

ON

THE
CLAIMS
OF
THEORY
—
ELIZABETH
S.
ANKER

PARA-

DOX

ON PARADOX

BUY

ON PARA

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CLAIMS
OF
THEORY

ELIZABETH
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To my parents, Roy and Ellen Anker

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INTRODUCTION

On Paradox

“Was that a paradox?” asked Mr. Erskine. “I don’t know. Perhaps it was. Well, the way of paradoxes is the way of truth. To test reality we must see it on the tightrope. When the verities become acrobats, we can judge them.” —Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890)

He played with the idea and grew wilful; tossed it into the air and transformed it; let it escape and recaptured it; made it iridescent with fancy and winged it with paradox. The praise of folly, as he went on, soared into a philosophy, and philosophy herself became young . . . —*The Picture of Dorian Gray*

A paradigm can, for that matter, even insulate the community from those important social problems that are not reducible to the puzzle form, because they cannot be stated in terms of the conceptual and instrumental tools the paradigm supplies. —Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962)

Paradox is what happens to Dorian Gray, Oscar Wilde’s iconic protagonist. Wilde’s 1891 novella follows Gray’s corruption by the worldly-wise Lord Henry, setting in motion an aging process reflected only in Basil’s painting of Dorian (rather than on Dorian’s face). It is through paradox that Lord Henry—dubbed “Prince Paradox” by Dorian himself—cajoles

Dorian. When they first meet, the “wilful paradox” of Lord Henry’s words possesses a “subtle magic” that “touched some secret chord that had never been touched before, that [Dorian] felt was now vibrating and throbbing to curious pulses.” Throughout, Lord Henry champions the logic of paradox not only for its “acrobatic” skill but also for staving off a “creeping common sense.”¹

This book argues that we are all heirs of Wilde and compatriots of Lord Henry in our shared dedication to paradox. Its thesis is that faith in paradox has been a hallmark of left intellectual life, in particular defining what it means to do theory. Even for scholars (whether of history or law) with no special investment in literature or art, the logic of paradox governs our inquiries, discoveries, puzzles, methods, commitments, and self-images. Since the advent of theory within the Anglo-American academy, this has been true across the humanities—within scholarship, classrooms, and beyond.

Such devotion to paradox has not always been the case, and this book therefore asks: how did such a spirit install itself within critical and humanistic thought? How and when did we become, like Dorian, seduced by paradox and, like Lord Henry, its ambassadors? What are the features and effects of reasoning through paradox; how has it shaped our intellectual habits and pursuits? What circumstances have allowed paradox to operate as its own epistemology: a way of perceiving the world that more or less dictates how and what we can imagine and even think?

Wilde’s epigrammatic thought suggests initial answers to these questions, illustrating a few recurring aspects of paradox and its logic. Wilde’s memorably irreverent style is representative in countless ways: theorists today inherit not only a Wildean fascination with paradox but other of his doctrines as well. Wilde’s appeals to paradox are frequently overdetermined, entwining a cluster of meanings. Paradox serves most immediately for Wilde to diagnose a given reality, although in a diagnosis that unmasks what he thereby derides as complacency and the status quo. In so doing, Wilde’s witticisms capture why the logic of paradox has been indispensable to critique—as I’ll argue, perhaps its defining technology. While reminiscent of the instinct to define theory itself as a disputing of common sense, that tactic of leveraging paradox to debunk the taken-for-granted also echoes the Oxford English Dictionary’s first entry for that word: “a statement or tenet contrary to received opinion or belief.”² There is accordingly a self-consciousness about Wilde’s tributes to paradox, staged within Mrs. Erskine’s question (“Was that a paradox?”) in the epigraph above. As we will see, one badge of theory has been reliance on paradox as a method and analytic mode.

But that is not all: still more is at stake within Wilde's many hymns to paradox. In issuing both diagnoses and critiques, Wilde's paradoxes foretell access to elevated forms of truth—or to “the verities” “on the tightrope.” Despite being playful, Wilde's paradoxes encode more complex, nuanced, deeper—and hence exclusive or exceptional—ways of knowing. These expectations for paradox have also been fundamental to theory. With such appeals, Wilde's writing further invests that logic with aestheticized (even erotic) qualities: his paradoxes are pulsing, throbbing, and “iridescent with fancy.” These lyrical, metamorphic, tropological, charismatic dimensions of reasoning through paradox are similarly far from unusual: an embrace of paradox specifically as a *style* has united theorists of all inclinations.

By no means last, it is hard to escape the autobiographical thrust of Wilde's relish for paradoxes, evident in his claim that the characters Basil, Dorian, and Lord Henry are all varying reflections of himself. This reflexivity plays out in multiple ways. Basil's painting assumes such metacritical significance, embodying Wilde's ambition to invent “a new personality for art” that would at once be a statement of “modern times.”³ Indeed, we'll see that the language of paradox has offered one of the most authoritative and enduring frameworks for describing the experience *not only* of modernity (as a political, socioeconomic, cultural, and psychic condition) *but also* of art. Wilde's self-referentiality thus taps into a time-honored romance of the legendary artist or thinker as a gadfly or pariah—exiled to the socially marginalized, contrarian location of the *para doxa*. Much like Wilde, humanists have long seen themselves in paradox, projecting their missions, desires, and fears of persecution onto that logic. While naming the burdens of the outcast, however, paradox has simultaneously provided a vehicle for rhapsodizing that plight, in thinking that exalts what I will explain as various “paradoxes of exclusion” not only for purveying keener, heightened understanding but also as the provenance of notions like justice, ethics, and democracy.

Since these vast expectations for paradox have not always existed, one goal of this book is to disentangle the many threads—historical, political, cultural, scholarly—that wove paradox into a comprehensive and accommodating explanatory fabric. Some possessing deep philosophical roots and others forged in the cauldron of the mid-twentieth century, a web of disparate though now tightly enmeshed influences came together to fashion paradox into what I will conceive as a type of intellectual paradigm.⁴ To grasp how a generalized spirit in the postwar air evolved into an all-encompassing and tenacious cosmology, this book's examples range far and wide within (and beyond) what one might denominate as the “theory canon.” Its case

studies are comparatively sweeping. What follows investigates how ideas about paradox *both* orchestrated *and* were themselves implanted by proliferating debates about the character of modernity; the fortunes of legal and political rights; radical social movements post-'68; the value of a liberal arts education; crucibles of trauma and witnessing; and much, much more.

As an explanatory prism, the term *paradox* naturally consorts with a chain of mutually reinforcing and often interchangeable rhetorical-analytic cousins (contradiction, antagonism, aporia, ambivalence, irony, ambiguity, indeterminacy, Otherness, opacity, complexity, dialecticism, and so on). While I'll parse the distinctions separating these and other near synonyms for paradox, this book's main project is to raise questions about such thinking's epistemic sway: to inquire into everything that the logic of paradox has come to engulf—and in the process, to obscure and to discard. It argues that faith in paradox has been transacted at an increasingly exorbitant price, and it sets out to recover intellectual-political resources and horizons that such a mindset surrenders and forbids. But as an internal critique, this book argues less for abandoning paradox than for its containment: for offsetting such thinking's conceptual dominance with an expanded, diversified toolkit of criticism and theory. Its reservations about the intellectual equipment of paradox flow above all from the concern that critical theory has lost sight of that tradition's guiding ambitions. Conviction in paradox has diverted us from goals like just coexistence, social belonging, principled resistance and dissent, collective action, and, perhaps above all, critical, humanistic inquiry broadly. To track the many (mis)adventures of paradox, the following analyses will therefore journey through encyclopedic topics of debate as well as down certain rabbit holes, grappling with what "theory" "is" and from whence its many guises came.

The Genetics of Theory

Like most if not all books, this one tells stories—or, more accurately, a maze of interlocking ones. Each chapter revisits what is really the same story involving the many forces that aligned to consecrate paradox as a way of knowing and a left intellectual creed, although by adopting a series of divergent perspectives on those developments. With alternating protagonists—ranging from modernity to literary criticism to human rights to higher ed—each chapter unfolds microchronicles that replay a parallel narrative trajectory and recurring set of themes. Recursive, this web of intellectual genealogies all converging on paradox as a near talismanic answer offers one angle on

why that spirit has functioned as a governing edict for whole generations of scholars, including schools of thought otherwise far from compatible or sympathetic. While many of this book's examples magnify points of disagreement over paradox and that logic's implications, its accumulation of varied thinkers and debates all independently endorsing the truth claims of paradox is designed to capture such thinking's supple adaptability as well as power. The sheer array of intellectual puzzles such a logic has *both* inspired *and* proficiently unraveled will illustrate why paradox came to be naturalized as a self-propagating worldview.

This book is, on the one hand, a testament to the industry of such thinking, and it aims to vivify the dynamic energy and often giddy excitement that led paradox to be enshrined as *the* conceptual prism of our times. One clear source of that authority lies with the basic accuracy of paradox as a diagnosis. It is hard to imagine a world—or frankly a life worth living—without paradox, complexity, ambivalence, and contradiction. Many aspects of contemporary existence are wildly paradoxical; as a result, many (if not most) intellectuals have flat out labeled modernity a condition of avalanching paradox, as we will at length consider. Even more, it is near impossible to conceive of critical inquiry—or for that matter thought itself—without paradox. Much of the pleasure of theory lies with the operations of paradox: with the epiphanic, cunning, delicious, unexpected discoveries that paradoxes often elicit. Yet precisely given these attractions, this book, on the other hand, scrutinizes the pitfalls and snares of such a mind-set. It examines the perils of intellectual engrossment with paradox, and it argues that too much has been sacrificed on that altar. While demonstrating why intellectual obeisance to paradox can tend to stultify, it simultaneously seeks to retrieve registers of thought throttled or interdicted by that logic, suggesting why paradox will not always be the best or the only answer to every question.

Along the way, the book recounts something of a perfect intellectual storm: a storm that overtook left intellectual life amid the same decades that witnessed the rise and institutionalization of theory. That dawn of theory, it argues, inculcated a religion of paradox that remains a calling card of the radical, academic, progressive, and theoretically informed left. Poststructuralism, Marxism and the Frankfurt School, Foucault, psychoanalysis, critiques of race and gender oppression, existential philosophy including theology, post-Saussurean theories of representation: these influences and more arrived on the doorsteps of Anglo-American universities to be ordained as “theory”—and to go on to revolutionize higher education.

Taking up initial residence in language and literature departments, that thriving body of thought annexed many of those fields' preoccupations, namely with the literary, poetic, or aesthetic. Radiating across the humanities and into pockets of the social sciences, the innovations now associated with theory spurred not only contagious anticipation but also deep conflicts and rifts. While precipitating canon wars that overhauled the syllabi and research archives of entire disciplines, that ferment also spawned now semi-independent academic programs (like Science and Technology Studies or Feminist Gender and Sexuality Studies), with the net effect of remaking the structure and orientation of major sectors of the university as we know it. This commotion within the ivory tower eventually found itself popularly disseminated, chaperoning (and capitalizing on the enthusiasm of) innumerable legal-political movements for sociopolitical change and overcoming. And while spreading the gospel of paradox far and wide, this prospering of theory simultaneously augmented the meanings and associations of paradox as an alluring language—in albeit subtle ways.

Beyond such upheaval within the academy, the transitions charted in this book are a byproduct of the peculiar sociopolitical and cultural climate of especially the 1970s and '80s. As others have suggested, the "theory era" harnessed many energies orphaned after the dissipation of 1960s-style radicalism, as the broad ethos and certain principles of the counterculture and student protest were redomiciled within then-blossoming scholarly leftisms and, eventually, the humanities classroom. Academic discourse repackaged many rallying cries of '68: anti-authoritarianism, nonconformism, anti-institutionalism, experimentalism, moral transgressiveness, a symbolics or aesthetics of politics, and belief in impromptu or "free," uncensorable expression.⁵ Just as for Wilde almost a century earlier, the lens of paradox has synthesized these commitments, amalgamating them into a cohesive yet intoxicating philosophy. As a repository for the 1960s' unspent yearnings, the language of paradox has channeled not only that era's exuberantly mind-freeing (and even psychedelic) élan but also its consciousness-raising and justice-oriented mandates, which prevail to this day.

Simultaneously, intellectual life during the 1970s was indelibly imprinted by the Cold War. That context also bequeathed theory multiple warrants for paradox, along with a lingering fixation on that geopolitical era's phantoms. The anti-authoritarianism (and anxieties regarding totalitarianism in particular) understandably rampant during the Cold War readily colluded with the residual mood of '68, as those dual vectors of paradox cross-pollinated and fused. In addition, the Cold War injected the language of

paradox with charged and historically precise valences still redolent within many if not most areas of theory. As intellectuals across the ideological map (including liberals and conservatives) wrestled with Cold War politics, they regularly anatomized totalitarianism in terms of a hostility to paradox and everything that quality was understood to telegraph (uncensorable speech, human rights, pluralism, Otherness, justice). And whereas the spirit of paradox was conceived as intrinsically antitotalitarian, democracy (being totalitarianism's foil) was increasingly viewed as a bastion of unmasterable paradox. Such thinking hallows paradox as an almost gnostic code binding those dual political forms together, impregnating each with an intimate if inverted inner logic. Once imbued with such a cocktail of ethical-just-democratic and protolinguistic qualities, paradox was further weaponized as a poison pill geared to sabotage power's encroachments. This premise that paradox and its armory (contradiction, ambivalence, dialecticism, indeterminacy, and so on) are vital to the unmasking and defeat of potentially authoritarian power remains a methodological staple for many.

Meanwhile, a congeries of philosophical-intellectual shifts helped to ingrain other emergent expectations for paradox—expectations that confirmed and redoubled all of the foregoing. These shifts recalibrated the tenor and resonances of that language (and its adjacent terminologies), infusing paradox with a distinctly rehabilitative if not transformative aura. One such innovation lies with what is often dubbed the linguistic turn, and especially its post-Saussurean incarnations. As Toril Moi suggests, the “doxa concerning language and meaning” within the humanities remains post-Saussurean, and this book's arguments build on Moi's assessment.⁶ Whether transmitted via Lacan or deconstruction or a radicalized pedagogy operationalized by critiques of power, one thing the linguistic turn did was to install paradox within essentially *all* claims to meaning, representation, truth, identity, subjectivity, politics, justice, ethics, and more. In its wake, it has been axiomatic that basically all “representations” (political, literary, identitarian, or otherwise) must be deciphered with reference to their enabling “exclusions” and other “necessary failures”—in a relay that deems paradox both constitutive and brimming with consummate (albeit recondite) meaning.

What thus transpired with developments like the linguistic turn was a growing impulse to highlight the redemptive promise (rather than the structural oppressions) encoded by the language of paradox. Theorists for centuries (if not millennia) have relied on paradox and other dialectical maneuvers as an apparatus of critique, unsettling orthodoxy by exposing the contradictions it camouflages. But the instinct to valorize the mind-opening,

emancipatory aspects of paradox was encouraged by the arrogation of two specific philosophical traditions that have historically enlisted paradox to negotiate various legitimization crises—crises mirroring those increasingly understood to plague all meaning-making practices. One such source is theology, à la a blend of diverse variants one might very differently associate with Søren Kierkegaard, W. E. B. Du Bois, and legal thinkers like Robert Cover and Carl Schmitt. Established genres of paradox (i.e., theodicy) borrowed from religious thought contained a trove of strategies for explaining why apparent limits (i.e., God’s ineffability, silence, allowance of evil) could in fact be insignia of glory and greatness. A text like Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling* thus recounts such “struggles of faith” through a vocabulary composed of paradox and other familiar grammars that today reverberate across theory: incalculability, incommensurability, impossibility, singularity, unintelligibility.⁷ Instead focused on “political” paradox, Schmitt’s presence has similarly towered, among other things bestowing on the exceptional and excluded—or the marginalized positionality of a paradox—a privileged, “sovereign,” constituent power. Not last, Du Bois’s famed notion of “double consciousness”—which Du Bois himself labels a “paradox”—makes separate recourse to theological vestiges of paradox, although to convert the pain of oppression into a grace-like font of insight and renewal.

Just as important, aesthetic criticism has provided theorists with another storehouse of tools for contending with paradoxes. After all, a paradox is a rhetorical figure (like apostrophe, simile, metonymy, irony, and so on), so it is not surprising that lyrical-metaphorical resonances would, as for Wilde, animate that logic. But those associations also activate a long tradition of accounting for the peculiar truths procured by encounters with art and literature through a deep grammar of paradox. Over the centuries (if not millennia), paradox has been widely taken as a, if not the, signature of the aesthetic: of what makes art *art*. While here too partner to a retinue of related terminologies, in particular has the language of paradox been taken to designate art’s unique province. Within aesthetic criticism, that grammar fulfills functions strikingly analogous to those at play within theology, disclosing ostensible deficiencies or limits (such as art’s tenuous evidentiary status) to be replete with epistemic bounty. It is not hard to comprehend why art would suffer a legitimization crisis: one rehearsed ever since Plato’s infamous charge that “fictions lie.” But those “liar’s paradoxes” of art and its ambiguous claims to truth have simultaneously been heralded as its *sine qua non*. Whether in the early modern period’s many rebuttals of Plato or contemporary discourses on art’s singularity, the technicities of paradox have

converted art's lack of real-world or calculable bearings into a predicament worthy of veneration, just as anti-instrumentalist creeds of paradoxically "mattering without mattering" have been oft-sloganized within popular defenses of the humanities.

These multiple conduits for paradox assembled into the definition of a Kuhnian paradigm. As I'll show, certain features peculiar to reasoning through paradox (versus irony, or ambiguity, or contradiction and the dialectic) worked to synchronize those threads, merging them into a concordant and self-sustaining intellectual fabric. Precisely that eclecticism has rendered the logic of paradox versatile and elastic: a conceptual scheme readily transported to digest a host of far-flung topics and debates. Yet what also happened is that well-established metrics for reckoning with paradox inherited from theology and aesthetics were grafted onto sites of paradox not, however, so clearly aesthetic or symbolic or spiritualized in their fiber. Whether trauma, or democracy, or the radicalized liberal arts classroom, the dynamics of such phenomena have been widely modeled upon—and dissected according to—genres for navigating paradox crafted within alternate disciplines and arenas. As a result, those phenomena, first, became permeated with redemptive energies one might be inclined to confine to realms of experience like religion or literature. Second, discrepant scales, calibers, and auspices of paradox came to be collapsed: conjoined into—and capable of being delineated by way of—a single and all-enveloping explanatory matrix. Paradox has been the connective tissue cohering that matrix, just as it has acted as the axis around which those multiform inquiries (into art, politics, law, modernity, agency, history, the subject, and more) collectively rotate. Hence, this book explores the consolidation of a style of thought that has been, on the one hand, formulaic in its tendency to naturalize paradox as a mind-set and *fait accompli* but that, on the other, has been strikingly capacious in the plethora of issues it has adjudicated. Another perplexity of paradox and its logic involves those many homogenizing, routinizing repercussions.

By now, it should be clear that this book is, more than anything, a meditation on the state of theory and in particular on its successes and failures. Insofar as it paints an unusual picture of that landscape, that account foregrounds the diverse traffic conducted by paradox. One reason such a logic has dictated so much involves its frequently exhaustive frame of reference: as for Wilde, a single allusion to paradox can embed a discovery, a diagnosis, a critique, an objective, an ethos, a modality of thought, and almost autobiographical ruminations. This is also why the book's analyses

cover such an expansive territory, ranging across broad swaths of commonly anthologized, taught, and otherwise exalted theories, thinkers, and texts. In mapping an intellectual formation fully engineered by paradox, that scope is devised to place into high relief what reasoning through paradox not only confers with the watermark of momentousness or authority but also overlooks and shuns. Although rewarding scholarship brandishing its complexity, irony, difficulty, and ambiguity on its sleeve, the edicts of paradox also abjure quite a lot. What follows therefore investigates everything that the logic of paradox forecloses and expels: what it prevents its practitioners from thinking and arguing and valuing and seeing. This is especially crucial because the truth claims of paradox are secured by various negative theologies: by stipulating (in keeping with the structure of the *para doxa*) what a given domain (whether the humanities or justice or modernity) is *not*, or with reference to what something appears to supersede and to banish. In such ways has theory similarly been constituted by its exceptions, exclusions, bans, and refusals: by all that it purports *not* to be. And insofar as belief in paradox can be self-reinforcing, that prophetic status centrally derives from what its logic occludes from view—even while being wholly dependent on those omissions for its very existence.

Only Paradoxes to Offer: The Story of Rights

This book ended up in a very different place from where it began. It started with a narrow objective: to weigh in on the explosion of interest in human rights across the humanities, including my own field of literary studies, during the first and second decades of the twenty-first century. In taking stock of that efflorescence, I was struck by the regularity and even predictability of certain default assumptions regarding rights. Over and over again, attempts to theorize rights arrived at one or another stock conclusion regarding their paradoxes, even while holding out that insight as surprising if not revelatory. Whether to deem paradox fatal or fertile, essay upon essay after book upon book presented paradox as the chromosomal makeup of rights. Whereas for some a preliminary diagnosis, and for others the culmination of lengthy analyses, paradox seemed to emerge as its own governing principle. At once, I was astonished by the manifold roles paradox played within many such studies, representing *both* problem *and* solution—if not an uncanny providence. Far from last, a given citation to paradox frequently pertained to multiple facets of rights simultaneously, fast becoming overdetermined. I asked: how could one property carry out

such intricate theoretical labor, and for so many otherwise inharmonious thinkers?

While wrestling with what felt like an odd (and unremarked) consensus, I gradually observed such patterns of thought to extend far and wide beyond the narrow purview of debates about rights—and even beyond the precincts of theory. Worship of paradox started to show up every place I looked. Any random book from my shelves, whether acquired the week prior or in college, already contained diligently underlined sections that zeroed in on disclosures of paradox and contradiction. As I proceeded, my research for this project often felt eerily straightforward, given that I had already marked the exemplary passages providing fodder for my arguments years ago: passages all verifying paradox as a way of knowing and belief structure. Some best-selling theory texts made my research even easier by staging paradox in their titles: *Cruel Optimism*, *The Right to Maim*, *Ugly Feelings*, *The Queer Art of Failure*, *Vibrant Matter*, *Revolution of the Ordinary*, *The Emancipated Spectator*, *Black and Blur*, *Transnational America*, *The Cunning of Recognition*, *Enlightenment Orientalism*.⁸ Seemingly everywhere did paradox operate simultaneously as riddle and clue, enigma and cipher, the key to virtually anything that mattered—or at least to any question meriting theorization. Hence, I slowly began to accept that I was writing a book about questions much bigger than those besetting rights: that I was trying to apprehend something vaster than any discrete line of inquiry. Rather, I was investigating deep structures of thought, sacred ideals, foundational methodologies, and vocational callings—plainly put, the nostrums of theory.

Notwithstanding this project's ever-amplifying scope, rights have continued to offer an ideal platform for entertaining its main arguments. This is partly due to the fact that rights—arguably more than any other legal-political-philosophical construct, and since their modern inception—have been outright defined with reference to their incurable paradoxes. The premise that rights have “only paradoxes to offer” (per a book by Joan Scott) and that we must “suffer the paradoxes of rights” (per Wendy Brown) has been doctrinal.⁹ On the one hand, this view of rights is undoubtedly correct. Paradox has haunted rights' fortunes on nearly every level, causing the world's hopes for rights to be impaled on paradox after endless paradox. If anything, the globalization of rights has only multiplied those hazards, aggravating the sorts of worries ventured long ago by a thinker like Jeremy Bentham when he wittily called the idea of *natural* rights “nonsense upon stilts.”¹⁰

But on the other, theorists have responded to that diagnosis of paradox in markedly different, even opposing ways. In sorting theories of rights, I was therefore confused by what appeared a balkanized intellectual landscape. On one side was a healthy tradition of rights skepticism, wedded to a vision of paradox as structural, chronic, and lethal. For many, the determination that rights are riddled with paradox levels a damning verdict: a basis for jettisoning or otherwise disparaging rights. On the other side were cadres of thinkers who instead celebrated rights as vessels of justice, ethics, and democracy—and not *despite* but rather *because* of their plentiful paradoxes. These thinkers tended to seize on the *exact same* paradoxes of rights that elsewhere prompted condemnation—however, to celebrate that property rather than to lament its existence. Within both camps, moreover, a lot more than rights was implicated within the discovery of paradox: paradox acted as a linchpin demanding parallel conclusions about related phenomena comparatively afflicted by tenuous legitimacy or an exclusionary architecture. Marveling at this ostensible divide, I wondered: what occurred that allowed some theorists otherwise committed to a staunch “anti-legalism” to exalt rights as uniquely redemptive? And on the very grounds (paradox) that had conventionally toed the line of rights skepticism and refusal (paradox)?

Just as telling, certain theorists’ forays into rights seemed to have triggered watershed advances carrying broad significance. Jacques Derrida, Karl Marx, Jacques Lacan, Giorgio Agamben, Claude Lefort: these thinkers’ efforts to anatomize rights stimulated broad, thoroughgoing transitions in their respective oeuvres. Moreover, it was precisely due to overlapping paradoxes that rights came to be enmeshed within—and to glean larger lessons into—*both* the institutions embedding them (e.g., democracy) *and* abiding dilemmas understood to face law, politics, justice, ethics. This privileging of paradox also appeared to generate a type of conveyor belt inviting transference back and forth across contrasting and even unrelated problematics and domains, permitting the paradoxes of rights to be patterned on the foreclosures of the subject or deferrals of a text or an antinomian grace. Some of these relays struck me as unsurprising, for instance given trauma theory’s role in fostering academic interest in rights. But all of this traffic undeniably endowed the logic of paradox with chameleon, ambidextrous qualities—enabling sleights of hand, slippages, and conversions. This book looks to rights as one laboratory in the incredible virtuosity of reasoning through paradox.

Joan Scott’s 1996 *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man*, an intellectual history of the centuries-long struggle for women’s rights

in France that later chapters revisit, can afford an initial demonstration of this colossal labor frequently conducted by paradox. Followed by a colon in Scott's title, paradox issues a double diagnosis, indexing *both* the exclusions constitutive of rights *and* the plight of feminists fated to embody such failed universality. Yet to be expected by now, Scott's appeal to paradox signals a lot more simultaneously. For one, Scott plots feminist activism over history as a litany of successive encounters with paradox that, moreover, are held out as the recipe for *all* radicalized agency. In Scott's thinking, radical agency comes to be near synonymous with paradox, and for reasons that mirror other influential accounts of the resistant insurgency of society's marginalized and downtrodden. This is because feminist agency is above all actuated for Scott by the symbolic enactment of "inconsistency and ambiguity—of self-contradictoriness—within an orthodoxy that strenuously denies [its] existence."¹¹ However, we can pause to note a certain tension (which I'll extensively probe): paradox *both* denotes the machinery of women's oppression *and* harbors eye-opening, prolific, and even justice-oriented faculties. Not last, paradox is a bedrock of Scott's own method as a revisionist historian who sets out to excavate sites of heterogeneity, ambiguity, and fragmentation in the record—or what Michel Foucault would call "mak[ing] visible all of those discontinuities that cross us."¹² A symmetrical justificatory framework thus connects Scott's genealogical project as a revisionist historian seeking to uncover paradox with the radicalized agency mobilized by her French feminists—offering one early glimpse of why the logic of paradox tends to become autobiographical for theory.

Scott's kaleidoscope of paradox, like Wilde's, is far from anomalous. Over its course, this book examines a panoply of thought comparatively riveted by the transformative and consciousness-raising powers of paradox. To be sure, paradoxes are not foreign to the intellectual-political traditions often juxtaposed with theory: humanism, analytic philosophy, law, normative inquiry, (neo)liberalism. As Bertrand Russell once observed, "The point of philosophy is to start with something so simple as not to seem worth stating, and to end with something so paradoxical that no one will believe it."¹³ I'll therefore question the common gambit of accusing nonhumanistic, social scientific, quantitative disciplines of indifference to paradox: that move creates cartoonish straw men—albeit straw men that many regnant defenses of the humanities have fully required. Even more worrisome, we'll see, is the fact that crying paradox by no means represents an exclusively left or progressive or radical strategy, but rather is just as prone to smuggle in right-wing or reactionary agendas. Indeed, the jury is out over whether the

machinations of paradox have increasingly embezzled not only the politics of theory but also contemporary public life and civic debate. Nevertheless, it is also true that theory has been exceptionally spellbound by paradox and its charisma; other disciplines and variants of thought typically confine that logic to a much narrower intellectual berth. Only within theory has paradox overseen such multitudinous, vertiginous functions, dominating all stages and components of the reasoning process to emerge as a kind of oracle-like cipher.

This book, then, reckons with the intellectual-historical collisions that catalyzed these exorbitant aspirations for paradox. Those high hopes, we'll see, are both old and new. Although it is descended from fabled philosophical origins, something unusual transpired when growing ranks of left intellectuals began to regard paradox in a newly rejuvenating and metamorphic light, extolling the logic of paradox as something to be reveled in, promoted, and pursued. Flowering into its own self-sufficient explanatory principle, that logic has swallowed more and more and more. What follows consequently asks: when and why did paradox begin to legislate and presort our theoretical puzzles? How did paradox become *the* impetus for intellectual inquiry—occasioning, shepherding, and guaranteeing what, in the context of this study, will start to appear foregone conclusions? What environmental factors allowed paradox to acquire this unrivaled conceptual and critical acumen? Even more, what syndromes take hold when a single metric becomes so massively overburdened?

Autobiographies of Paradox

One such syndrome involves that logic's propensity to become intimately personal as well as self-referential. And in fact, this book in part recounts my own intellectual biography. Its beginnings stem from some of my earliest memories, traceable to a vision of my eight-year-old self poring over my father's study shelves. Like many academics during the late 1970s and early 1980s, my father (a professor of nineteenth-century American literature) had amassed a collection of books all differently haunted by the "age of atrocity" and that era's many crimes against humanity.¹⁴ Already at a young age, I internalized such an onus to tackle political evil head on. Later, my undergraduate education was constellated by philosophy and English majors that provided endless avenues for my continued probing of such matters, although primarily routed through existential and "postmodern" philosophy. Whereas college found me transfixed by thinkers like Mikhail

Bakhtin and Derrida and Fred Jameson, even in law school I convinced my professors to let me write seminar papers on Max Weber, Foucault, Virginia Woolf, Milan Kundera.

When I returned to the academy to write a dissertation on postcolonial literature and theory's relevance to human rights, Yale school approaches to that interdisciplinary juncture provided my main compass. In many respects, I was drawn to theories of human rights precisely because of their dizzying, irresolvable paradoxes. My first book wrestled with what I characterized as one distinct paradox of human rights: that "liberal" discourses of rights presume a strangely abstract and decorporealized subject, eviscerated by rationalist individualism. (My hiring talk at Cornell was titled "The Human Rights Paradox.") Even more telling, my book's rejoinder to that anemic subject of rights hinged on a methodology (adapted from phenomenology) for revealing apparent limits of rights to be, lo and behold, reservoirs of ethical, just, fecund paradox. My analyses thus relied on that logic to effectuate the very sorts of alchemy this book calls into question. Since then, my scholarship has frequently proceeded from the assumption that awakening submerged paradox can liberate law from its errors, just as my investment in literature will always rest on a hope that the vicissitudes of paradox attune us ethical and other complexity.

My classrooms have similarly paid frequent homage to paradox. Even today, nearly every novel or film or theoretical text I teach procures lessons in the virtues of qualities like indeterminacy and ambivalence, which I contrast with the moral hazards of stability, intelligibility, closure, transparency, resolution, and more. The twenty-first century academy certainly bears some responsibility for making available a literary canon stocked with texts verifying that wisdom, as chapters 4 and 5 discuss. But the point is that my classrooms and research alike have found me a regular evangelist for paradox; and on some levels, I am still a believer. The language of paradox will always conjure my sense of vocation, including the passion and exhilaration of a life of ideas. That love is something this book does strive to capture: to recreate the thrill of an intellectual mode that has captivated and defined entire disciplines and academic generations and sociopolitical movements and schools of thought. Despite its reservations, this book attempts to do justice to the radiance of a philosophical tradition that has proven world-altering and electrifying for so many.

However, what follows is foremost a chronicle of mounting frustration. When I began this project, my curiosity was piqued by what struck me as a startling predictability and homogeneity of thought. Reliance on paradox had

become rote and programmatic. But as I slowly recognized those bearings to be compulsory, claustrophobia set in. Allegiance to paradox had, with great irony, congealed into its own orthodoxy, into a regimen that suffocated free thinking and stymied creativity. Rather than provoking nuance or sophistication, insistence on paradox seemed to annihilate thought: to administer a kind of intellectual anesthesia. Every book in my theory library performed the exact same moves on what felt like autopilot, walking lockstep through a worn-out methodological repertoire. Texts that had previously invigorated me started to feel dead, robotic, and unoriginal. In too many talks at too many academic conferences, paradox might have ghostwritten the gag lines in advance. Perhaps counterintuitively, I was overwhelmed (rather than pleased) by the sea of evidence supporting my arguments, as literally every thinker or text I perused served to confirm what I was seeing.

These frustrations only deepened the longer I lived with this project. Beyond how the logic of paradox ossified thought, I grieved over its disciplinary effects. Careers were threatened for those who broke from its ranks. It also seemed one matter to dictate practices of reading literature, and yet another to submit life-threatening issues of politics or justice or law to such a threadbare machinery. Don't get me wrong, I have and will remain a proponent of many founding commitments of critical theory: to social justice, to defeating structures of oppression, to freedom from ideological conformity, to the critique of power, and even (*à la* Wilde) to the unmasking of philistine common sense. However, the clutches of paradox have too often sabotaged those principles, leading theory to forsake everything it has advocated. Of late, it has become a cottage industry to blame certain imperatives (like critique or paranoia or symptomatic reading) for selling theory out, and this book may well be numbered among those indictments. Nevertheless, blind adherence to paradox has appeared a tragedy of the worst, lowest common denominator winning out, despoiling other elements of an otherwise rich, lively, engaged intellectual formation.

Ongoing immersion in this project thus intensified my wariness regarding the intellectual habits that the arithmetic of paradox both entrenches and gratifies. In diagramming those priorities, I became dismayed by more than default positions or foreordained outcomes. Belying a frequent mystique of singularity and difference, that logic more accurately encourages facile homologies and sweeping parallels, often gaining momentum precisely by toggling seamlessly from one domain (say, semiotics or aesthetics) to another (say, politics) only to collapse them into a single economy of meaning and valuation. The same algebra recruited to decipher the meaning-making

practices of a text can thus be applied to account for political agency or rights. All the while, the humanities classroom gets touted as a microcosm of the political, teeming with consciousness-raising opportunities paralleling activism in the streets. Relatedly has democracy's lack of secure foundations been ransomed by the same apologetics enlisted to redress the justificatory crisis facing the ailing humanities, and precisely by modeling both those spheres' paradoxes of representation (of democracy's people and of the humanities' marginality) on the arbitrary slippages and deferrals that harbor a text's elusive "meaning." While such analogical transfers can be stirring, their emulsifying effects have felt disabling if not downright destructive. To me, a tradition staked on fantasies of radicalism seemed to have fallen victim to the very syndromes it sought most vigilantly to combat. As an edict, paradox appeared to have set theory up to succumb to its worst fears—to install itself as a universalism, a pure form and formalism ripe for cooptation.

Beyond my own peculiar intellectual pilgrimages, this book tells a wide network of stories, many of which I hope will feel recognizable (if not biographical) to my readers. Some of those tales concern developments that are resoundingly positive, whereas others are more mixed. For some readers, this book will recount the shifts that refurbished their home disciplines and departments, as many humanities fields became caught up in canon wars and other efforts to give voice to the paradoxical exclusions underwriting their historical foundations and ambit. For others, this book will describe the terms that presided over their primary fields' birthplace, as those mandates simultaneously inseminated new programs and majors across the liberal arts. For others still, it will explain the critical movements that swept through disciplines with partial footings in the social sciences, like sociology or psychology or law. There is no question that these innovations that rebuilt higher education, and thereafter rippled throughout popular culture, number among the most beneficial gifts of theory. However, the complex stakes of those gifts will appear less clearly salutary when tied to enchantment with paradox.

Readers with Marxist sympathies will likely approach this book as an odyssey of the dialectic and, perhaps, of its betrayal. In certain ways, this book does track the dialectic's fate in the aftermath of 1960s-style radicalisms, the institutionalization of theory, and the apex of poststructuralism. It examines dissipating hopes for the utopian transcendence promised by revolution—hopes superseded by a spirit of vagrant and irresolvable dialecticism. But this is not a book about the dialectic, and, more important, its main fights are not internal to vying factions of Marxist theory. At best, debates

about the dialectic surface intermittently, although it also submits that reasoning through contradiction (the usual *métier* of the dialectic) is ultimately cut from the same cloth as that of paradox. On the one hand, there is much truth to the notion that a spirit of paradox did colonize and overtake the dialectic, supplanting its status as the primary engine of history, change, power, domination, agency, and so on. Hence, the ensuing chapters ratify one standard rendition of the dialectic's trajectory post-'68: its replacement with an exuberant "modernism in the streets" of the sort chronicled by Marshall Berman.¹⁵ At the same time, one might counter Berman and wager that what more accurately triumphed was a negative dialectics akin to Theodor Adorno's, or a dialectic that foremost serves as a mediating device allowing conflictual, incommensurable ideals to coexist together. Nevertheless, what undoubtedly did ensue is that an uncabined dialecticism became something virtually every student of theory could get behind, papering over these and other schisms.

So on the other hand, I would put pressure on a retort this project has often met with: "well, what about the dialectic?" That impulse to distance Marxism from deconstruction and its ilk by appealing to the dialectic is all too easy. For one, the annals of Marxist theory are filled with many ardent crusaders for paradox—and not only figures like Slavoj Žižek, whose bravura performances tantalize precisely because they culminate with omnipresent paradox. Indeed, paradox is a punch line that Žižek's 2001 *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?*—an ostensible takedown of deconstruction—converges on a total of sixty-one times.¹⁶ Seminal thinkers like Georg Lukacs, Louis Althusser, and Fred Jameson are all celebrants of paradox, often substituting paradox for "properly Marxist" terms like contradiction or antagonism perforce.¹⁷ Hence, there is no question that Marxist brands of the dialectic deserve due credit for aiding and abetting the consolidation of paradox as an epistemology.

I expect some readers will therefore experience this book as a saga of competing radicalisms, or a battle for methodological-institutional dominance amid the academic peak of theory. Yet while parsing such quarrels, its main goal is to understand how otherwise acrimonious schools of thought settled their differences—all assenting to a common catechism of paradox. Despite how different sites of paradox can in fact incur competing responses (as we'll examine throughout), those contentions risk obscuring the significantly more profound and thoroughgoing consensus that set in across theory for its practitioners. That consensus was both choreographed and secured by a shared devotional of paradox. So notwithstanding eruptions

of internecine warfare like those roiling a field like literary studies amid this book's completion, rarely if ever has that infighting questioned paradox and its paramount authority.

Given that literary studies represents one of this book's backdrops, some readers may try to pigeonhole it accordingly, such as to take it as a statement of postcritique. However, those attempts would similarly miss the mark. While invested in rethinking the methodological precepts administering theory, this book does so in effort to better integrate our theory into our critical praxis. It therefore examines the reasons those projects have been sundered—with praxis, as Bernard Harcourt suggests, getting short shrift.¹⁸ The problem, in turn, is not with critique per se but rather that critique has been bowdlerized, truncated, and diverted along lines that increasingly prevent it from living up to task. This book's explanation for that depletion lies with the spell of paradox. Far from tangential or occasional, paradox has been *the* architecture of critique, as we will see again and again and again. It is this beholdenness to paradox that leaves critique in disrepair, although the final chapter proposes one itinerary for its renovation.

Other of this book's subplots will, I hope, indulge readers' specialized or idiosyncratic interests in varying ways. The status of critical work on law, inside and outside of the legal academy, is a theme within many chapters. As I argue, "anti-legalism" (often paired with "antinomian" visions of an antirationalist justice dispensed by versions of grace) is one artifact of conviction in paradox rife within much of the humanities. Debates about power and its guises also recur, along with theorizations of modernity; of the contours of radical agency; of aesthetics; and of selfhood and the subject. Lacanian psychoanalysis helped to naturalize a logic of paradox: an entire section of Lacan's *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis: 1959–60* is focused on (and titled accordingly) "The Paradox of *Jouissance*."¹⁹ Later thinkers incorporated such an itinerary of the subject into accounts of disciplinary power analogously scaffolded by paradox, as Judith Butler's 1997 *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* declares: "As a form of power, subjection is paradoxical."²⁰ This book contains many such underdeveloped leads begging for elaboration.

Still others will discern a narrative of theory's attempts to metabolize various allegations. As Thomas Keenan notes, "paradox" (like the epithet "postmodernism") was a standard ground for disparaging a thinker like Foucault (as in the antiquated term "paradox-monger").²¹ Yet that tactic of leveraging paradox as an accusation has not been alien to theorists' own civil wars. As John Searle recalls, Foucault himself claims to have charged

Derrida with something similar: with practicing a method of *obscurantisme terroriste*.²² Yet even more instructive is the reasoning that emerged to neutralize complaints like those differently directed at Derrida and Foucault. Indeed, what thinkers like Keenan self-consciously did was to accept the basic diagnosis of paradox but to dispute its essence and implications. Actively recalibrating the meanings and significance of paradox, what others mistook as a philosophical deficit or lapse (paradox) was instead embraced as the vector of an insurgent agency and ethics (paradox). Reliance on the logic of paradox to effectuate a type of transubstantiation links many of this book's examples.

With thinkers like Butler and Keenan in mind, this book further considers the dynamics that rendered theory a hodgepodge or melting pot of approaches and schools. Theory in the twenty-first century begs to be characterized by its eclecticism, of which Butler's blending of Foucault with Althusser with Hegel with psychoanalysis with deconstruction is prototypical. Here, too, the trappings of paradox are *both* what enabled *and* essential to that pluralism. Especially when harnessing the figural or tropological dimensions of paradox does such reasoning not only concatenate synergies and analogies (as metaphors and other rhetorical figures are wont to do) but also broker the merger and acquisition of disparate and arguably incongruous problematics into a single explanatory prism. To be sure, such catholicism is contagious in how it transgresses intellectual pieties, but it can simultaneously produce a kind of methodological grab bag from which one can pick and choose.

But the point is that *all* these different stories are present, just as an array of topics ranging beyond this book's remit would comply with its individual chapters' mirroring narrative arcs. Notwithstanding small points of departure, those tales are all, at their core, one and the same. One way to understand that consistency is as a textbook case of a "paradigm," as Thomas Kuhn famously theorized scientific orders of knowledge. Kuhn emphasizes the fact that a research community can adhere to a paradigm "without agreeing on, or even attempting to produce, a full interpretation or rationalization of it" or the existence of "any full set of rules."²³ Rather, the sheer number of "puzzles" and problematics that a paradigm works to assimilate, digest, and inspire will ensure its combined purchase and resilience. That the conceptual architecture of paradox has incorporated so many far-flung inquiries, issues, and debates—spinning off subsidiary frameworks and even theoretical microcommunities—thus tells us everything we need to know. As Kuhn explains, the crux of a paradigm is to be

sufficiently “open-ended” as to motivate a wealth of seemingly endless sites of application each of which conspires to reinforce the naturalness of that basic schema.²⁴

One of Kuhn’s agendas in reflecting on the nature of a paradigm is to make sense out of a research community’s seeming imperviousness to “incommensurabilities”—and hence striking immunity to change and challenge. In fact a successfully functioning paradigm will “often suppress fundamental novelties because they are necessarily subversive of its basic commitments.”²⁵ In drawing on Kuhn to contend with the grips of paradox, this book therefore foregrounds such thinking’s intolerances: its congenital allergies, resistances, and denials. Yet Kuhn’s formulation of a paradigm also registers the irony that precisely the throng of narratives a paradigm reconciles and absorbs can foretell its exhaustion. The very attributes enabling a paradigm’s survival can lead to its fatigue (if not looming extinction). Having incorporated so much, faith in paradox indeed writes off what Kuhn would call “anomalies”—or a gathering host of disturbances that call its foundational premises into dramatic question. Hence, still another cardinal feature of a paradigm lies with that community’s inability to recognize itself as thus beholden—even while that denial leads to a silencing of outliers with all the more militancy and vigilance.

The Logic of Paradox

The peculiar technicities of reasoning through paradox have themselves worked to enforce such fidelities and decrees. While ordaining certain substantive commitments, in particular has the veneration of paradox as a *style* sealed such reasoning against anomalies and other challenges. What is it about paradox as a stylistics, genre, and mode that exerts such control? As we will see, that logic often serves to harmonize clashing frequencies, as for Butler pacifying what might be sites of friction. On the one hand, this is because paradoxes are hoarders: they tend to stockpile heterogeneous meanings, often playing them off one another like Wilde in his clearly literary fashion. Hence within allegory, “paradox” has sometimes been personified as a flesh-and-blood character, allowing such a medley of meanings to loom larger than life. Like other rhetorical figures, paradoxes summon parallels, homologies, repetitions, and metamorphoses. Rather than to magnify dissimilarities, they tend to activate synchronicities that only contribute to their gravitational pull. But on the other hand, such thinking’s critical, contrarian orientation renders it simultaneously prone to scramble and

unsettle its referents, thwarting stabilization and predictability. Paradoxes frequently self-complicate (if not self-detonate)—which is exactly why they have been prized within theory. It is this endless volley of provisionalities, subversions, and remainders that can magnetize, pulling more and more into such reasoning's conceptual orbit.

Over the following pages, we'll probe this agility and acuity. Although one might distinguish contemporary theory by its penchant for paradox, that investment is by no means a niche or a recent invention. In fact, early modern thinkers were attracted to paradoxes for reasons akin to those that mesmerize us to this day. For instance, Rosalie L. Colie's 1976 *Paradoxa Epidemica* studies the burst of such reasoning during the Renaissance, which Colie analogously attributes to its dexterity and versatility. Colie singles out many of the same properties as does this book, among others the propensity of paradoxes to amuse, to equivocate and even be duplicitous, to be self-critical, to "do two things at once," to be dialectical, to defy their own categories, and to reduce truth and meaning to a "hall of mirrors."²⁶

As Colie further suggests, many facets of that logic have inspired cathexis or self-identification. Paradoxes can be cunning vehicles of critique, which is why talk of paradox flourished in the late eighteenth century alongside other portals of modern doubt and suspicion. Indeed, paradoxes have offered particularly adept tools for demolishing hierarchies and outing hypocrisies, in an often reflexive manner. Reasoning through paradox can appear to place the terms of inclusion-exclusion under perpetual renegotiation—an itinerary theorists have extolled as not only theory's own but also the kernel of democracy, justice, and ethics. Paradoxes are often protean, mobile, shape-shifting, energetic, and restless—and, given that fugitivity, hard to pin down. Not surprisingly, many thinkers have sought to rhetorically and formally emulate those qualities, routing their analyses through the tortions, meanderings, and other frequencies of paradox. Bringing to mind the recursive style of Lacan or Derrida as well as contemporary thinkers like Fred Moten or Hortense Spillers, reasoning through paradox often hovers about, undercutting its own inchoate recognitions, forever blurring boundaries and on the move.

While dramatizing these sorts of features, this book mainly strives to illustrate why such thinking becomes problematic. Like any analytic tool or argumentative maneuver, paradoxes are extremely good at certain things and less so at others. Staging a paradox is a highly effective way to liquidate substance and content—an enterprise chartering whole schools of theory. However, that logic is less good at telling us what should come along to

fill that ensuing vacuum (other than still more paradox), or what might prevent invidious causes from profiteering from the normative-evaluative abyss that reasoning through paradox often creates. These tendencies are exacerbated by a related proclivity to interrupt efforts to equilibrate or rein such thinking in: paradoxes tend to short circuit the drawing of lines, the proposing of values, and the application of evaluative or prescriptive criteria. One reason their logic thwarts such differential analysis (which chapter 5 instead defends) stems from the ways paradoxes almost organically spawn synergies, correspondences, and analogical transfers—which, however, can end up homogenizing (if not totalizing) wildly discrepant circumstances and phenomena. Just as that logic can muddle the drawing of granular and other distinctions, it is at constant risk of running roughshod over ideals, norms, facts, truths, principles, standards, and commitments—even those that urgently require salvaging and preservation. This book puts forward various such theories of how and why the formal logic of paradox became erected into a global or omnibus theory, in the process critiquing its (crypto-) formalist bracketing of content, autonomization of discourse and style, and antifoundationalist foundationalism.

Still other common aspects of reasoning through paradox tend to self-armor it against efforts to moderate or curtail its workings. As we saw with Wilde, paradoxes deign to be smarter: to startle, unmask, and outwit. Yet despite acting as trump cards in a stacked deck, the predicament of a paradox is simultaneously to be derivative and parasitic: contingent on the original or dominant upon which its logic preys. Tellingly, theorists (ranging well beyond Wilde) have often glorified that very contingency as both liberatory and a defense mechanism impeding ideological capture. A paradox (much like theory itself) brooks no desire for assimilation into the rule or dominant or center; those outcomes are more accurately what that logic religiously guards against, installing intellectual trip wires prone to get tripped whenever a goal like inclusion or resolution is on the table. Compounding all of this is that such reasoning typically knows no stopping point: its migrations can become almost hypnotic in their endless self-complications. Although acclaimed as consciousness-raising and galvanizing alike, reasoning through paradox, our case studies will recurrently show, is just as likely to do the opposite: to produce a haze of indecision; to apologize for handwringing and inertia; to mystify (if not stupefy) thought; and to offer succor in the face of real moral, political, and other difficulty.

It is also true that the world looks very different today than when devotion to paradox came of age. Once upon a time, that logic was surely

eye-opening, provocative, and even revolutionary—with regard to *both* the surrounding sociopolitical environment *and* the academic hierarchies it shook up. Today, however, we face a radically altered geopolitical landscape that can seem to expose faith in paradox as a relic of a distant era. At the time of this book's completion, the circumstances conspiring to betray that paradigm's obsolescence (a global pandemic, rising authoritarianism, mass protest, raging wildfires) seem only to mount. But beyond those atmospheric factors, the larger reality is that such reasoning is no longer the sole possession of intellectuals or of the left; critical theorists are no longer the only ones skilled at the weaponization of paradox. Of late, it has been au courant to worry, à la Bruno Latour, that “critique” and other historically left agendas have “run out of steam,” whether due to their own subsidence or susceptibility to right-wing takeover.²⁷ The fate of reasoning through paradox can appear to vindicate those fears, causing concerns about critique to pale in comparison. Not only has crying paradox become a favored missile in the right-wing arsenal, used to derail more than particular arguments or ideological standpoints but the basic conventions of fair, open-minded, civic debate. In addition, that logic's therapeutic aura has been popularized: rebranded and watered down as today's face of common sense. One subtext of this book is accordingly to ask whether the tides of history have rendered faith in paradox not only outmoded but fully dangerous. Insofar as devotion to paradox was gestated within a bygone sociohistorical milieu, can it still equip a left, progressive politics for the future? As one example among many, does the authoritarian personality still behave in the same manner as during the Cold War, seeking to devour paradox and everything it stands for? Or does tyranny instead thrive within the very throes of indeterminacy and indecision long espoused by theory? And what about rising generations of students; if paradox manufactures ideology in the twenty-first century, will throwing still more paradox into the mix really rupture that façade?

Notwithstanding these liabilities, the problem is *not* that reasoning through paradox is inherently limiting or pernicious. Its logic has been and will continue to be irreplaceable, and especially to the forms of critical inquiry cultivated by an education in the humanities. Over the decades, the habits of thought dissected herein have radically transformed, along with intellectual life, our available imaginaries regarding politics, law, justice, and more, dramatically expanding the range of what we can realistically hope for and endeavor. However, this very world-altering power raises the question of why the more damaging, deadening tendencies of such thinking have increasingly won out—eclipsing if not stifling its many contributions.

It is hard to deny that paradox has simply engulfed too much, subsuming more and more to become all-determining (if not deterministic) within a lot of theory. That syndrome is in dire want of moderation, and this book argues more than anything that investment in paradox requires supplementation with other intellectual resources and goals. Such an integration with alternate analytic modes promises to better tailor theory to a praxis, including to reattune that tradition to pursuits it has erroneously jettisoned. A diversification of the repertoire and horizons of theory is therefore what this book above all endorses.

Plainly put, the logic of paradox cannot solve all of our puzzles, and it is even less suited to help us figure out how to act. Having “only paradoxes to offer” is not something to be celebrated: it is a dereliction. Yet in a state of denial, we continue ramping our dosage up and up, believing that the discovery of more durable, more foundational paradoxes will deliver us. But in actuality it is this bottomless insatiability that needs to be curbed.

Each chapter of this book offers a different angle on the dynamics that hardwired paradox into the genetics of theory. Those forays begin with the axiomatic link between modernity and paradox, although by interrogating the warrants subsidizing that modernity-as-paradox thesis. Intellectuals of all stripes have been in basic agreement that modernity represents a condition of escalating paradox. Discourses of modernity are therefore a playbook in the precepts and moves that have allowed paradox to supervise nearly all dimensions of theory, functioning as diagnosis, critique, method, philosophy of agency, ethics, metacritical self-commentary, and—when all is said and done—a type of panacea. Causing even contrasting accounts of modernity to appear strange carbon copies of one another, this consensus can also index larger debilities afflicting the logic of paradox. Among others, the equation between modernity and paradox has hinged on the positing of various pre- or anti-modern antitheses and foils; those exclusions from modernity, not surprisingly, map onto predictable sites of sociopolitical exclusion operative still today. Nevertheless, even theory committed to interrogating modernity’s “othering” undercurrents has requisitioned paradox as a key apparatus of anticolonial and other critique. This chapter ventures tentative explanations for blind spots such as these, contending with perplexities that the rest of the book goes on to probe more fully.

Thereafter turning to debates about rights, chapter 2 investigates why a robust tradition of rights critique has often responded to the paradoxes of rights by ontologizing them—or by substantializing paradoxes that might otherwise be viewed as purely abstract or conjectural. For many that assessment has

further meant that those limits are fatal and incurable—in extreme cases, motivating the view that rights logic is a blueprint for state-sanctioned and other organized injustice, violence, and oppression. According to versions of such reasoning have Marxist critics handcuffed rights to capitalism, whereas others (Arendt and Agamben) blame “legalization” for bankrupting rights. This impulse to ontologize paradox is part and parcel of the “anti-legalism” that remains a methodological *a priori* within many humanistic fields.

The middle section of the book addresses how, with the debut of theory, the predominant valences of paradox mutated to increasingly harness that grammar’s uses within aesthetic theory, theology, and linguistics—although to decipher a spectrum of legal and political constructs and debates including rights. To illustrate what exactly was thus appropriated, the first Interlude takes a detour through the aesthetic criticism canon. In many ways, the nexus between aesthetics and paradox is even *more* doctrinal than that linking modernity to paradox. But what permitted a notion like rights to be infused with genres of paradox devised to make sense out of art and literature? And what happened when those literary-aesthetic vectors of paradox were enlisted to navigate deep quandaries that are preeminently legal and political, not only aestheticizing but also redeeming them along the way?

Given this book’s attempt to vivify the protean workings of reasoning through paradox, that logic’s aesthetic texture and figural-rhetorical bearings animate certain of its own arguments. While problematizing many facets of those dynamics, what follows also seeks to undergo and inhabit the vitality of paradox as an intellectual mode. Paradoxes, as suggested, often propagate metaphorical and allusive connections, and parts of this book draw freely from such strategies—and precisely to elucidate how and why that logic took on a life of its own. My own intermittent recourse to paradox as a stylistic mode should further clarify that this book is not “against paradox”: it is an internal critique inspired and outfitted by the very intellectual tradition it scrutinizes.

In key ways, aesthetic criticism laid the groundwork for theorists to embrace rights, although that embrace was simultaneously facilitated by other intellectual and historical influences canvassed in chapter 3. While the peculiar geopolitical climate of the 1970s found many left intellectuals newly championing rights, that acclimation was not an isolated phenomenon but instead was stimulated by a budding wave of enthusiasm for paradox. The turn to rights was also enabled by their redefinition as linguistic claims or utterances; a Cold War preoccupation with censorship; psychoanalytic theories of “inhuman” justice and ethics; various

poststructuralist rebuttals of Marxism; and more. While clearly incited by the dual specters of atrocity and totalitarianism, persisting long beyond that historical milieu have been decidedly redemptive hopes for paradox—and for everything projected onto that quality.

Chapters 4 and 5 explore the many channels through which these intellectual developments traveled far and wide beyond the chambers of high theory and even the academy. Even while nascent hopes for paradox midwived key transformations within the university, theory capitalized on certain residues of '68, especially the ethos of the counterculture and radicalized youth protest. Chapter 4 inventories the countless social justice movements that, beginning in the 1970s, were enrolled under the banner of a “politics of exclusion.” Giving voice to exclusion and its paradoxes was a central mandate that not only rebuilt the liberal arts but also piloted many popular consciousness-raising agendas. Not coincidentally, a near-identical justificatory framework and conviction in exclusion have underpinned many prevailing defenses of the humanities, which chapter 4 further examines. However, that genre of the humanities defense exemplifies the double binds created by reasoning through paradox.

These consciousness-raising initiatives have been accompanied by both therapeutic and pedagogical ambitions for paradox, considered in chapter 5. During the 1980s and '90s, a spirit of paradox was widely imagined to radicalize the humanities classroom, a mood that coined new vocabularies (hybridity, alterity, in-betweenness) and inspired teaching philosophies dedicated to an (often autobiographical) bearing witness. While ushering in many beneficial advances, those yearnings for a hyperpoliticized classroom have been among the more mixed bequests of theory. These innovative pedagogies were also subsidized by trauma theory, which left its own lasting imprint on many humanities fields. Especially in its early formulations, trauma, too, was conceived as a project of “giving voice to exclusion”: here, the paradoxical repressions and foreclosures of traumatic remembrance.

This book concludes by venturing a series of proposals for mitigating the dominance of paradox. It connects those proposals by appealing to an “integrative criticism” receptive to the analytic yield of noncontradiction. Among other things, that notion of the integrative embeds a plea to supplement paradox with a wider arsenal of critical strategies better catered to tackling whatever diverse challenges arise. Given the antinormativity of paradox, that logic has discounted if not obstructed forms of differential evaluation and analysis, whether the drawing of distinctions regarding varying objects of critique, alternate manifestations of a given syndrome,

or the comparative merits of one truth claim versus another. Relatedly, insistence on friction, fractures, divisions, and dualities has blinded us to realities “when things hold together,” a phrase taken from Virginia Woolf. To consider how such a criticism oriented toward encounters with integrity and integration might instead proceed, the book’s final chapter returns to the isolated scene of reading often allegorically envisioned as a laboratory in critique, attempting to practice a different kind of criticism and theory. In so doing, it strives to reclaim a disavowed intellectual space—a space where paradox does not have all the answers, where paradox is instead one resource among many, a resource that is sometimes fruitful but at others a dire threat to our very being.

Notes

Introduction: On Paradox

- 1 Wilde, *Dorian Gray*, 15.
- 2 Culler, *Literary Theory*, 4.
- 3 Wilde, *Dorian Gray*, 8, 20.
- 4 It has become a bit fashionable to ask whether the prevailing instincts within literary criticism and/or theory can best be summed up as a paradigm. However, Kuhn's formulation remains enormously helpful. For other reliance on Kuhn, see Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary*; North, *Literary Criticism*.
- 5 See McCann and Szalay, "Do You Believe in Magic?"
- 6 Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary*, 15.
- 7 Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*.
- 8 The acknowledgments in Stephen Best's *None Like Us* open with a telling reflection. As Best writes: "A friend of mine (an editor at a major press) once gave me a bit of advice: every good book should be structured around a paradox." Best, *None Like Us*, 133.
- 9 Scott, *Only Paradoxes*; Brown, "Suffering the Paradoxes of Rights."
- 10 Bentham, *Anarchical Fallacies*.
- 11 Scott, *Only Paradoxes*, I, II.
- 12 Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," 95.

- 13 Russell, *Philosophy of Logical Atomism*.
- 14 Langer, *Age of Atrocity*.
- 15 Berman, *Modernism in the Streets*.
- 16 Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?*
- 17 Fredric Jameson is also particularly prone to use those terms interchangeably. See Jameson, *Antinomies*.
- 18 Harcourt, *Critique*.
- 19 Lacan, *Ethics of Psychoanalysis*.
- 20 Butler, *Psychic Life*, 1.
- 21 Keenan, *Fables of Responsibility*, 138–41.
- 22 Searle, “Reality Principles.”
- 23 Kuhn, *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 44.
- 24 Kuhn, *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 10.
- 25 Kuhn, *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 5.
- 26 Colie, *Paradoxa Epidemica*, 5–11, xv. It is telling that Colie’s study was published in 1976, at the inception of an intellectual era this book investigates.
- 27 Latour, “Has Critique Run Out of Steam?”

Chapter 1: All That Is Solid Melts into Paradox

- 1 Berman, *All That Is Solid*, 13.
- 2 Marx and Engels, *Marx/Engels Reader*, 476.
- 3 Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*.
- 4 As Fredric Jameson clarifies, “the notion of contradiction is central to any Marxist cultural analysis.” Jameson, *Political Unconscious*, 80.
- 5 Marx’s account of alienated labor layers one paradox upon the next. As he describes it, “The devaluation of the world of men is in direct proportion to the increasing value of the world of things.” In turn, “Labor’s realization is its objectification.” See Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*.
- 6 *Capital*, for instance, mines how “the absolute contradiction” intrinsic to modern industry “dispels all fixity and security in the situation of the worker.” Marx, *Marx/Engels Reader*, 413.
- 7 Marx, *Marx/Engels Reader*, 406.
- 8 Mao, “On Contradiction.”
- 9 Hiley, “basic contradiction.”
- 10 Berman, *All That Is Solid*, 92.
- 11 Kornbluh, *Realizing Capital*, 122–23. For Kornbluh, the notion of “psychic economy” is the “crowning” example of Marx’s personifications. *Realizing Capital*, 11.
- 12 Marx, *Marx/Engels Reader*, 413.
- 13 Marx, *Marx/Engels Reader*, 77, 317.