On the Way to Theory

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The most thought provoking thing in our thought provoking time is that we are still not thinking.

—MARTIN HEIDEGGER, *What Is Called Thinking?* (1976)

To believe and to think. You can't do both. Either we're going to believe or we're going to think, and the difference is we project electromagnetic thought energy, when we think. So when we're thinking, energy is flowing, it's going where it goes, it's flowing. When we believe, we've taken that flowing energy and put it into the box that is limited by the definitions of the belief. So here's energy that should be going and finding its way into the universe so that we can create solutions, being put into the box of belief, and then every solution we attempt to come up with is limited by the box of belief.

—JOHN TRUDELL, "I'M CRAZY?,"
U.S. SOCIAL FORUM (2010)

Never consent to be completely comfortable with your own certainties. . . . Never imagine that one can change them like arbitrary axioms.

—MICHEL FOUCAULT, *The Politics of Truth* (1997)

THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED

to those who taught me to think

Contents

Preface

These lectures address a single question: How to think about thinking? Thinking matters because our ability to respond to the urgent and often threatening demands the world keeps throwing at us depends on our ability to examine how we think and the theories different ways of thinking enable. Existing theories seem inadequate for the problems we face. The German philosopher Martin Heidegger may have been right that we are not thinking (enough), and when we do, as the Native American poet John Trudell suggests, we do a poor job of it, simply reaching for the comfort of answers already known rather than reaching for the openness and uncertainties of thinking.

I have been teaching humanities classes for half a century, and it has always disturbed me that people will read challenging texts about the current state of the sciences but avoid the more immediately relevant discussions concerning human lives.[1] Why are so many people distrustful and even afraid of theorizing in the humanities but not in the sciences? Why do people assume it is more esoteric? Perhaps it is because we generally assume that the sciences arrive at a consensus on truth, while the humanities revolve around conversations and arguments. Neither assumption is accurate. Perhaps it is because people think science is always politically neutral, while theorizing in the humanities is somehow intrinsically tied to left-wing politics. Again, neither assumption is true. Different ways of thinking and different theories rarely guarantee their own politics, although too many people today, even in the humanities, act as if they do.

What is true is that ways of thinking—and the particular theories they engender—are engaged in an ongoing conversation, although it can sometimes

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1 Let me explain myself just a bit. My intellectual/academic career has been defined by three great loves/questions: thinking (theory), power (politics), and popular culture. They have come together for me as cultural studies (see lecture 30). Over five decades, I have studied and been influenced by all the ways of thinking presented here—some more, some less, some directly, some indirectly, some positively, some negatively, but all as angels to be wrestled with. That is the way of thinking.

feel more like a war among many forces on many fronts. It began long before my story starts, and it will continue long after these lectures end. I have had to make choices, leaving aside important contributors, both past and present.

Perhaps we distrust theory and are reluctant to think because there are so many theories—about everything, and so many of them seem strange, but perhaps a bit of the strange is exactly what we need in this moment. It may seem almost impossible to find a way to make sense of the seemingly chaotic field of thinking about thinking—but that is what I try to do here. Theorizing can sound arrogant, but in these lectures I try to read and think theory with the humility of knowing that there are always other ways of thinking, and other ways of reading and using them. That may be the most important lesson: there are many ways of thinking!

We need to be open to them. Our future depends on our ability to go on thinking, publicly and collectively, even with those who think differently than we do. We need to think with them even as we think against them. Again, the point is not to tell you how or what to think but to make possibilities visible. With the French historian of ideas Michel Foucault, I have no illusions that we can change our ways of thinking so easily.

Our ways of thinking (and, hence, of living) and the theories they give birth to may not be conscious, systematic, consistent, or even coherent; they may seem obvious, drawn from personal experience and the wisdom of generations. Or they may seem esoteric, beyond our comprehension. But theories exist everywhere; they describe, prescribe, and proscribe particular relations in and to the world and other people. They define the ways we make and justify choices—from the trivial (how to dress) to the significant (the paths of our collective lives). Thinking begins by questioning the things we take for granted, things that remain just outside of our curiosity. But thinking does not leap to judgment—criticizing and rejecting every thought that differs from our own. It unsettles the different ways people understand the questions, at least for a while. After all, the world is messier than our theories imagine; it is filled with multiple and often complicated possibilities.

Given our present dilemmas, given a certain refusal to think, I have chosen one path to find a way to go on thinking. It is not the only path. Many of our current ways of thinking hold traces of the long history of thinking, the sediments of yesterday's efforts, which have embedded themselves in our minds and bodies, our senses and feelings. Perhaps understanding more about the

roots and routes of our thinking, the doors opened and those closed, will provide a better grasp of our dilemmas but also resources for thinking our way out of them.

The story I am telling in these lectures does not follow a straight path; some of the lectures are out of place, out of time; sometimes they reach back for another beginning. The story encourages multiple readings. It is already many stories—about the different ways of thinking of relations, and of how the world is constructed, and of the role and nature of thinking itself.

I'd like to think I am Mr. Miyagi in the original version of *The Karate Kid* (dir. John G. Avildsen, 1984): wax on, wax off; sand the floor; paint the fence. These seemingly meaningless exercises teach Daniel the basic moves of karate, and how to understand karate as a long, hard journey. If it works for karate, it may work for thinking. Each way of thinking is a language embodying specific sounds, resonances, harmonies, timbres, rhythms, and codes. Different languages are better at some tasks than others. I do not expect to make you experts in all the languages or even any one. At most, I hope you might be able to recognize the sounds, parse out the words, maybe understand some sentences. I hope you might be able to distinguish among them: Show me wax on, or show me Spinoza. Show me paint a fence, or show me dialectics. I hope you might reflect on what different "moves" can and cannot accomplish. I am trying to give you tools that will let you think about our common ways of thinking and hear some of the other possibilities.

This will involve discovering unfulfilled capacities for thinking, and accepting the open-endedness of the paths to truth. It will demand that we find ways of making disagreements productive. We will have to be willing to learn from unexpected sources and to hear the very things we did not expect or do not want to hear. Many people, including university administrators and management consultants, tell us that we have to teach students to think outside the box, but what they really mean is to think inside, at most, two or three boxes. But the real question is: Why does thinking have to be organized in boxes? What if we actually learned to think relationally—in any of the ways of thinking I have presented or that one might find elsewhere? What if we embraced different ways of thinking, each offering not only its own ways of answering questions but its own ways of asking them? What if we understood these lectures not as a body of knowledge to be mastered or a search for the right theory but as mapping a path—on ongoing conversation for thinking about culture, politics, and the world around us?

Should you decide to continue reading, there will be moments, possibly many, when you may feel lost and befuddled. I cannot promise it will all make sense in the end, but perhaps you will not feel quite so lost and befuddled when you ask whatever questions have led you to these lectures. What if we just kept on thinking and questioning . . . together? I wish us all good fortune on the journey.

It Takes a Community . . .

Finally, gratitude is simply not enough for my son, the poet Zachariah Claypole White, and my wife, the novelist Barbara Claypole White, who have always believed I am better than I think I am, and pushed me to become what they imagined me to be.

Introduction

I want to begin by telling you how this book came to be. If you are not interested right now, you can skip ahead to or jump around in the various sections, and maybe come back to this introduction later. But knowing the book's origins may help you understand certain choices I have made, without intending to limit the ways you can understand and use it. The lectures printed here capture classroom lectures that evolved over decades of teaching theory at public universities; the academic location set some possibilities, demands, and limits. At their best, lectures are constant and ongoing conversations with students, colleagues, and a growing list of references; at their worst, they impose artificial limits on thinking (e.g., seventy-five minutes per class, fifteen weeks per semester). Lectures are fragile and precarious: might this be so? Chapters are assertive: here it is! By translating these lectures into a generally less interactive, expressive, and nuanced medium, but continuing to call them lectures, I hope to stimulate and contribute to a larger conversation about thinking that seems increasingly difficult to find.

My academic location was also defined by a particular moment in which, for reasons I shall elaborate shortly, there was an excitement around and a demand and desire for theory. The result was an explosion of theories in the humanities and social sciences, and the appearance of Theory, with a capital *T*. Theory took on a life of its own as a new interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary field drawn from and flourishing within numerous disciplines. Theory was imagined playing a role parallel to that of formalization—that is, mathematical quantifications and logical analyses—in the hard sciences. It became and, to a large extent, remains a lingua franca, a common language enabling scholars and intellectuals to talk to one another, across disciplines and even across theories. From the 1970s to the 1990s, scholars specialized in Theory (I "do" Theory) while everyone had to familiarize themselves with it.

How did the moment of Theory come about? Thinking is always related (as both expression and response) to the contexts from which it emerges and the specific social arrangements and relations of power that partially determine who can speak and be heard, what can be allowed to be present and

have influence. I want to talk briefly (maybe not so briefly) about some of the conditions of possibility of the emergence of Theory.

It needed the rapid and continuing expansion of (especially public) higher education that occurred after the Second World War (partly for the benefit of veterans). It depended on universities being the central staging ground for many of the protests of the late 1960s and early 1970s; students of this era became the first academic generation committed to Theory. And it required real investments to translate work into English and to create new outlets—journals, organizations, conferences—for sharing and discussing relevant work.[1] Ironically, this depended on the growing capitalization of universities and publishing.[2] But Theory also was a rebellion against the arrogance of science and the dominance of a particular understanding of science: logical positivism.

THE ARROGANCE OF SCIENCE

In the mid-nineteenth century, Auguste Comte, one of the founders of sociology, proposed separating science and philosophy.[a] This new philosophy was dedicated to the clarification of science and had two assumptions. The first, later called **foundationalism**, asserted that there is a Reality or Truth that exists independently of our knowledge of it, which provides the ground of all claims to knowledge and truth. The second—**positivism**—took science, understood in relatively narrow terms, as the only valid form of knowledge. Anything not following the methods and logics of science was nonsense.

Positivism, or "scientism," took on a life of its own. Its rule was simple: follow the model of science and delegitimate all other claims to knowledge. Its claims have become commonsensical. For science, the world is made up of facts that exist objectively. A fact is not influenced by whether anyone sees it, or who sees it, or whatever assumptions and biases they bring. "Facts" are simply there, but facts are, by themselves, mostly useless. The real objects

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1 The rise of theory was sustained by the appearance of many new and important journals, such as *New Left Review*, *Critical Inquiry*, *boundary 2*, *Substance*, *New Literary History*, *Diacritics*, *Cultural Studies*, *Semiotext(e)*, *Social Text*, *Enclitic*, *Oxford Literary Review*, *Angelaki*, and *New Formations*. A number of publishers either emerged or gave such work new attention, including Verso, Routledge, Duke University Press, and the University of Minnesota Press.

2 Over the decades, Theory has become a more international formation, with contributions from and variations in every part of the world; exactly when, how, and how successfully this internationalization came about are questions I will not address here.

of science are the objectively real relations between the facts, their effects on one another. It is these relations that science captures and represents in some language as hypotheses. Science can make no claim about reality that is not embodied in hypotheses, which can be tested and determined to be true or false. But Comte's positivism had no theory of language beyond a common-sensical one and, as a result, no theory of the specificity of scientific language.

This was the case until the early twentieth century, when positivism was institutionalized and formalized by a group of scholars in Vienna, as well as by scholars from many other countries, in a philosophy called logical positivism (and, later, logical empiricism).[3] Logical positivism was a response against what its adherents saw as the increasing power of metaphysics and romanticism. It rejected most of the history of philosophy and the questions that drove it. As the logician Rudolph Carnap put it, "We give no answer to philosophical questions and instead, reject all philosophical questions, whether of Metaphysics, Ethics or Epistemology."[b] (Don't worry, this will all make sense to you soon.) Philosophy was little more than the "handmaiden of science,"[c] meant only to clarify the language of science.[4]

The logical positivists were driven by a faith that science was a truly liberating force that could guarantee both material and social progress, against the conservative and authoritarian implications of other philosophies that served only to obscure truth. Like earlier forms of positivism, logical positivism assumed that facts are the only legitimate starting points for knowledge. They are—at least in principle—available to anyone, neutral insofar as they do not carry any theoretical or political assumptions, and uncontaminated by anything subjective (and, hence, cannot be understood psychologically,

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3 The Vienna Circle flourished in the 1920s. Founded by Moritz Schlick (the author of *The General Theory of Knowledge* (*Allgemeinen Erkenntnislehre* [1918]), it involved scientists, mathematicians, and philosophers; its most famous members included Rudolf Carnap in Germany and, later, the United States; Ludwig von Mises in Austria; Carl Hempel in Germany; Bertrand Russell and A. J. Ayer in England; and Ernest Nagel, Willard Van Orman Quine, and Charles W. Morris in the United States. It created its own journal, modestly called *Erkenntnislehre* (Knowledge), in 1930 and also began a highly influential book series, the International Encyclopedia of the Unified Sciences. The Vienna Circle fell apart for a variety of reasons—not least the rise of Nazism and so-called Nazi science.

4 Logical positivism also significantly transformed the professional practice of philosophy, which was now seen as an activity based on careful public formulation, analysis, criticism, and revision. It made the "essay" rather than the treatise into the dominant genre of philosophical work.

as David Hume attempted). Consequently, the logical positivists assumed an absolute distinction between facts and concepts, between observation and theory statements.

But they recognized that ordinary language was insufficient for scientific knowledge. Science replaces ordinary language with the formal, propositional language of logical implication (e.g., in its simplest form, if A then B), although they disagreed about the most appropriate formal logic.[5]

Thus, the most revolutionary aspect of logical positivism was that it was fundamentally a linguistic philosophy, an early instance of what is called the linguistic turn.[d] It explored what can be meaningfully said; it was concerned with what is "communicable" by language, and with what constitutes the ("cognitive") meaningfulness of propositions. The logical positivists asserted that a proposition was meaningful only if it could be traced back to empirical statements of fact; all other statements are either meaningless (metaphysical) or tautological.[6] But its meaningfulness also depended on whether it could be put into the logical form of a nomothetic theory, a lawlike hypothesis stating the relations among facts in logical form.

Since these "laws" would necessarily include theoretical terms, the logical positivists had to consider how theoretical statements were related to or could be translated into observation statements. The answer involved a third kind of statement: correspondence or translation rules, which operationalized the cognitive meaning of a theoretical statement. Such rules defined a series of conditional statements (if you do something, then something will happen). To take a simple example, a theoretical term like *being brittle* (it is not an empirically observable fact) is given meaning by translation rules such as: if you hit it with a hard object, it shatters. Translation rules offered predictions that could be empirically tested. The predictions would either come to pass or not, and the law would be verified or falsified.

Consequently, logical positivism was also a theory of what constitutes a truthful statement. At first, truth depended on whether a hypothesis had been verified or not, effectively equating prediction and explanation: if you understood the causality involved, then you could predict the outcome of

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5 A proposition is a statement or judgment that is or can be stated in a logical form.
6 In Bertrand Russell's theory of description, what would be a meaningless statement, apparently neither true nor false, such as "The present king of France is bald," could be represented in logical terms as "There exists an x that is king and there can only be one such thing and it is bald." This, Russell argued, is not a statement of existence but a proposition that simply names x, and therefore is meaningful and false. Russell, "On Denoting."

any experimental manipulations. The collection of verified ("proven" or "true") hypotheses defines the sum of scientific knowledge at a given moment. As scientific truths are accumulated, there is an expanding body of scientific knowledge.

However, the members of the Vienna Circle quickly realized not only that it was impossible to verify every condition that might be deduced from a hypothesis but also that there were meaningful and possibly true statements that could not be verified (e.g., at the time, the dark side of the moon). So, they weakened the requirement: a statement had only to be verifiable (i.e., one could imagine its possible verification). But even this posed insurmountable difficulties and led the Austrian philosopher Karl Popper (never a member of the Circle) to suggest that meaningfulness and truth depended only on the possibility of falsification.[7,e]

For most of the twentieth century, positivism ruled. (Some would say it still does.) Science was the gold standard of knowledge production in the academy, and outside, people generally assumed that science improved their lives (although they are thinking of technological advances). Inside the academy, the arrogance of science dismissed every alternative as poetic, soft, subjective, intuitive, superstitious, and speculative.[8] And, most damning, such

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7 There were many other disputes among the logical positivists, resulting in multiple versions. They argued about whether theoretical terms describe real properties or whether instead they were simply instrumental constructs. Could there ever be a fully exhaustive list of conditions (translation terms) that would completely define a theoretical term? They argued about whether translation terms were operational or dispositional. And they argued about what observation statements described, what language was about, and what was outside language, which brought them dangerously close to metaphysical questions. They proposed a variety of theories (from physicalism, which asserted the reality of objects, to phenomenalism, which asserted that only sensations were real) and argued about how the logical structure of true statements could represent or "mirror" the arrangements of facts in the world. Moritz Schlick declared that the elaboration of meaning "always comes to an end in actual pointings, in exhibiting what is meant, thus in real acts, only these acts are no longer capable of, or in need of, further explanation." And Ludwig Wittgenstein (whose *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* was much beloved by the Vienna Circle, although he refused any affiliation with the Vienna Circle, eventually reading mystical poetry when he finally accepted its invitation to speak) turned to more poetic responses.

8 Science remains the final arbiter of truth and the normative model of theorizing, despite the many scandals—financial influence, confirmation bias, contradictory findings, and the inability to replicate what are often taken as agenda-setting studies—that have rocked numerous scientific communities.

work was incomprehensible—but to whom? The irony is that the mathematical reasonings of science are no less esoteric, abstract, and incomprehensible than qualitative work in the humanities. For that matter, the knowledge of any craftsperson—whether a plumber or a potter—has its own conceptual vocabulary, which is incomprehensible to outsiders. The illusion that science is comprehensible to the educated or even "ordinary" reader results from the ways science's very existence *as a cultural activity*—its methods and languages—is denied or misrepresented in the classroom and the media. On the other hand, neither schools nor media even attempt to help people make sense of the languages, arguments, and insights of the humanities or qualitative social sciences.

Logical positivism exerted an almost suffocating pressure on scholarship and pedagogy. Textbooks in the social sciences, and sometimes even in the humanities, from the 1950s at least through the 1970s began with a chapter on "deductive-nomothetic theory," in which only the formulations of hypotheses and the verification of predictions defined knowledge. There was palpable institutionalized pressure on most disciplines to seek their proper practice as a science. Research had to be—or at least pretend to be—scientific, despite the apparent lack of opportunities for rigorously controlled experiments and quantification in the fields studying human realities. Some fields (e.g., economics, psychology, sociology, and political science) adopted scientific methods (of experimentation and quantification, statistical analysis, and modeling), although judging from their failures to predict very much, their claim to "scientificity" is suspect. Even as a graduate student in communication and culture in the early 1970s, I felt the demand of "scientism." Fortunately, I pushed back with a little help from my mentors.[9]

BEYOND SCIENTISM

Eventually, logical positivism died; in fact, one might say it has the distinction of being the only philosophy to be proved wrong. When A. J. Ayer, the leading British logical positivist, was asked about its major defects, he responded, "Well, I suppose most of the defect is that at the end of it all, it was false."[f] As this became obvious, it transformed itself into analytic philosophy, which continues to hold on to empiricism, while expanding the possibilities of formalization and logics and blurring the line between fact and concept.

9 My task in my first academic position was to teach quantitative research.

While the demise of logical positivism was partly the result of its own internal inconsistencies and inadequacies, it was helped along—especially for those already inclined to question its status and power—by studies in the history and sociology of science. In the American academy, Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) (ironically published in the book series created by the Vienna Circle, which sought a unified understanding of all the sciences) had an immediate and profound impact.[10,g] Kuhn's historical studies undermined the assumptions that there was only one way of doing science, and that science accumulates knowledge, despite changes in its theoretical vocabulary (e.g., Einstein's theory is simply more general than Newton's and encompasses it as a special case).

Kuhn distinguished between normal and revolutionary science. Normal science proceeds on the basis of a shared scientific paradigm, a set of assumptions and practices (embodied in "exemplars" or exemplary experiments) that define the "proper" way of doing science within a particular field. It lays out the important questions, the appropriate methods for investigating them (i.e., how to do research), and the range of possible answers. As long as scientists operate within a paradigm, they do science in basically the same way, and science proceeds "normally," giving the appearance of an accumulation of knowledge.

However, sometimes the paradigm itself is challenged not by addressing its theoretical assumptions or empirical findings but by foregrounding phenomena that the dominant paradigm ignored or marginalized. A new paradigm claims that these phenomena are more fundamental to unlocking the mysteries constituting the field of study. It offers new exemplars of how to do "normal" science and, often, new assumptions about the nature of the reality under investigation. As a result, how facts are identified, the nature of their relations, and the meaning of concepts all change, and the "knowledge" of the old paradigm will not be transferable to or translatable into the new one. What appears to be the same concept or fact in the two paradigms is not the same. For example, Kuhn argued that everything that led Albert Einstein to the theory of relativity was visible in Newtonian physics. It's just that Newtonian physicists didn't think the phenomena were important enough to bother with. Einstein placed them at the center of his research, creating a new paradigm.

10 Kuhn was not the first one to offer an antipositivist view of science, nor was he the most philosophically eloquent; that distinction probably belongs to French philosophers such as Gaston Bachelard and Georges Canguilhem. But the work of various sociologists of science, such as Robert K. Merton, as well as the historical research of, for example, Bruno Latour, also contributed to the criticism of positivism.

As a result, what gravity means in the Newtonian paradigm isn't the same as what it means in the Einsteinian universe (just as the meaning and significance of the "gene" change between Mendelian and biochemical genetics).

Kuhn further argued against the radical separation of observation statements and theory statements. Facts are not theory-free; they cannot be separated from theoretical assumptions. What you "see" depends on what you assume, what you think you already know, and how you go about producing knowledge. Consequently, knowledge cannot be accumulated across paradigms. Instead, science proceeds through a series of shifts between incommensurable paradigms.[11] Whatever Kuhn's intentions, his work turned science into another cultural system, one of multiple ways of seeing and thinking about the world, with no unique claim to authority. The door to other possibilities had been opened, and many lights came shining through the cracks.

A BRIEF NOTE ON POLITICS

Having spent so much time on a rather arcane academic dispute, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the turbulent politics of the post–World War II decades, which were marked by many—often interconnected—political struggles nationally, internationally, and globally. The struggles and movements addressed every major dimension of human life, including economic, social, political, and cultural lives. They targeted economic inequalities and greed, governmental corruption and incompetence, war and nuclear armaments, racism and ethnic hatred, gender and sexual discrimination, coloniality and imperialism, overconsumption and commodification, environmental degradation, and even the boredom and stultifying conformity of middle-class life. Anticolonial wars, civil rights, gay rights, feminism, the antiwar movement, the antinuclear campaign, demonstrations against global capitalism, the visibility of socialism, Black Power, hippies, counterculture—all were reshaping the United States, penetrating the interstices of institutional and

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11 While this was certainly how Kuhn was read, and the reading can be justified from the text, it is important to note that Kuhn eventually criticized such "relativist" readings and moderated his argument, pulling back from the assumption of complete incommensurability, allowing for communication across and transitions between paradigms. Still, his work opened the door as well to more discursive and rhetorical analyses of science, asking how it is that the sciences have constructed and secured—and continue to do so—a unique claim to truth, transparency, and objectivity. Kuhn, "Objectivity, Value Judgment, and Theory Choice," in *Essential Tension*.

everyday life. They undermined the myth of the happy, flourishing nation presented in mainstream culture and media.

But they were not limited to one country or one continent. All over the world, political struggles appeared in the streets as people took on whatever issues mattered. People created broad alliances and often dismantled them just as quickly. And people created and performed their own cultures—in music, film, literature, theater, and the material arts, but also in new forms of community, socialization, spirituality, and learning. Around the world, the taken-for-granted ideas and ways of thinking of modern society were being challenged.

By now, you are probably asking what this has to do with the rise of Theory. Part of the answer is obvious: institutions of higher education were a major site for the organization, expression, and action of many of the struggles and cultures. Not surprisingly, all the "noise" on campuses worldwide reverberated through the entire academy, affecting faculty, students, and even administrators. Often it was resisted or even crushed, but like the music that was its constant soundtrack, it permeated everything. It could not be stopped—in dormitories, classrooms, or even laboratories.

The less obvious part of the relation of these new political movements and Theory was that science was often involved in the very structures that were being attacked. And since the sciences were so visible and accessible in universities, they were immediate targets for their cooperation with and contributions to racism, imperialism and militarism, nuclear weapons and genocide, pollution and the monetization of resources, by dismissing every negative outcome as an unintended consequence, a side effect. Science was called to justify itself, and it mostly failed, which led many to reject the claims of scientific objectivity, political neutrality, and progressiveness that had justified positivism. The door was opened even wider, and even more came rushing through.

NEW TRADITIONS

Some academics and intellectuals in the 1960s began to argue that the uniqueness of human life demanded different concepts and methods from those defining the study of the natural world. They turned to a heterogeneous tradition of theories known as the *Geisteswissenschaften* (literally, the sciences of spirit).[12] The human sciences are built on a distinction between

12 It included the seventeenth-century historian Giambattista Vico; neo-Kantians like Wilhelm Dilthey, Ernst Cassirer, and Max Weber; certain Marxist social and cultural

movement (stimulus and response, cause and effect) as the object of the natural sciences, and action, which was unique to humans because it necessarily involved meanings, intentions, goals, and volition. There is a difference between my arm rising and my raising my arm. Human beings make choices about how they behave, and those choices are informed by the understandings, values, emotions, and desires they bring to a situation. Human life cannot be reduced to the status of an object, even a natural (living) one. The study of human life demanded its own ways of thinking, its own sense of the theoretical and the empirical.[13]

The rediscovery of this complex body of work offered new histories of modern thought and set the stage for the emergence of Theory. To a large extent, this revitalization of thinking was built on three fundamental assumptions that were now foregrounded as constitutive of modern thought: First, reality is defined relationally; relationality is the alternative to "facts." Second, reality is constructed rather than given; the world is made to be the way it is. Various versions of constructionism defined the alternative to foundationalist philosophies. And, third, reality is always complex and contingent.

These assumptions posed three founding questions: What are the forms and natures of the relations that constitute human reality? What are the processes and agencies by which relations are themselves constituted? Do such assumptions deny truth and inevitably lead to relativism? Does the denial of a single, universal Truth mean that there are no truths? Do relationality and constructionism mean that the realities we experience are not real? As you shall see, these questions and arguments are woven into many of the lectures here.

Taken together, these assumptions and questions pose thinking as critique, asking, How did the present (or whatever you want to think about) come to be what is? What are its conditions of possibility? After all, if it is all constructed, it could have been otherwise. But this poses further difficulties: To

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critics like C. Wright Mills and John Berger; pragmatic sociologists like Robert Park, W. I. Thomas, and George Herbert Mead; and phenomenological sociologists like Alfred Schutz and Peter Berger. But it also existed on the fringes of psychology, economics, and political science. These would become visible much later in the twentieth century.

In my professional travels outside the Anglophone academy, I am often greeted as a "scientist," since Wissenschaften presents science as the rigorous excavation and organization of knowledge.

13 The nature of the relations between these two understandings or descriptions of human behavior—e.g., between the neurophysiology or biochemistry of emotions, and more qualitative, experiential, or discursive accounts—remains highly contested.

what extent is humanity an active agent in the processes by which reality is produced? Does this involve matters of language? Subjectivity? Do we need to challenge the hubris of humanity, the assumption of humanity's exceptionalism that makes it into the creator of its own reality, the master of its own fate? Do these processes involve agencies over which humans have little or no control?

Such questions have a long history: Copernicus argued, against common wisdom, that the Earth is not the center of the universe—and, by implication, deprived humanity of its place at the center of creation. Baruch Spinoza seemed to reduce humanity to simply one among the infinite expressions of God. Adam Smith's "invisible hand" and Karl Marx's theory of economic determination suggested that people were not in control of their own lives, that they are driven by forces working behind their backs. Charles Darwin's theory of evolution (and later Gregor Mendel's discovery of genes), as well as Sigmund Freud's theory of the unconscious, further challenged humanity's status and capabilities. And developments in physics (e.g., James Maxwell's theory of thermodynamics and Albert Einstein's theory of relativity) also challenged the special place of humanity in the universe. These are the questions that have haunted and continue to haunt those who try to understand human realities. And these are questions that animate many of the following lectures.

A PEDAGOGY OF THEORY

All this leads me back to my classes and the conditions that defined these lectures. The fact is that students came to my classes with their own agendas. Some were interested in a particular social or political problem; some were interested in particular theories. Some wanted to find the right theories to address specific questions, and some were looking for the theory that would deliver Truth. Some used it to meet requirements, and some found it therapeutic. A few sought new ways of thinking for the times, and some just liked to think, even about thinking itself.

But this was the moment of Theory, and what most of them wanted was a road map to navigate and make sense of the overwhelming number of theories that were rushing through the floodgates, and of the complex relations among them—including agreements and disagreements, appropriations and collaborations. They faced a chaotic hodgepodge of apples and oranges, but also of nuts, vegetables, cereals, and so on. They did not know how to read theories or to think about them. They were trying to come to grips, responsibly I hoped, with the anarchic and oneiric wonderland of Theory.

There are many ways to teach Theory, each with its own strengths and weaknesses. And each has its own problems. The three most common approaches are the survey, "critical thinking," and what for lack of a better name I will call rhetoric. The survey course does just what its name suggests: it introduces students to a wide array of current theories. The problem is selection; given the constant proliferation of theories, each of which is itself producing its own progeny, how do you decide which theories are important enough to be included? No survey can ever adequately cover the terrain, consider all the possibilities, field all the questions; in the end, the selection criteria usually remain hidden. Inevitably, any survey leaves out what others see as the most important, influential, creative, or original thinker(s). The result is that the many different and often outstanding efforts to introduce people to Theory do not play well together.

Critical thinking attempts to give students the capacity to use theories to criticize specific assumptions and their consequences. The problem is that every theory can be criticized, and there is no way to stop the criticism. The only end points are nihilism, which denies the possibility of going on thinking, or forms of judgment predicated on normative ethical and political values.

The rhetorical approach is a mélange of the first two. It seeks to help students recognize different concepts and their uses, as well as different forms of analysis and argument. It aims to enable them to think about whether this concept, or that analytic practice, is the best or even an appropriate way to engage a particular problem. One has to make choices in thinking about the world, and those choices should never be easy; they should not result from laziness or ignorance, or from personal biases or preconceived certainties. They have to be thought out, fought over. As important as this is, it does not offer a road map of the plenitude of theories.

I looked for another way, which would show how the various theories are related. I wanted my students—you—to see them as participants in different, not always coherent, histories and conversations, responding to and challenging each other's questions. There had to be a way to map the roots and the routes that led to and connect theories, that recognize the range of effective ambiguities, displacements, and disagreements that might circulate around them, and in the modes of argument, commensuration, and equivocation that constitute the conversations of thought. And as if that weren't enough, I needed them (you) to understand the complex relations between thinking and its historical contexts, without giving either too much power. Only then can you understand the continuities and discontinuities through

which theories can be appropriated into multiple contexts, with disparate meanings and effects, and with different justifications for whatever power they may have.

I came up with a rather idiosyncratic pedagogy, based around two concepts: deep theory and backstory, both of which I will explain in the first lecture. For the moment, using an uncomfortable metaphor, I offered a representation of the neural net constituting the ground from which Theory emerged. And, much to my amazement, it seemed to work, even after the moment of Theory had passed, in the last years of the millennium.

The concern for theory did not go away with the passing of Theory; if anything it got stronger as it took new forms. Two things happened. First, the multiple reasons why students reach for theory, and the multiple ways they want to use it, became too obvious to ignore or to capture under the sign of Theory. Students increasingly approached theory with a concern for either careers (I have never really understood that one) or social and political activism. The former makes the rhetorical approach reasonable, while the latter tends to put a modifier before theories. Thus, these days, you are more likely to find classes in critical race theory, decolonization theory, communist theory, or trans theory than a class in Theory or some particular school of theory. These students realize there is no direct correlation between theories and political positions, although some theories may be more useful in addressing a particular issue while others may be inadequate to the problem or may even erase it. There are many theories that provide an understanding of a particular issue; there are many ways to theorize a particular struggle, and they may lead you to different conclusions and strategies.

While this change in how theory was taken up was not a surprise—after all, it had always been there—the second development did catch me off guard. There has been a growing if still small interest in a public conversation about theory. A few academics have decided that they need to share the multiplicity and complexity, but also the omnipresence, of theory in order to perhaps create new possibilities for collective thinking. Consider these lectures one such effort! At the same time, there is a growing skepticism about the authority of science (despite the media's continuing scientism), and some people—the numbers do not matter—are looking for other ways of understanding the conditions in which people live and the forces that are determining and changing them. Brought together, they raise a small hope that we might forge common grounds, common languages, and some common trust, for other pathways to knowledge, other ways of theorizing and thinking.

NOTES

a. Comte, *Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte.*
b. Carnap, *Unity of Science*, 21–22.
c. Ayer, "Logical Positivism," 8:12.
d. Rorty, *Linguistic Turn.*
e. Popper, *Logic of Scientific Discovery.*
f. Ayer, "Logical Positivism," 34:41.
g. Kuhn, *Structure of Scientific Revolutions.*