

Contemporary “Theory” and its Discontents — Nietzsche and the Problem of Literary Decadence

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A note for crass individuals of either side — this is not an attempt to discredit Postmodern theory, and certainly not Baudrillard, whom I verily owe great respect and credit to philosophically.

“Theory” is a word which has gripped online leftist culture for quite some time. People post “theory,” debate “theory,” and everyone tells everyone else to “read theory.” The exact relevance of theory may be unexplained for some — particularly for those not very exposed to it — and more importantly, the content of much of the “theory” that is shared online is itself dubious. It is necessary to investigate.

1 — A Definition of Theory

“Theory,” generally understood, may have as its roots the notion of theoretical practice in Marxism, which may itself be rooted in the German approach to critique initiated by Kant. The relevance of a notion of “theory” in the face of scientific empiricism and positivism was that it could articulate the *necessity* of certain empirical facts, rather than simply the empirical facts themselves. For Kant it was a transcendental grounding, and for Marx it was a theoretical practice; for Kant it was an elucidation of

the categories of the mind in the subsequently necessitated production of phenomena, and for Marx it was an elucidation of the categories of capital in the subsequently necessitated production of “the current state of affairs.”

That facts have a necessity was crucial for Marx because he wanted to allow the articulation of a state of affairs *beyond* the current empirical facts. Knowing what facts were a necessary outcome of what other facts was needed to grasp how and in what way the current empirical world could be radically changed — and what a new empirical world as an outcome of this change might reflect. In this way, it could not be enough to study the world in all its various ways; it is necessary to also *contemplate* it. This is where theory begins.

2 — Latent Problems of Theory

The latent problems with “theory” lie in its directed purpose in Marxist thought; the purpose of Marxist theory is to allow change by showing how it may be possible. Theory must advance from agreed-upon empirical truths and proceed to show their relation to other empirical truths — in what ways they are interconnected and in what ways it is subsequently possible to change these realities. But in Marxist thought ultimately the point of it all must lie in a sort of personal *moral* conviction: that x empirical reality is bad, unfree, undesirable, inhumane, or whatever.¹

The two main contentions which lie at the heart of the troubles then are: (1) what count as “empirical realities” and (2) what count as objectionable empirical realities. If the point of it all is to change things, the interest in theory is solely dependent on people’s conviction that: (1) there are empirical realities which we can agree upon, and (2) these realities are objectionable. Only then can we apply theory to show how these realities are an outcome of this or that necessary feature of contemporary society; but without these assumptions, the outcome of theory amounts to nothing.

For example, Marx’s famous exposition on “Estranged Labor” → <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/labour.htm> from his *1844 Manuscripts* is a truly excellent piece of theoretical exposition. However, there are two presumptions (among others) which if not implicitly agreed upon shortly after or before the exposition begins, make the whole exposition worthless. The two presumptions I have in mind are these: (1) that something called “labor” exists as a generally agreed upon phenomenon with common characteristics, and (2) that the “estranged labor” which Marx deduces from capitalist relations of production is in fact undesirable as a unique phenomenon. If the empirical fact of “labor” appears to us as not an empirical fact at all, and/or if the notion of “estranged labor” does not sound objectionable to us, then Marx’s exposition amounts to nothing. Moreover, if “estranged labor” — even if objectionable as an idea — does not seem to correspond to any state of affairs which we encounter in our lives under the rule of capital, then so too would Marx’s exposition be naught. The exposition works only if it appears to operate on and correspond to empirical facts which we agree upon, and if these facts (or subsequent expositions on it) we believe have been revealed to be objectionable.²

Now knowing what the latent problems of theory are, let us look at the sort of “contemporary theory” which is the focus of the piece, to understand where the problems of theory proliferate.

3 — “Contemporary Theory”

I use the term “contemporary theory” hesitantly for myriad reasons, but the fact of the matter is that some term is needed to demarcate what I see as a growing problem with theory that is emerging — for reasons to be explained — out of the present moment. The general problem I see is essentially rooted in the two latent problems discussed above: that (1) it is becoming less clear what the agreed upon empirical facts are, and (2) it is, as a result, becoming less clear what state of affairs is at all objectionable. But — and this is absolutely crucial — contemporary theory and its discon-

tents is rooted in a combination of the above two problems *and* the problem of “literary decadence.” The sides two come together to produce the theoretical impoverishment of the present moment, and do not stand alone in contemporary theory. Both sides will be discussed.

The general issue can perhaps be blamed in origin partly on late-20th century French theory, although it is dubious and potentially dangerous to place the fault of a general social malaise on a single national category. I am not sure it can be entirely denied, however, that whatever the merits of the “Postmodern” thinkers such as Lyotard or Baudrillard (and perhaps, though not quite “Postmodern,” Deleuze and Guattari), their increasingly abstract, esoteric, and forcibly extreme — especially in Baudrillard’s case — sense of theory has generated issues which are seen returning to us today in waves.³

The problem with this type of theory is that the empirical facts from which it advances from are unclear and often not generally agreed upon — *to what extent is the world dominated by simulacra? to what extent has the human disappeared? to what extent has the hyperreal replaced the real?* Not only is it not entirely clear, but the theory desires (today more than anything) to look as profound as possible, and so must necessarily *exaggerate* empirical reality in order to present an extreme doomsday-like scenario. In this unbelievable crisis, which is largely constructed artificially on the page, the theory advanced from its extremity subsequently appears incredibly sharp and impressive.

Today, with the growth of the commodification of theory and of “literary decadence,” this problem has become hugely exacerbated. Hence why we cannot simply blame the French for our problems. In fact, they likely were merely ahead of the game.

4 — Literary Decadence

When Nietzsche published his humorous, yet biting critique of Wagner in 1888 — *The Case of Wagner* — much of the focus of the critique was a critique of “decadence” and in particular “literary decadence.” Wagner, as “*a child of this age*” was “*no less...a decadent*” (17). Nietzsche himself admitted he was one as well, but claimed also to have been conscious of this fact and “*resisted it.*”

What was this decadence? Nietzsche describes it like so:

“That life no longer resides in the whole. The word becomes sovereign and leaps out of the sentence, the sentence reaches out and obscures the meaning of the page, and the page comes to life at the expense of the whole — the whole is no longer a whole. This, however, is the simile of every style of decadence: every time there is an anarchy of atoms” (33).

Nietzsche wishes to contrast modern “*minaturis[m]*” — one of the words he uses to criticize Wagner — with the “*sustained grandeur of the Iliad or Spinoza’s Ethics, of Shakespeare’s and Goethe’s dramas, Beethoven’s music, and Hegel’s system.*” Today, “*we generally applaud a few great insights or a certain sketch or chapter more than the total work*” (Kaufmann 73). The result is an “anarchy of atoms.”

I wish to take this conception further to aid the characterization of contemporary theory and its vicissitudes. It is likely increasingly the case that the *slogan* has replaced the chapter, in much the same way that in Nietzsche’s time it may have seemed that the chapter had replaced the whole of the work. A lot of French theory lives on slogans, and in this way it offers no help in combating the phenomenon.⁴

By “slogans” here I mean easily quotable sections of a work — sections which almost *demand* to be xeroxed and plastered over walls, police stations, or Twitter bios. Work which is heavily based on the logic of the

slogan effectively uses much of the written word to merely *lead up to* the grand slogan — the slogan itself is the payoff.

Today it is also the commodity. Twitter and Instagram are obviously optimized for the communication of small bits of information, and this is ripe terrain for the proliferation of the logic of the slogan. At such a point, theory can only be shared popularly in slogan form, and the popular manifestation of theory becomes effectively slogan-ized.

Thus, we reach the point where we are now. “Theory” in its contemporary form reads more like a laundry list of slogans than anything rigorous. Each sentence seeks to sound profound *in itself*, anticipating its ability to be shared on social media. The contemporary theory writer seeks to generate self-sufficient slogans, and a book or article becomes nothing more than a long chain of slogans run back-to-back. Each slogan proclaims: *Look, I am profound, I am quotable, I can be remembered easily*. It is simply rhetoric, and not rigorous even at that; moreover, with the flow of huge magnitudes of content at high speeds on the internet and its standing in algorithmic relations to itself, extremity is forced as well. Slogonization becomes, at the same time, a race to appear *more* radical, *more* extreme, and hopefully as a result *more profound* and biting than everyone else.⁵ In this sense, the irony of the work of someone like Baudrillard is that, in articulating relations of hyperreality and simulation, his work in fact promotes such relations in the realm of theoretical articulation itself. In Baudrillard’s case this likely was intentional.

To be sure, rigorous theory in the spirit of Marx, and often as a direct outcome of the rigorous work of *Capital*, is still alive and well — in fact, it may have even recently had some kind of a resurgence in the English-speaking world. But the tendency to sloganize, particularly in the heavily commodified spaces of online leftist culture, is alive and well too, making it necessary to talk about.

5 — Fighting Against It?

It appears to me the way to fight against sloganization is to start writing longer and more boring theory again, but which roots itself in a non-esoteric and directly relatable empirical reality. For example, I have yet to really be convinced that we truly live in the hyperreal and that the simulacrum has replaced the genuine, but, at the time of writing this, I know damn well that I have to clock in for work later today. The strength of Marx's materialism comes through here: while it may be dubious that the "mode of production" is the real ontological foundation of the phenomenon of society, in any case the enduring significance of material production certainly cannot be denied. This is especially true in capitalist relations, where production *sans phrase* becomes an end-in-itself.

Why should theory become long and boring exactly? As a remedy against the short and overly-excited theory which has come to dominate leftist spaces. This is not to say that theory should be *intentionally* dry, but that it should not attempt to be specially exciting or quick-witted. Poignancy is admirable, but between intellectual rigor which comes to occupy a boring large numbers of pages on the one hand, and rhetorical sharpness which is more terse on the other, I would prefer the former. Therefore, profoundness should be *earned* as the positive result of deep and sobering analysis; it should not be demanded from the reader, forced, or sought out prematurely.

If this all sounds like the infantile whinings of a boomer, I say in response that I am still quite young and that certainly my points could stand to be stated in better ways and expanded upon by those who are far above me. What I want to do is not diagnose a problem so much as call attention to something I see and believe to be real. It is entirely up to the reader to determine if my perception corresponds to an empirical reality, and if this reality is objectionable. I believe both to be true, and I also believe at the same time that there is absolutely fantastic work being done even now by

theorists whose methods completely fly in the face of “literary decadence.” It is not out of despair, but out of hope and knowledge of a better alternative, that I write this piece.

Kaufmann, Walter. *Nietzsche: Psychologist, Philosopher, Antichrist*. 3rd ed. Princeton University Press, 1968.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Case Of Wagner, Nietzsche Contra Wagner, and*

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