

## Timely Meditations: On the Uses and Abuses of Theory for Cultural Studies

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“[I]t becomes clear how badly man needs, often enough... the *critical*....He must have the strength, and use it from time to time, to shatter and dissolve something, to enable him to live”

– Nietzsche

What David Simpson in 1991 referred to as “the antitheoretical bandwagon,” is “rolling” with renewed “impetus” in McMaster University’s M.A. in Cultural Studies and Critical Theory program, presenting itself most notably in David Clark’s graduate seminar “On the Remains of the University” (2). What irrupted in this class was more than just an anxiety or frustration about the challenges that arise in engaging with difficult texts; it was a distinct hostility towards anything remotely resembling “theory.” This paper seeks to contextualize the antitheoretical impulse in our class within a larger trajectory of Anglophone resistance to theoretical thinking, a populist, levelling trend within Cultural Studies, and a contemporary obsession with transparency and “pop-clarity” fuelled by late-capitalist consumerism and the proliferation of new media. We will begin by examining antitheory’s historical and contemporary configurations by looking at work by David Simpson, Marc Redfield, Tilottama Rajan, Henry Giroux, and Susan Searls Giroux. More specifically, we will identify three related criticisms of theory – that it uses unnecessarily difficult language, that it is not political (in that it is not practical), and that it is part of a techno-bureaucratic over-specialization of humanistic knowledge. We will then consider Cultural Studies and its troubled relationship with theory as presented in Bill Readings’s, Giroux’s, and specifically, Rajan’s accounts of the latter. Lastly, we will respond to the first two criticisms discussed above, and make a case for the importance, particularly at this historical conjuncture – marred by multiple wars, a diminished social state, economic insecurity,

and a disappearing middle class – of, following Giroux, a “politicized version of cultural studies [that] makes a claim for the use of highly disciplined, rigorous theoretical work” (TB 98).

If the epigraph for the “On the Remains of the University” course syllabus is Jacques Derrida’s “[t]oday, how can we *not* speak of the university,” it is ironic that the invocation of “theory” was seen as a kind of “not” speaking of the university – that is, a *not* addressing the university as a material place which harbours students’ everyday lived experience. Rather than embracing the possibilities that can only emerge through struggling with difficult theoretical texts, many students felt that they were being “alienated,” in some cases, even “shamed,” by a “pretentious high culture” bent on confronting them with the inadequacies of their cultural capital. Through a kind of Nietzschean *ressentiment* which, in reactionary and self-poisoning fashion, holds on to what is felt as an injury, while displacing the real cause of the injury and projecting it onto an “effigie” (Nietzsche I.10 and III.15), students held theory-cum-Derrida-cum-Professor David Clark as responsible for both their inability and their unwillingness to invest the time and energy necessary for thinking through difficult theoretical texts. We do not want to discount the complexities of the psychological experiences involved in this course, which Deborah Britzman, discussing the reason that all learning involves conflict, aptly explains thus:

The thousands of hours everyone spends in compulsory education do not suddenly dissolve into nothingness when one enters the university....one is already haunted by conflictive versions not just of education but also of what it means to learn and what efforts get to count as learning. Even though the manifest story of higher education is a story of reason and rationality, the latent content is more contentious: justified wills continue to clash as new editions of old learning conflicts are played out. (26)

Nevertheless, we want to suggest that the conflict over theory that emerged in this course need not be considered as purely a question of affective experience, nor, indeed, as merely a failure of individuals to overcome *ressentiment*. What this paper seeks to explore are the larger questions of which the resistances to theory that we encountered are an unfortunate symptom.

One thing this resistance is a symptom of, we are suggesting, is the conflict that necessarily arises in a program with the designation “Cultural Studies *and* Critical Theory.” Not only, as we will elaborate below, does this titular coupling conjure up the historical antagonism between Cultural Studies and Critical Theory, which Rajan discusses in “In the Wake of Cultural Studies: Globalization, Theory and the University,” the very grammar of the program’s title is misleading. Composed of two predicates combined by a “coordinating conjunction,” the title suggests that both “Cultural Studies,” and “Critical Theory,” are equally represented, are on equal footing, so to speak. However, in this course (and possibly this program), “Critical Theory” takes on a subordinate position to “Cultural Studies,” and in fact, could well be considered the “other” to the monolith that is “Cultural Studies.” We would thus like to suggest that a more grammatically appropriate appellation for the program, as it stands, would entail combining the predicates with one of two “subordinating conjunctions”: “after,” or, “unless.” “Cultural Studies *and* Critical Theory” at McMaster, it seems to us, would be better titled “Cultural Studies *after* Critical Theory,” or, “Cultural Studies *unless* Critical Theory.” This conjunctive re-articulation makes it clear that Cultural Studies, at least as we have experienced it, proceeds either in the wake of theory, or to the extent that it is liberated from the interfering enigma of theory. The anxiety around what can only be called an inaccurate program title can be witnessed in Professor Clark’s – whether conscious or unconscious – rewriting of the

conjunction as “Critical Theory and Cultural Studies” in the course syllabus. What we would like to suggest, as will become clearer through the defence of theory that follows, is a reconfiguration of this seemingly coordinating, but effectively subordinating, conjunction. If Clark’s rewriting can be read as an indication of Cultural Studies and Critical Theory’s historically agonistic, and, more immediately, within our program, *hierarchical* relationship, we would like to propose in its place a subordinating conjunction that expresses the necessity of taking Critical Theory seriously for a progressive Cultural Studies: “Cultural Studies *if (and only if)* Critical Theory.”

We must begin by defining what we mean by “theory,” and its counterpart, “anti-theory.” Following Rajan, Redfield and others, we will make the point of distinguishing between theory as it is invoked in antitheoretical positions – as phantasmatic signifier, or “bogeyman”; and the enigmatic referent that is “real” theory – or theory as the fulfillment of its potential. Redfield, for example writes that the term “theory” “belongs” in “quotation marks” “insofar as it functions less by referring to an identifiable object than by triggering figurative associations” (5).

Providing a working definition of theory is rather difficult, given that even in texts that deal with theory, it is rare to find a more or less succinct definition of the term. Rajan declares that “real” theory, which “today has become an endangered species,” ought be aligned with “the modes of thought” “that came into prominence after the Johns Hopkins conference on ‘The Structuralist Controversy’ (1966)...and the antecedents for such thought going back to the late eighteenth century” (67). Redfield, when pressed, offers a “pragmatic definition of theory,” following Jonathan Culler’s suggestion that “the term nicknames a genre of writing that is reflexive, analytic, and speculative, ‘interdisciplinary in the sense of having effects outside an original discipline,’ and ‘a critique of common sense of concepts taken as natural’” (5).

Simpson associates antitheoretical rhetoric with the following: “A way of doing and seeing things based on common sense, on a resistance to generalized thought, and on a declared immersion in the minute complexities of a human nature” (4). Looking back at a time in the 1970s and 80s when theory was in fashion, Simpson claims that, in 1991, “it is now fashionable to be against theory, not only on the right, which is traditionally against theory, but also on the liberal left, which has traditionally resorted to what is called theory for a rhetoric of demystification and distance” (2-3). Now, Simpson notes, even “countercultural postmodernists” are against theory “for its inevitable appetite for assertions about what is normative, schematically elegant, and describable by acts of pure intellection” (3). Seeing it as a “symptom of the problem rather than the solution,” the left attacks theory for its supposed “elitism, masculinism, [and] Eurocentrism” (3).

More specifically, Redfield argues that “when debates about theory grow heated... theory sooner or later turns out to mean deconstruction” – and indeed, this was the case in our class, with Derrida (and arguably, Professor Clark, as well) representing “deconstruction.” Redfield goes on to claim that “[d]econstruction is [perceived as] ‘high theory,’ the theoretical essence of theory,” narrowing, “under polemical pressure, to mean ‘deconstruction in America,’ and above all” – following Paul Guillory’s thesis in *Cultural Capital* – “Paul de Man’s project of rhetorical reading” (5). Following de Man, Redfield argues that the resistance to theory must be understood as “occur[ing] with the introduction of linguistic terminology in the metalanguage about literature” (de Man quoted in Redfield 7). Redfield notes that, “as soon as de Man has defined literary theory” in this linguistic sense,” he “has aligned theory per se with his own work’s central preoccupation” – “a ‘linguistics of literariness’ ... where literariness names the irruption or revelation of an ‘autonomous potential of language,’” rendering theory, “in essence, rhetorical

reading” (7). Although, as Redfield notes, this may be too limited an understanding of theory, it is worth keeping in mind as a way of understanding the resistance to theory. A common element in accounts of both “real” theory and the phantasm of theory is an emphasis on language. Antitheory, as Giroux notes, frequently presents itself as “an appeal to clarity,” simplicity, and transparency, while figuring theory as an “excuse for *abusing* language as a marker of the educated mind” (PC 2 our emphasis). Indeed, if Rajan writes that theory’s endangerment is “evidenced in the resistance to difficult language,” the antitheoretical stance in our class manifested as precisely a version of this attack on “difficult language” (67). We will return to this debate about the difficulty of language in theory towards the end of this paper.

A second critique of theory, which can be seen as emerging from the first, is that voiced by John Guillory in *Cultural Capital*, and which Redfield and Readings discuss. According to Redfield, in Guillory’s account, “theory responds to, and reacts against, the emergence of a professional-managerial class indifferent to the forms of cultural capital of an older bourgeois culture” (8). In other words, theory’s “emphasis on ‘rigour,’ ... functions as an unconscious repetition of contemporary conditions of institutional life by modeling ‘the intellectual work of the theorist on the new social form of intellectual work, the techno-bureaucratic labour of the new professional-managerial class’” (8). In short, Guillory contends that the departmental adoption of theory resulted in the production of over-specialized knowledge, which decoupled academic work from larger social and political issues. While Readings does agree with Guillory’s “diagnos[is] [of] a decline in the role of the public intellectual,” he contends that Guillory overemphasizes the degree to which, “the system ... gives meaning to intellectual production” (139). Both Readings and Redfield criticize Guillory for viewing the formative institutional structure, or more specifically the institutional legitimacy of theory, as over-

determining the range and scope of theory's possible work. Thus Redfield claims that it is "questionable whether Guillory's sociological interpretation adequately addresses the peculiarities of theory," and suggests that Guillory fails to understand the degree to which theory is capable of theorizing its own limitations (8). Further, Readings, noting the attention traditionally paid to institutional questions by those working in the field of theory – Derrida, de Man, Samuel Weber, and countless others – suggests that Guillory's claims are "not only harsh but inaccurate," and that quite to the contrary, "a common feature of many of the texts produced under the rubric of literary theory is precisely a tendency to worry about the problematic role of the intellectual within a bureaucratic system of power" (139-40).

A related contemporary antitheoretical argument – informed by appeals to clarity and to less specialization – is the claim that theory "is not political enough." Notably, Marxists have "found common ground in arguing that clarity was the paramount issue in privileging writing as a form of political and cultural expression" (PC 4). More generally, Giroux recognizes an anti-intellectual strain of thought "that posits theory as too academic and complex to be of any use in addressing important social and political issues" (TB 97-8). Theory, as the story goes, is too obtuse, oblique, and convoluted to be translated into the type of knowledge that can effect social change. Those who fault theory for its lack of political clout thus typically "repeat complacently all the old saws concerning the inevitable difference between theory and practice, as if what is theoretically articulated could never be practically effective" (Simpson 2). However, that theory is not inherently political, as we will show, could not be further from the truth. Indeed, whatever else it may be, theory, as Redfield contends, is "always also about politics" (25).

At the same time, it is important to note that not all criticisms of theory are antitheoretical or invalid. In other words, it is possible, even from within a position that supports the use of

theory as a resource, to criticise instances where it is misused, or even abused. Rajan, for example, while arguing that theory, having become “esotericiz[ed] and narrow[ed]” to post-Heideggerian French philosophy,” can now be seen “lead[ing] a quasi-life as the domesticated ground for what has replaced it, or as a form of prestige,” nevertheless calls for an embrace of theory as deconstruction (67). Even more strikingly, although Giroux has been mistaken for taking a similar antagonistic stance towards theory as, for example, Guillory, when he argues that “too many academics retreat into narrow specialism” and “theoretical fetishism,” and thus “become adjuncts of the corporation,” or the corporatized university, this is an utter misreading (HE 64). Giroux’s criticism is only of certain kinds of “sterile” “theoreticism,” or of “an academicized jargon that is as self-consciously pedantic as it is politically irrelevant” (TB 98). The problem with theory only arises when it is “[t]reated less as a resource to inform public debate, address the demands of civic engagement, and expand the critical capacities of students to become social agents,” instead of aiming to “connect the acquisition of theoretical skills to the exercise of social power” (HE 64-5).

It is also important to understand that the antitheoretical sentiment outlined above is not new, but rather arises out of a complex interplay of more recent conditions with a long-entrenched Anglophone tradition of common sense and hostility towards abstract ideas and “French theory.” This historical contextualization is necessary in order to recognize historical continuities, to avoid falling into what Rajan calls “presentism” – a failure to recognize that there might be something outside the current social and cultural landscape, and finally, to bring into sharper focus that which is new in contemporary antitheoretical and anti-intellectual formations. Thus we are now going to look at Simpson’s account in *Romanticism, Nationalism, and the Revolt Against Theory* of “how the Anglophone national traditions have constructed and

perpetuated this particular phobia” of theory (3). According to Simpson, although the vigilance against theory can be traced back to “at least the 1650s” (2), it emerged most crucially in the British reaction to the French Revolution. “In the 1790s,” he explains, “the majority of commentators on both left and right pronounced that the French Revolution was principally the result of ideas. The right found those ideas dangerous; the left saw in them a means for bringing about utopia” (5). Since then, there has been a shared Anglophone notion of the “contamination” of French ideas, and “theory” has often been associated with the left, with radicality – although, as seen above, and as Simpson notes, at other times the left has been critical of theory. The 1790s, according to Simpson, “refigure[d] the terms of the argument” about theory (8) in ways that can be linked to the argument’s current figuration, such that these arguments share a “persistence of certain rhetorics of disbelief” (3). Thus “[t]he language of contemporary Britain, and above all of contemporary metropolitan England,” as well as, to a certain extent, America, “remains very much affected by the debates of the 1790s and their specifications of theory and method as fundamentally antagonistic to the British national character” (176).

Simpson discusses the historical evolution of this debate as involving the initial alignment, and later separation, of the terms “theory” and “method.” Method, “used to specify the radical element in Ramism and in Puritan and Methodist doctrine,” “suggests not so much a finished, totalized system (though this may be implied or projected) as a way of doing things according to a progressive procedure” (7). In contrast, “theory” “tends to describe a more speculative, or hypothetical mental projection, perhaps gesturing toward a point that the executive capacities of method cannot reach, or have not yet reached” (7-8). According to Simpson, “within the rationalist ideal the projections of theory must eventually be in accord with the conclusions of method,” while at a certain moment, “[o]rthodox Baconians, on the other

hand, claimed method but abjured theory” (8). Addressing “British reactions to the French Revolution,” Simpson notes that “we can see the two terms coming to be identified as either in themselves synonyms or effectively so in the dangerous confusions put about by the French politicians. Here the belief in method, in the progressive application of mental techniques to practical-political ends, comes itself to be regarded as a wild and visionary delusion – a delusion of ‘theory’” (8). Subsequently, method became less important, and a new dichotomy emerges between “theory” and “practice,” the “orthodox Baconian tradition [being] now aligned clearly with the second” (8).

Simpson notes that if the Enlightenment and the revolutionary Tom Paine viewed “rational method [as] a liberating and demystifying energy,” the “rhetoric of vilification” of theory is conceived in similar terms (11). Thus for example, the Cambridge English faculty, defending itself in the early 1980s against “the challenges of more or less everything” by “the conjunction of Marxism, psychoanalysis, and poststructuralism,” invoked “structuralism” as the “representative bogeyman,” as a “useful term of *abuse*, not least for its connotations of bloodless rationalism and theoreticism, and its reputation for murdering by and for dissection” (11-12 our emphasis). On the other hand, “it is under the banner of theory that the postmodern left attacks method, thus reintroducing a separation between two terms that have been rhetorically, if not definitionally synonymous for much of the past two hundred years” (7). Further, “[p]ostmodern attitudes seem to share with the inherited ‘common sense’ doctrines a distrust of totalizing explanations and a faith in the integrity of the microscopic detail” (182). Thus, “[a]cross a wide range of academic practices, a common pattern has emerged whereby the urge for or belief in anything that looks like Enlightenment rationalism is identified negatively with such belated subcultures as blinkered scientists, old-style Marxists, and political reactionaries” (12).

Ironically, the “kind of ‘theory’ that shook the establishment in the 1790s is now, in other words, itself the target of radical critique, and imaged as the ideology of the ruling interests” (13).

The dichotomizing of theory and practice is not only most notably persistent in contemporary versions of antitheory; it also appears to be a strong feature of American anti-intellectualism. Searls Giroux traces an American rhetoric of theory vs. practice, in which “[t]hought, according to those suspicious of a critical and contemplative mind, inevitably g[e]t[s] in the way of action” (3.6), by linking Richard Hofstadter’s discussion of the opposition to Thomas Jefferson in the 1800 American presidential election, to the anti-intellectualism which characterized the right’s criticisms of Obama in the lead-up to the 2008 election. Searls Giroux notes similarities between the targeting of Obama’s “reflexive capacities and his rhetorical strengths” (3.5-6), and the attack on Jefferson which, according to Hofstadter, “established a precedent for subsequent efforts to render an active, curious mind either trivial and ridiculous, or evil and dangerous” (3.5). If recently, Americans were encouraged by a dominant right-wing media “to vote for a man of action, not intelligence,” with the latter being “derided as inevitably naive, ‘timid,’ ‘abstract,’ or ‘wavering’” (3.7), “Jefferson’s critics assailed his philosophical training and literary talents which they insisted made him unfit for practical tasks” (3.6). It is worth noting that, insofar as Jefferson’s depiction as a “theorist” and, evoking a French enlightenment tradition, a “philosophe,” was used to render him questionable, it adds support to Simpson’s claim that Anglophone antitheoretical sentiment took on a particular configuration in the reaction to the French Revolution, whereby French ideas were rendered suspect; the mode of Jefferson’s maligning demonstrates a particularly interesting continuity between English and American anti-intellectual and antitheoretical beginnings.

However, more than just the result of a long tradition of Anglophone antitheory and anti-intellectualism, the current large scale “withdrawal from complexity,” according to Giroux, can be traced back to the descent into neoliberalism, marked by the election of Reagan in 1981 (PC 8). While the discourse around the election, in which “Reagan’s carefully crafted persona of strong masculinity, decisiveness and middle brow wit culled from his early Hollywood days” was opposed to intellectuals, who “were cast in the role of radical, if not communist, subversives, or dithering eggheads incapable of effective action,” drew on the traditional Anglophone rhetoric privileging practice vs. theory (3), Giroux suggests that this important historical conjuncture marks an escalation of public and institutional resistance and hostility towards intellectuals and any kind of slow, abstract, methodological thought. More so than ever “[t]he notion that important social problems requir[e] a more complex language or careful analytic accounting in order to render them with precision and accessibility was dismissed as a plunge into unintelligibility” (3). What Giroux argues began most strikingly with Reagan has only intensified in the wake of 9/11 and the Bush administration, which worked insidiously to quiet, malign, and vilify dissenting voices – especially intellectual ones – as anti-American. As a result, the current “critique of difficult and complex language” has “degenerated into a full-court effort at eradication, similar to what one would expect when governments mobilize to tackle the spread of a deadly virus” (4-5).

Interestingly, it is possible to trace variations of these tendencies within the reactions of our class. Frequently, “method” was the element rebelled against. Simpson notes that “[t]he debate about method is most often a debate about the relation of such procedures to the true order of things in the world, and about the transferability of any one procedure from one area of the world to others” (7). In our course, a permutation of this claim (which we will return to)

emerged in the contention (mentioned above) that the “method” of “difficult language” is flawed, and that it should be possible to “transfer” or rather, “translate” its procedures into those of more “accessible language.” On the other hand, method in general was abjured as a hindrance to the more organic workings of “speculative hypothetical mental projection,” which were conceived as the real “point” to be “gestur[ed] towards” – producing a version, in short, of the means vs. ends argument, wherein it was believed possible to arrive at desirable results irrespectively of the methods employed. To a certain extent, some of the students’ distrust in rational method – and, in some cases, in anything associated with the Enlightenment – can be seen as a response to a larger issue identified by Simpson – the current recognition of “the incompleteness of all constructions of meaning within interim formations” (15). However, even if this is the case, at its most extreme, the students’ response to this recognition seemed something along the lines of a “celebration of absolute idiosyncrasy,” which, as Simpson notes, “can provide only a personal epiphany” (15). Not surprisingly, another recurring argument was a continuation of the theory vs. practice debate. Theory was seen as an avoidance of serious engagement with real material conditions and a diversion of energy from what could have been a far more “effective” *practice*.

If we have been tracing the historical emergence of antitheoretical sentiment as an Anglophone phenomenon and as a contemporary feature of American society, we would now like to consider the historical emergence of Cultural Studies as a British phenomenon that had certain overlaps with the latter. Both Readings and Rajan distinguish between two important moments in the history of Cultural Studies – its inauguration with the early work of Raymond Williams, E.P. Thompson, and Stuart Hall, and its eventual shift, beginning in the early 1990s, to its current form. Drawing on Lawrence Grossberg, Rajan notes that Cultural Studies “[e]merg[ed] in the fifties alongside ‘the Americanization of Britain [and] new forms of

modernization,” seeking “to include the working classes as well as various subcultures and later “work around gender and sexual difference” (70). According to Readings, “[i]n the early 1960’s , those excluded from the institutions of culture on grounds of class, race, sex, or sexual orientation tr[ie]d to reimagine their relation to culture” (103). He locates the beginning of Cultural Studies in Raymond Williams’ and E.P. Thompson’s turn from “high-culture,” towards an “ordinary,” everyday, or holistic “culture,” and their enactment of the view that culture rather than class should form the primary focus of social analysis (92). According to Readings, “[t]he preference for culture over class comes from a desire that social analysis should not imply total separation (pure critical verticality), which is also a desire not to critique the working class from [a] transcendent position” (96). He cites Grossberg’s contention that “what unites the attack on cultural exclusion and the resistance to theoretical verticality is *the question of participation*” – “the critic must participate in the culture that is analyzed, and the object of analysis must participate in culture as a whole” (96 our emphasis). Insofar as it came out of a commitment to the “democratic principle...that the discourses of all members of a society should be its concern,” Cultural Studies, according to Rajan, was “a populist expansion of the bourgeois public sphere: a civil society made up of groups bargaining for political power and formulating common interests on their own terms” (70).

The initial relationship between Cultural Studies and theory was already a fraught one. If, as the above account shows, it came out of a strong democratizing tendency, it also came out of a certain British national tradition of “experience” and “common sense.” Pointing out “the national limitations of early Cultural Studies,” Jed Esty claims that, “[a]t a certain point, Cultural Studies nativists demystified the rhetoric of Englishness as an invisible, normative incarnation of the human” (196), attempting “to transform British universalism into English particularism,” (187)

and ultimately “constitut[ing] a coordinated critique of the universalist excesses of imperialism and the particularist excesses of postimperial nationalism” (196). Esty’s account of Cultural Studies as emerging out of a broader movement towards a “home anthropology” as part of England’s postwar imperial decline suggests that Cultural Studies was not entirely free from drawing on the “common sense,” antitheoretical tradition that Simpson identifies as historically British. Simpson notes that even Raymond Williams, “one of the greatest socialist critics of this century” and one of the founders of Cultural Studies, “participat[ed] in the culture of the national character” and made “gestures ‘against theory’” (175). E. P. Thompson, according to Simpson, “reproduced all the traits of the British national character” (176). His “monotonous contempt for ‘Grand Theory,’” “corresponding worship of something mystically called ‘experience,’ along with a general disregard for anything done by the French” and his “identification of the theoretical demon with ‘one of the dottiest moments in the Enlightenment’ all place Thompson squarely in the tradition of British common sense” (176). Simpson notes that “the degree to which the language of common sense is, precisely, *shared* by Thompson and by his avowed enemies on the conservative right is an index of the seriousness of the problem” (176).

If the first moment of Cultural Studies marks the desire to expand (high) culture to include other voices, the second moment marks the recognition of “the impossibility of participating in living culture,” since, according to Readings, “the word ‘culture’ no longer names a metadiscursive project with both historical extension and critical contemporaneity from which we might be excluded” (103). Readings thus contends that “the rise of Cultural Studies becomes possible only when culture is dereferentialized” (17), and further, “when culture ceases to be the immanent principle in terms of which knowledge within the University is organized” (87). At the same time, if culture no longer has any clear content, it means that Cultural Studies

no longer has a clear object of study. Thus Readings claims that “what is remarkable about Cultural Studies as a discipline is how little it has by way of what might be called theoretical articulation, how little it needs to determine its object” (97).

Addressing what Readings describes as Cultural Studies’ “dereferentialization,” Rajan suggests “instead that the elasticity of the term reflects its original encyclopedic mandate: a comprehensiveness not of contents but of constituencies” (70). However, Rajan identifies a “more recent symbiosis” between Cultural Studies and globalization (69), “wherein its dereferentialization is what makes it dangerous to some of its own original components” (70). She argues that Cultural Studies has been “drawn into” a “domesticat[ing] consumerism” and has become part of a dynamic in which “even individually subversive phenomena” are “deploy[ed]” “collectively within an apparatus of power” (70). Thus, if Cultural Studies came out of a potentially subversive movement, it has largely failed to deliver on this promise. According to Rajan, “at the level of marketing and image (and thus also the self-image of academics), Cultural Studies has become the primary focus of North American academic *publishing* in the humanities” (67), but its pervasiveness has been the result of “an inclusive vagueness that masks underlying contradictions” (70).

Rajan further identifies within Cultural Studies two different strains, each of which has a specific relationship with theory, but both of which fail to deploy theory in what Rajan considers to be an effective manner. The first strain, the “academic postmodern,” includes various identity politics and “humanisms that often avoid Theory,” having “retain[ed] from the theoretical revolution of the late sixties... “poststructuralism” as the oppositional overthrowing of structures, *but not the rigor of its linguistic turn*” (71 our emphasis). Rajan notes that the antitheoretical bent of this strain of Cultural Studies is concomitant with its lack of political clout: “the study of the

social, aesthetically abstracted from the economic, leaves no room for ‘politics beyond . . . the particularisms of cultural difference’” (71). The second strain of Cultural Studies is highly theoretical, and includes “theorists of techno-poststructuralism and changes in mediality” and “embraces technology so as to ally itself with science, progress, and membership of the global scene” (71). Rajan criticizes this strain of cultural studies for participating in the commodification of a “technologized self” that “has become raw material for a new power complex” and a “global academic consumerism” (72). She claims that “[t]he two cultural studies described above coexist, despite their profound disjunction, because of common operational features that result in their performing the same work of discursive exclusion and the redistribution of disciplinary power” (72).

Thus, Rajan identifies four shared features of both strains of Cultural Studies. The first of these features is “a certain presentism that signals the end of history”: while one strain of cultural studies is narrowly “oriented by today’s social politics” and identity politics, the other fails to “reflect on itself within a historical framework so as to recognize that there are other ways of thinking culture” (72). A second feature of both strains is “their emergence in the shadow of the social sciences” (72), and their tendency to “mak[e] themselves a soft-sell for, and a personalization of, the social sciences” (73). Thus Rajan claims that “Cultural Studies interpellates minority identities and localisms into a disciplinary complex which, in its upper reaches... does not criticize structure and reification but rather reprojects the affect of identity onto a specular identification—either ascetic or jubilant—with technology and economics. Cultural Studies is, in this sense, the end of Marxism no less than of philosophy” (77).

A third, and more important feature for our discussion, is what she calls Cultural Studies’ teleology of ‘absolute *self-transparency*’ based on total communicability” (73). Arguing that

“Cultural Studies develops from Enlightenment concepts of civil society, as an attempt to maintain this society transnationally in the era of globalization,” she claims that “a condition of this society as shared culture is homogenization,” which is necessary for “context-free communication, the standardization of expression and comprehension...in an anonymous mass society” (76). Thus this feature of Cultural Studies must be understood as a symptom of a broader shift towards what Gianni Vattimo calls the “‘society of communication’ and mass media produced by an ‘intensification in the exchange of information’” (73). In his essay “On Pop-Clarity: Public Intellectuals and the Crisis of Language,” Giroux addresses this very feature as the rise of “a social order mobilized and shaped by new technologies and forms of audio and screen culture that blend all too seamlessly with the anti-intellectual tendencies of the dominant society which is wedded to the spectacle of celebrity culture and mass advertising and resistant to almost any notion of critique and rhetorical complexity” (8). He claims that, in a neoliberal “age in which a ruthless market-driven culture reduces literacy to being a savvy consumer of commodities and an ongoing participant in brainless celebrity culture” (17), any “cultural apparatuses” are “overwhelmed by an infusion of endless soundbites, celebrity babbling, hate talk, [and] consumer mania” (8). As a symptom of this cultural shift, “Cultural Studies,” according to Rajan, “is the latest version of what Vattimo calls the ‘transparent’ society,” as it “consolidates the emphasis he places on ‘the positivity of the [social] phenomenon’ in which everything can be communicated and given its code” (73). Insofar as the term “accommodates the slippage in his argument between transparency as the recognition of minorities and transparency as the expansion of the reach of the media,” it evokes simultaneously the democratic and domesticating potential of Cultural Studies (73). However, what this has meant more recently is that for students, perhaps especially those in Cultural Studies, no matter how

historically or theoretically complex knowledge is, if it cannot be pre-packaged for quick consumption in a “How to Read” book or comic/graphic adaptation, a ten-minute YouTube video, or a podcast, it is seen as overly-complicated, and it is passed over for quicker and more easily digestible information-bites.

If knowledge has been utterly commodified, and students expect to get what they pay for – a transparent and instantaneously clear education – this is symptomatic of what Rajan sees as a fourth aspect of Cultural Studies – “the way its syncretism of its differences produces a specifically capitalist integration of knowledge into commodity production,” whereby while seemingly enabling “the empowerment of consumers over authors,” it ultimately “rationalize[s] and instrumentalize[s]” us, rendering “readers and spectators... entirely economic creatures” (75). Lamenting its eschewal of Marxism, Rajan contends that “Cultural Studies is the epitome of a gentrified mass culture that provides the social glue against anarchy,” insofar as its “pragmatic use of the humanities within a modular structure... *appears* to promote dissidence” (77 our emphasis). Rajan concludes that Cultural Studies has participated in and even driven the “globalizing of academe” (75), the effects of which have been a “loss of a (political) unconscious,” “the very study of literature under the sign of the economic, “the requirement that all sectors be economically represented in the curriculum, which is most efficiently managed by reducing texts to cultural soundbites,” and the “disappearance...of literature, not as a corpus but as a discipline of slow thought” (76).

Cultural Studies can thus be seen as both cause and symptom of a new set of formative social political conditions that heighten the tensions between theory and antitheory. Following Giroux, we want to argue that now, more than ever, it is imperative to link Cultural Studies and theory. In doing so, we will critically address two of the main arguments levelled against theory

– that it is too convoluted, and that it isn't political – and suggest that Cultural Studies is at its strongest – as the work of both Henry and Susan Searls Giroux demonstrates – when aligned with theory.

First, why is it so important to take the “difficult language” of theory seriously? Redfield answers this question by examining “high” or “literary” theory’s unique relationship to, and understanding of, language. According to Redfield, “in its radical or de Manian sense,” theory is concerned with “the difference and deferral of the sign” (de Man quoted in Redfield 22) that is the cause of the “*linguistic*” “instability at the origin of the aesthetic effect” (23). Theory thus “understand[s] language as our richest, most difficult term for mediation,” and as “the Western tradition’s master trope for that which must become transparency: to be itself, language must efface itself before objects and concepts” (23). If theory understands language as “exist[ing] in order to be obliterated,” it foregrounds the notion that, precisely “where language persists not as meaning, but as an opacity, a stumbling, a transport or drift or mutation irreducible to meaning or intention, then language may be said, oxymoronically, to persist *as language*, as the technical supplement that in itself can never properly exist” (23). Thus “[r]hetorical reading thematizes...in the idiom of rhetoric” the fact that language refers, “but not in ways that can finally be rendered reliable or predictable” (24). Consequently, if the difficulties of language – its slippages, excesses, over-determinations, and elisions – are precisely what theory is *about*, then it would be absurd to demand of theoretical language that it be “less difficult.”

Furthermore, literary theory is a tool for analysing and critiquing ideology. According to Redfield, “[i]t is from this standpoint that de Man offers his well-known definition of ideology: ‘What we call ideology is precisely the confusion of linguistic with natural reality, of reference

with phenomenality' (11). Thus defined, ideology becomes that which the 'linguistics of literariness' critiques" (24). Redfield further cites de Man's claim that

more than any other mode of inquiry, including economics, the linguistics of literariness is a powerful and indispensable tool in the unmasking of ideological aberrations, as well as a determining factor in accounting for their occurrence. Those who reproach literary theory for being oblivious to social and historical (that is to say ideological) reality are merely stating their fear at having their own ideological mystifications exposed by the tool they are trying to discredit. ("The Resistance to Theory" 11, quoted in Redfield 24)

Redfield notes two aspects of de Man's account of theoretical work in this passage. First, is that the text does not ignore or disavow social and historical experience; in fact, de Man "dignifies these spheres of life with the resonant noun: social and historical *reality*" (25). Second, is that, according to Redfield, insofar as "the theorist and his theory are caught up in this reality" (25), and theory, as language, "reflects on...its own...self-difference but cannot overcome it" (23), thus "repeat[ing] the aesthetic error it critiques" (25), it might seem that theory is particularly inconsistent. However, Redfield suggests that it is actually precisely *because* "theory lives a cycle of demystification and resistance...that theory negotiates its own imbrications in social and historical reality" (25). In other words, theory is *self-reflexive*, constantly applying its own critical capacities against itself, for itself; for this reason it is an invaluable resource.

Thus, Giroux argues that language does real work: difficult language has the ability to "carr[y] forward values... change perceptions and indeed in the end change the world in which we live" (PC 10). Reflecting on the "linguistic turn" in theory that Redfield diagnoses, Giroux

acknowledges that, “[w]ith the turn to high theory, close textual reading, and a commitment to the instability and multiplicity of meaning,” “proponents of poststructuralism, deconstruction, literary theory and postmodernism, wrote in a language that was indeed specialized, theoretically dense, and highly opaque” (2). However, Giroux argues that this was not necessarily a descent into absolute obscurity. Rather, “[t]he turn toward critical cultural analysis and other forms of theory in the academy,” particularly in the 80s, was in part an attempt to formulate responses to new social and political formations. Theory, according to Giroux, was inspired by the recognition that “new ideas often require different terms and that such [theoretical] writing, while difficult, was necessary to expose the appeal to common sense and totalizing authoritarian narratives that the Reaganites valued” (4). In other words, this emerging “diverse body of scholarship was an attempt to expand the possibilities of theory and politics within new and more complex registers of meaning, writing, and criticism that undercut the totalizing, often authoritarian logics, of modernism” (3). It is thus all the more unfortunate that the current dominance of “the appeal to clarity often ignores the challenges of language use incurred by writers whose aim is make the familiar strange – retooling certain commonsense assumptions by putting them in different contexts, revealing their hidden order of politics or placing them in new modes of language” (16).

If difficult social problems cannot be addressed without difficult language, then it is all the more worrisome that the “corporate domination of the new media” does “not allo[w] people to focus, take their time, develop a sense of compassion and social responsibility, or create the conditions for thoughtful reading and writing” (PC 8). The lack of a social and cultural landscape that promotes engagement with difficult language is thus “producing a dangerous form of depoliticization and moral indifference” (8). In this light, even those students who might

consider themselves politically engaged cannot enact their commitments because they lack the intellectual rigor that can only come from the sustained practice of slow and careful thought. Indeed, it was ironically precisely in those students in our class who thought of themselves as most politically conscious and/or active that the resistance to the difficult language of theory was most prominent.

According to Giroux, “[i]n an age in which a ruthless market-driven culture reduces literacy to being a savvy consumer of commodities and an ongoing participant in brainless celebrity culture, *language, literacy and meaning must become crucial terrains of contestation and struggle*” (PC 17 our emphasis). More specifically – especially given Rajan’s extremely harsh critique of Cultural Studies today – it is the responsibility of “a more politicized version of cultural studies [to] mak[e] a claim for the use of highly disciplined, rigorous theoretical work,” to “rejec[t] the notion that intellectual authority can only be grounded in particular forms of social identity... and [to] refus[e] an increasing anti-intellectualism that posits theory as too academic and complex to be of any use in addressing important social and political issues” (TB 98). In the “progressive” form of cultural studies, “[t]heory and criticism do not become an end in themselves but are always a response to problems raised in particular contexts, social relations, and institutional formations” (100). Giroux suggests that “intellectual rigor” is inextricably linked to “social justice, and civic courage” (99); while “theory is not a substitute for politics, it does provide the very precondition for a critically self-conscious notion of individual and social agency as the basis for shaping the larger society” (100).

Following Giroux, we contend that theory must be seen as “a resource for connecting cultural studies to those areas of contestation in which it becomes possible to open up rhetorical and pedagogical spaces where we can challenge the actual conditions of dominant power and

create the promise of a future that contains a range of democratic alternatives” (98). Furthermore, we want to argue that failing to realize the *uses* of theory would be seriously detrimental for Cultural Studies. Giroux’s early essay “School as a Form of Cultural Politics” nicely demonstrates the limitations that antitheoretical tenacity can impose on the production of socially and politically meaningful knowledge. Here Giroux suggests that early radical educationist’s refusal to engage with contemporary theoretical discourses – most notably poststructuralism/modernism – foreclosed any possibility of a normative and ethically progressive theory of education. He claims that an opening up to theory would have enabled their critiques to work beyond criticisms of schools as sites of reproduction, to one that encompassed the possibility of a new counter-hegemonic educational approach. In other words, the refusal to work through the difficulties of theory made it impossible “to think beyond current forms of practice so as to envision that which is ‘not yet’” (133).

In appealing to that which is “not yet,” Giroux draws on Derrida’s claim that both the university and “democracy contain a promise of what is to come and that it is precisely in the tension between the dream and the reality of democracy that a space of agency, critique, and education opens up” (TB 72). In light of this, both a substantive democracy “to come,” and the kind of socially reflective agency necessary to direct democracy in a progressive direction, require an ability to engage with theoretical knowledge. If theory is above all a resource for imagining that which is “to come,” then the present anti-democratic social and political situation, which calls for urgent attention, *calls for theory* insofar as it entails, according to Giroux, “not only responding to the crisis of the present... but also connecting to the future that we make available to the next generation” (73).

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