

# DEAD THEORY

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Derrida, Death,  
and the Afterlife  
of Theory

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EDITED BY  
JEFFREY R. DI LEO

B L O O M S B U R Y



"Rather than simply continuing stoically with theory in the face of its many proclaimed ends, deaths and aftermaths, *Dead Theory* rises to the challenge and explores what it might mean to think and write in a world after theory. Assembling a range of profound and bold essays, this collection is essential reading for anyone interested in sustaining critical thought, and for those who believe that the end of theory is possible."

Claire Colebrook, Edwin Erle Sparks Professor of English, Penn State University, USA

What is the legacy of Theory after the deaths of so many of its leading lights, from Jacques Derrida to Roland Barthes? Bringing together reflections by leading contemporary scholars, *Dead Theory* explores the afterlives of the work of the great theorists and the current state of Theory today. Considering the work of thinkers such as Derrida, Deleuze, and Levinas, the book explores the ways in which Theory has long been haunted by death and how it might endure for the future.

**Contributors:** W. Lawrence Hogue, Kir Kuiken, Hassan Melehy, Paul Allen Miller, Christian Moraru, Brian O'Keefe, Jean Michel Rabaté, Herman Rapaport, Nicole Simek, Henry Sussman and Zahi Zalloua.

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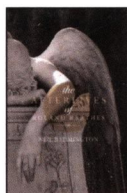
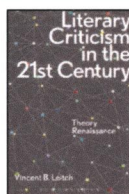
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Derrida, Death, and the Afterlife of Theory

Edited with an introduction by  
Jeffrey R. Di Leo

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# Dead Theory

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. . . after my death *there will be nothing left.*

Jacques Derrida (2007)





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# Introduction: Notes from Underground: Theory, Theorists, and Death

Jeffrey R. Di Leo

High or grand theory was exemplified through the work of figures such as Jacques Lacan, Jean-François Lyotard, Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida—each of whom is, alas, no longer among the living. Others though, such as Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Hélène Cixous, are still very much among us. These structuralist and poststructuralist thinkers set an impressive agenda for theory in the late twentieth century though were met with opposition from many different quarters. Vincent Leitch of the University of Oklahoma, the pre-eminent historian of theory of our generation, contends that it came “from not only conservative scholars, but also a broad array of contending liberal and left theorists, indicting it (particularly deconstruction) for philosophical idealism, nominalism, obscurantism, and quietism, charges early made famous by certain Marxists, feminists, critical race theorists, and cultural studies scholars.”<sup>1</sup>

The kind of high or grand theory exemplified by the work of Deleuze, Foucault, and Derrida was eclipsed by both low theory, which found its form in a multitude of “studies,” and posttheory, “a pragmatic approach to theory which leads them to assess various theoretical models on the basis of the socio-cultural and political understanding that these models bring about.”<sup>2</sup> Since the ascent of high theory (or the even higher, so-called sky-high theory or “theoreticism”<sup>3</sup>) and the emergence of various forms of opposition to it, rumors of and statements about its death have persisted well into the new century. Even today, closure regarding the issue seems remote. Again, just consider the work of Leitch, who recently published one of the most robust and enthusiastic defenses of the continuing presence of theory in the twenty-first century.<sup>4</sup>

Leitch acknowledges that word on the street is that theory is dead—superseded by a multitude of studies. Gone are theory stalwarts such as deconstruction, Marxism, and feminism. They have been replaced by studies of everything and anything from Barbie dolls and Beyonce to biopolitics and

books. Leitch maintains that there are “94 subdisciplines and fields circling around 12 major topics” in literary and cultural theory today, which he notes are “reminiscent of planets and satellites.”<sup>5</sup> Of these ninety-four subdisciplines, fifty include adjectives followed by the noun “studies”: patronage, subaltern, working-class, debt, object, technoscience, animal, food, postcolonial, border, diaspora, new American, resistance, surveillance and security, body, cyborg, gender, disability, age, leisure, new Southern U.S., whiteness, indigenous, ethnic, women’s, queer, masculinity, sexuality, celebrity, fashion, sport, gaming, sound, visual culture, TV, film, periodical, archive, professionalization, canonization, academic labor, literacy, composition, reception, performance, narrative, trauma, memory, and holocaust.

Another twenty clearly imply the noun studies, but for some reason it is not stated. For example, the field media studies has eight subdisciplines. All but three (new media, social media, and book history) include the noun studies—and for at least two of these (new media and social media) the noun studies is clearly implied. The final one, book history, is probably more accurate with studies replacing the noun history. Among the ninety-four subdisciplines, the noun “theory” is only used twice: in cognitive theory and affect theory.

Clearly, if Leitch is even somewhat accurate in his universal mapping of literary and cultural theory in the twenty-first century, there is little or no room in the new millennium for the more dominant mapping of literary theory and criticism, namely, one that divides it into schools and movements. For Leitch, designators of the theory and criticism universe such as Russian formalism, New Criticism, psychoanalysis, feminism, Marxism, structuralism, poststructuralism, queer theory, New Historicism, and postcolonial theory are strictly a twentieth-century phenomena. Though these designators were important to the emergence of theory in the last quarter of the twentieth-century, they have outlived their usefulness for mapping literary and cultural theory in the twenty-first century. The explosion of “studies” in the first quarter of the twenty-first century leaves little opportunity for organizing literary and cultural theory into the older matrix of schools and movements. Or, alternately stated, studies as a subspecies of the “twentieth-century” schools and movements makes for very messy and confusing mapping. Hence, why bother? Better to just leave it to the historians of theory to trace the legacies of theory amid the studies multitude.

What then to do with theory, that is, the sum body of the twentieth-century’s schools and movements in the wake of the explosion of twentieth-first century studies? Leitch’s answer is surprising. Namely, dub the first quarter of the twenty-first century a “theory renaissance.” This is the somewhat

counter-intuitive task of his book—a task which as difficult as it may sound, is one for which he makes an incredibly strong case. In a nutshell, his argument is that all ninety-four subdisciplines and twelve major topics “stem directly from recognizable contemporary schools and movements of theory.”<sup>6</sup> Therefore, because there is no other term that adequately captures the “proliferation” charted into ninety-four subdisciplines and twelve major topics, we need to just continue to use the designator: theory.

Leitch’s approach to theory in the twentieth century is right on the mark and represents the most energetic response to the so-called death of theory. Not only is theory not dead, it is undergoing a “renaissance” of sorts. Still, what is overlooked in these and other conversations of late about the death of theory is the related topic of the death of theorists.<sup>7</sup> Sure, there have been obituaries and legacy volumes—and even some biographies of theorists—but not much discussion about what the death of theory’s progenitors means for the institution of theory. And even when the topic is broached, there seems to be efforts to avoid it. Take, for example, a recent work by Alain Badiou.

A few years ago, the founder and publisher of Editions La Fabrique approached Badiou about putting together a book of tributes to some of the philosophers who are no longer with us. Badiou says he “agreed almost without thinking about it, mainly because it seemed to me to be a tonic and far removed from death”<sup>8</sup> Among the fourteen individuals that Badiou addressed are many of the progenitors of high theory: Lacan, Lyotard, Deleuze, Foucault, and Derrida. However, after completing the book, he said, “Now, I hold the view that neither death nor depression should be of interest to us.”<sup>9</sup>

In this volume, however, death *is* of interest to us. Not though in the form of tributes or obituaries, but as a means of understanding how the deaths of the high priests of theory have affected the life of theory and our relationship to it. Badiou himself gives us some insight into this when he speaks on the death of Derrida. His first feeling, he says, was “not a very noble sentiment.” “I actually said to myself,” writes Badiou, “We are the old ones now.”<sup>10</sup> But he continues:

So, we . . . We . . . who are we? Well, to be quite specific, it means we who were the immediate disciples of those who have passed away. We who were aged between twenty and thirty in those years from 1962 to 1968, we who followed the lessons of those masters with passion, we who, as they grew old and died, have become the old ones. Not in the same sense that they were the old ones, because they were the signature of the moment of which I speak, and because the present moment probably does not deserve any signature. But we are the



old ones who spent our entire youth listening to and reading such masters, and discussing their propositions day and night. We once lived in their shelter, despite everything. We were under their spiritual protection. They can no longer offer us that. We are no longer divorced from the real by the greatness of their voices.<sup>11</sup>

Badiou's comments here are both enervating and empowering. The death of the masters of theory calls for us to engage the present moment without their shelter and spiritual protection. The real is now our charge and will ultimately come to define who we are and our signature to those who follow in our path. Question is, will we rise to the task or hide behind the voices of our masters?

## Applied theory

Theory has always struck me as being a *living* entity. Perhaps it was because its major figures always seemed so full of life and lively—most of all in their writing. Not staid and static creatures like the philosophers,<sup>12</sup> but dynamic and dangerous individuals who by the power of their personalities and enchantment of their intellect brought to life a body of thought that straddled but was never at home in any of the traditional humanities disciplines.

This disciplinary homelessness created a continuous institutional anxiety about theory. Departments who allowed it entry did so at their own peril—a peril fraught with the potential of disrupting their traditional self-identity. But they also opened up their department to a continual sense of new possibilities and knowledge formations as well as to closer ties with other areas of knowledge and academic disciplines.

Through the eyes of theory, traditional disciplinary lines such as philosophy, English, comparative literature, and foreign languages blur via elegant readings that continuously ignore disciplinary stop signs. Moreover, theory always seemed to have a different relationship with history than its associated disciplines.

From the vantage point of theory, the institution of philosophy always appears to be unfolding backward into the call and response of its history, whereas theory always appears to remain in the present—and, in effect, resist the pull of history. It might even be said that efforts to map out “the history” of theory or to capture it “in history” are merely attempts to normalize it, that is, to bring it in line with the histories of more traditional areas of inquiry such as