given the recent rise of cultural studies.

In retrospect, the formalist period from the 1940s to the 1960s and the poststructuralist period from the 1970s to the 1990s appear comparatively coherent, though one can trace across these decades a line of disorganization in the fields of literary and cultural theory. It is in the 1990s, with the flowering of cultural studies, notably in the United States, that theory has entered a stage of dramatic disorganization so much so that the usual orderly "schools-and-movements" approach in depicting as well as in teaching theory no longer works. Interestingly, advocates of Birmingham cultural studies, a relatively coherent earlier project coalescing during the 1970s, complain bitterly that U.S. cultural studies has become a front for a wide range of disparate practices.[2] What most strikingly typifies this recent phase of theory disorganization is the rise of numerous discrete subfields more or less associated with cultural studies, such as media studies, science studies, subaltern studies, trauma studies, whiteness studies, fashion studies, food studies, disability studies, leisure studies, narrative studies, globalization studies, indigenous studies, border studies, urban and community studies, queer studies, visual culture studies, animal studies, and body studies. Add to this list more established fields such as film studies, American studies, gender studies, and postcolonial studies, plus indeterminate fields, for example, legal studies and cognitive studies, and you have a cursory inventory of today's cultural studies. In this way, I would argue that cultural studies is the postmodern discipline par excellence, disorganized in the extreme.

Most of the fields and subfields just enumerated have their own key terms, leading texts, research problems, major figures, archives and histories, journals, conferences, university press series, theoretical wings, and so on. Few are departmentalized or well-funded, existing in various "flexible" margins of today's *modern* university, which itself has undergone disaggregation since the 1960s. I do not dwell upon the disorganization of the "multiversity," a topic much written about in re-

cent years.[3] Suffice it to say, insofar as each subfield named above is interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary or antidisciplinary, it contributes to the postmodern disorganization of the modern bureaucratic departmentalized university.

How is theory positioned in relation to all these recent reconfigurations, particularly of cultural studies? To reiterate, each field and subfield has its own distinctive theoretical corpus. On the other hand, there exist numerous overlaps between and among fields, as, for example, the work of Michel Foucault, which finds use in philosophy, literary studies, body studies, queer theory, and more. In this connection, there is also the noteworthy rise to prominence of the "crossover text" that innovatively links multiple segments of (sub)fields. Gayatri Spivak pioneered this genre when she grafted onto deconstruction both Marxism and feminism from a Third World perspective.[4] Numerous such complex combinations are possible and everywhere in evidence. The point is the disorganization of theory is not another sad contemporary instance of death by Balkanization, but rather of expansion through combination and proliferation. It is also worth pointing out, however, that certain *theorists* regard the recent expansion of theory as a sad spectacle, implying dilution, vulgarization, loss of vigor, and death.

The new postmodern interdisciplines challenge the autonomous discipline or, more precisely, each discipline per se contains, it turns out, ineradicable elements of other disciplines. And although discrete disciplines may conveniently join like biology and chemistry, biology and chemistry themselves change in the process. Physics has mathematics, astronomy, and chemistry as both neighbors and unwanted guests. Literary studies by its very nature is entangled indissolubly with a half dozen or more disciplines from history and mythology to linguistics, anthropology, and beyond. Interdisciplinarity during postmodern times designates the unstable intermixtures of the disciplines. Where does this leave theory? If I say, "all over the place," I am sure you will at this point grasp my argument, one that I develop at greater length in chapter 12 on postmodern interdisciplinarity.

Inevitably, the question arises about whether theory, in the new era of cultural studies, isn't just one more example of late postindustrial, post-Fordist capitalist culture—flexibilized, imploded, preoccupied with popular culture, market-oriented, driven by rapid innovation, dedicated to vanguardism and countercultural ideas, and housed comfortably inside the new university. In one sense, how could it be otherwise. But in another sense, projects of cultural critique, rooted in various critical traditions ranging from Marxism to psychoanalysis to

such new social movements as women's and civil rights, Third World reparations, and environmental justice, invariably promote an ethicopolitics steeped in egalitarian ideas, often setting it at odds with mainstream practices and values. The politics of theory and also of cultural studies are routinely identified today as too "politically correct," too antithetical, and too affiliated with various subaltern and marginal groups like people of color, queers, greens, Third World radicals, exploited workers—the usual suspects. In other words, theory is mired in commodified, coopted, cooperative moments, however, it regularly presents contestatory discourses. Hence one of the main meanings of my title: theory still matters, certainly as much as ever, in intellectual and political struggles.

* * *

Part 1 of *Theory Matters* offers personal commentary on the changing situation of literary and cultural theory during the past thirty years, the postmodern period, mapping in chapter 1 the broad shift from formalism to poststructuralism to cultural studies, and then in chapter 2 discussing key elements of two dozen theory texts that have been most influential in my as well as others' development over these three decades. Chapter 3 argues that developments in contemporary theory constitute a renaissance and not a simple-minded capitulation to the latest fashions, and chapter 4 critically examines the standard ways of portraying contemporary theory change, advocating a disjunctive mix-and-match postmodern mode of historical representation.

As general editor of *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (2001), I spent nearly six years collaborating with a team of editors in putting together what turned out to be a large volume (2,625 pages), spanning from Gorgias and Plato to bell hooks and Judith Butler, complete, I hasten to add, with several hundred pages of bibliographies and an Instructor's Manual (an additional 200 pages). The inside story of this complex project is told in chapters 5 through 7, something no other Norton anthology editor, as far as I know, has ever done. Chapter 7 also offers observations about the current and future state of theory, literature, and literary studies.

Part 2 focuses at the outset on the development of globalization studies within the context of cultural studies. Specifically, chapter 8 assesses the influential works and concepts of Pierre Bourdieu, highlighting the last decade of his life when he became a formidable critic and engaged vocal opponent of neoliberal globalization. Chapter 9 surveys disparate new forms of economic criticism, focusing on their similar critiques of mainstream economic doctrine and globalization,

showing how they connect to the recent rise of "Lilliputians," an emerging disaggregated postmodern front advocating transformation of the current global political economic order. Chapters 10 through 12 offer three case studies in cultural studies, exploring key elements of the postmodern disorganization of, to begin with, contemporary fashion, then of today's blues subculture, and lastly of interdisciplinary studies. To be more specific, chapter 10 gives a survey of the main topics and premises of critical fashion studies, going on to argue that fashion today numbingly reiterates beautiful destructive stereotypes, norms, and ideals while, in addition, it provides materials for positive reinscription, resistance, and transformation. Chapter 11 applies some tried and true cultural studies concepts and methods—especially theories of subculture, popular culture, fandom, and participant observation—to a local blues music scene (framed within the broad contexts of blues history and scholarship), demonstrating the progressive nature of today's blues music *in situ.* Chapter 12 develops four points, stark propositions, about the disciplines today, contrasting modern and postmodern conceptions of interdisciplinarity while sketching along the way the situation of cultural studies in the contemporary university.

* * *

In our era of fast reading, the preferred genres of literary and cultural criticism are gradually changing to shorter forms often cast in personalized modes. *Theory Matters* reflects this postmodern shift by foregrounding in most of its chapters, all deliberately short, a prose style based on personal perspectives, in spoken language, sometimes in interviews. Early versions and parts of certain chapters, here revised, appeared originally in journals: Preface in *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies,* chapter 1 in *Massachusetts Review,* chapter 2 in *Genre,* chapter 3 in *Literature and Psychology,* chapters 4 and 6 in *minnesota review,* chapter 5 in *Symploke* and *College English,* chapter 7 in Finnish in *Kulttuurintutkimus* (*Cultural Studies*), chapter 10 in *Modern Fiction Studies,* and chapter 12 in *Profession 2000.* I am grateful to the editors for permission to reprint. For assistance I thank the Oklahoma Humanities Council, which provided research funds for work on regional blues, and the University of Oklahoma where in 2000 I received a Big 12 Visiting Faculty Fellowship, allowing me to develop some of my ideas. For help I am thankful to research assistants Mitchell Lewis and Nyla Khan, and for support I thank colleagues Eve Tavor Bannet, Richard Dienst, Jim Johnson, Winston Napier, Patrick O'Donnell, and Jeff Williams.

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PART 1
Theory Personalized

1

THEORY RETROSPECTIVE

LATELY I HAVE BEEN WONDERING how I got here. I mean that I have been trying to map the stages of my profession's development during the past three decades, the time of my involvement in academic literary studies, particularly criticism and theory, my specialty. In retrospect, I see that it is a story, in large part, about U.S. university culture in the late twentieth century being Europeanized one more time, becoming self-consciously multicultural, and undergoing postmodernization. When I committed myself to literary studies as an undergraduate in the mid-1960s, New Criticism was the ruling paradigm, which had been in place, not without various telling challenges, for several decades. It was not until the mid-1970s that this oppressive formalism gave way to "poststructuralism" (as it was oddly called), a peculiar set of literary philosophical methods and frames of reference largely derived from Friedrich Nietzsche but filtered through Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man, and Michel Foucault, among others. Itself dominant for more than a decade—though not without significant challenges—poststructuralism mutated from its French roots in response to more local problems and challenges, particularly those brought to the surface in the late 1970s and early 80s by feminists, ethnic autonomy groups, and postcolonial thinkers. I have more to say later about the branches of poststructuralism. By the middle or late 1980s, various united fronts of literary social critics, feminists, postcolonial theorists, historians of culture, scholars of popular culture, rhetoricians, and left poststructuralists like myself began promoting cultural studies, many extending models developed

during the 1970s in the United Kingdom's celebrated Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham. So what you had in U.S. university departments of literary studies through the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s was an ascendant cultural studies, increasingly capacious and broadly defined, simultaneously incorporating and displacing a once-dominant literary poststructuralism, both of which movements were held at arm's length by certain feminists, postcolonial theorists, ethnic critics, queer theorists, and leftists reluctant to join coalitions for fear of invisibility or cooptation. I hasten to add that New Criticism, to which many literary intellectuals trained in the 1940s and 1950s remained faithful, survived into the twenty-first century both as a besieged residual paradigm of "normative" literary education and a resurrected charter adopted by a small number of a young generation of new belletrists often associated with creative writing programs. To summarize using more emotional terms, in my experience U.S. academic critics and criticism can be characterized as comparatively complacent through most of the 1960s, frantic and expansive in the 1970s, embattled in the 1980s, and surprisingly ambitious yet generally glum during the 1990s. A detailed chronicle of everyday life during these years would enrich and complicate matters, needless to say, as would a less generalized more personal account of intellectual development, something I offer in chapter 2.

To simplify matters even further, I came into literary studies at a moment of extreme critical contraction and purification, and I have lived through an era of staggering expansion and hybridization. At the point at which in the 1980s cultural studies first grappled with the question of postmodernity, that is, when it started to map the global culture of the emergent "New World Order," academic literary horizons entered into a phase of extreme expansion, a time, still today, when popular music such as West Coast Afrocentric rap is scrutinized beside Shakespeare's Italianate sonnets; when contemporary global corporate practices such as downsizing and Renaissance patterns of aristocratic patronage both help explain publication practices as well as poetic themes and forms.[1]

Permit me to preview the trajectory of this chapter. First, I offer a personal retrospective on the tumultuous period in literary studies from the 1960s through the present, the time of my involvement as university student, professor, and scholar specializing in the history of literary and cultural criticism and theory. Second, I compare and contrast the three dominant critical paradigms of this period, namely, New Criticism, poststructuralism, and cultural studies, as a way to

portray and assess the broad intellectual and cultural struggles of the times. I conclude with some personal reflections on theory now and in the future.

My overarching thesis is that the peculiar coexistence within literature departments today of different generational projects and critical paradigms reflects, in miniature, the wider disorganization characteristic of Western societies in recent decades, a form of disaggregation that renders pastiche arguably our dominant organizational mode. Not incidentally, the contemporary university itself does not escape this form.[2]

WRITING SCHOLARLY BOOKS: INTERSECTIONS OF THE PERSONAL AND THE PROFESSIONAL

One way or another, I have been entangled in all these historical developments I have been enumerating, as have virtually all members of university departments of English and, perhaps to a lesser extent, departments of comparative and national literatures. My book publications offer four case studies of my various involvements over the years, providing a retrospective on what has happened in the profession. When I published *Deconstructive Criticism* in 1983 (which was seven years in the making), it was, objectively speaking, a comparative historical account of first-generation French and American poststructuralist criticism but, speaking personally, it represented an anxious effort on my part to master certain innovative contemporary Continental philosophical modes of criticism as a way to get free of the enervated Anglo-American formalist criticism into which I had been indoctrinated as an undergraduate and then graduate student, and which I had been trying more or less unsuccessfully to modify and eventually jettison for almost a decade. Under the cover of an advanced introduction, this book facilitated an expansive practice of poststructuralist textual analysis. What it did not do was promote the shift of textual analysis to cultural critique, a project that younger French feminists and second-generation U.S. poststructuralists, intellectuals such as Gayatri Spivak, were undertaking at that time and that, as I noted before, culminated some five to ten years later with the emergence of cultural studies. Shortly, I'll have a word to say about cultural critique, which entails the explicit turn of poststructuralist styles of criticism to ethics and politics.

In the United States, departments of literary study were especially embattled sites during the 1980s as different paradigms of interpretation and of the curriculum were pitted against each other. The para-

digm wars of those times are still with us, although usually in less disruptive forms. When in 1988 I published *American Literary Criticism from the 1930s to 1980s*, I sought to retell a complex segment of the history of criticism from the perspective of a left cultural historiography sympathetic to all manner of contemporary antinomian groups and forces, ranging from Marxism and poststructuralism to the new social movements (notably feminism, the black power movement, and the New Left). U.S. cultural history had a different look from this point of view, of course, but what preoccupied me personally was the effort to help change literature departments by telling graduate students and new professors, my main audiences, a story of their history culminating in the (momentary) triumphs of feminism, ethnic aesthetics, and cultural studies. This was my way of galvanizing myself and others toward transforming the institution of criticism and theory from its still powerful, yet too narrowly focused, formalist heritage to its expansive cultural studies future. To do this, I had to put myself step by step through an extensive education in the history of American criticism and theory, which willy-nilly helped me accrue a great deal of knowledge and become an authority, oddly an unlooked-for outcome.

It is one thing to write a partisan history and another to change the order of things through direct argumentation. I found in publishing *Cultural Criticism, Literary Theory, Poststructuralism* in 1992 that the effort to shape the emerging cultural studies project so that it took certain key techniques and solutions from poststructuralism on its way beyond poststructuralism offered narrow rewards. I personally worked up effective solutions to a number of key problems such as how to conceptualize "authorship," "genre," "discourse," and "institution" from the vantage of poststructuralist cultural theory and criticism. I also experienced an obvious truth: an emerging paradigm or vanguard movement is not necessarily interested in learning lessons from its immediate predecessors, nor in resolving its debts to more distant and less threatening progenitors. To the considerable extent that one writes books not just for audiences, such as fellow critics, scholars, and students, but for oneself (oneself always being at a certain crucial stage of development), this particular book has been for me the most important, even though it was poorly targeted and not well-timed. It forced me to move from understanding and promoting poststructuralism and cultural studies, through writing comparative histories, to theorizing poststructuralist solutions to cultural studies problems via scholarly polemics. It is a matter of doing—not just advocating—cultural critique, which entails investigating and criticizing contending

positions and explanations with an eye toward not simply faulty logic, but questionable values, practices, and representations, requiring subtle yet frank ethical and political as well as aesthetic judgments. Robert Scholes nicely dubbed this "textual power" in a book with that title.

By the time I published *Postmodernism—Local Effects, Global Flows* in 1996, which offered a set of essays on different facets of post-1950s culture, cultural studies had triumphed, but in the limited way that most theoretical movements and paradigms succeed in university literature departments.

Here let me diverge to say a word about universities and educational innovation before I return to cultural studies. While contemporary university presses, scholarly journals, and academic conferences often welcome the latest developments, the curricula of both the literature major and the liberal arts core remain largely unaffected, accommodating change at a snail's pace by adding on yet one more option to a large number of preexisting options.[3] In my experience, curriculum innovation comes slowly and grudgingly—and long after the fact. Universities are strikingly conservative when it comes to undergraduate curriculum. None of this stops individual instructors or like-minded colleagues and students from making de facto changes, at first discreetly and then more boldly, often engendering in the process hostile enclaves and factions. During recent decades departments, or frequently segments of departments, refused or failed to change, with the result that at any given moment departments can be in very different stages of development, which is one more site of the disaggregation characteristic of postmodern times.

All this explains why I included for the first time arguments about curriculum theory in the book on postmodern culture. Not incidentally, this text also offered expected chapters on contemporary criticism, poetry, philosophy, and feminism, plus new material on recent painting, theology, historiography, and economics, especially finance economics, today a leading edge of globalization along with media and advertising. In our postmodern condition, culture is in the last successful stages of incorporating nature, including nature's wildest zones. Media constitute the vanguard, capital the engine.[4] I take up these matters again in chapters 8 and 9.

I want to circle back and comment on some important issues that I glossed over when discussing cultural studies. First, I prefer to think not that literary studies (or university education) was tragically politicized in recent decades, say since the 1960s, but that it was peculiarly depoliticized in the 1940s and 1950s as part of the "end of ideology"