

# Theory

(Madness of)

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Forty years or so after it initially rose as a rather new name for a rather new thing, *theory* is still an obtruse signifier, troubling and floating, requiring we go back to basics. Theory as we most often understand it today is the name given by the English-speaking intellectual community to a certain type of contemporary Continental (largely French) philosophy. It is the name both of a transdisciplinary form of conceptual enunciation within the broad field of the humanities and of a highly desirable commodity, rich in distinctive potential and symbolic capital, in the newly globalized academic marketplace of concepts. In fact the word itself is almost entirely absent from post-World War II French thought, and has been ever since, while undergoing a spectacular inflation among English-speaking humanists and the various commentators and free-minded continuers of late-twentieth-century French philosophy. Thus, how to discuss *theory* in the light of the latter's legacy, if not as a paradox, a trend, and indeed a symptom? And to the extent that every trend as much as every symptom tends to have a limited life expectancy, isn't it even *too late* to still be speaking about theory *today*, to paraphrase the opening words of Hegelian master Jean Hyppolite's famous lecture at the 1967 Johns Hopkins conference on 'the language of criticism and the sciences of man', remembered as the primal scene of what was then not yet called in the USA 'French Theory' (his opening words were: 'Isn't it too late to still be speaking about Hegel today?').

Theory is a problem, for there might be nothing specifically philosophical about today's concept of theory, which might well be the most transdisciplinary of all notions – or most deprived of a specific disciplinary grounding. It might have become a surrogate philosophy, or what Anglo-Americans like to call *postphilosophy* – infatuated as many of them are with the disenchanting prefix 'post-' – but it remains outside of the quintessential philosophical approach, exterior to the institutional and strictly defined disciplinary discourse of philosophy. For at least four or five decades,

and again mostly outside of France, literary critics, social scientists, art theorists and the various experts of minority studies have had the monopoly on the discourse of theory, freely and randomly reappropriating fragments of philosophy's discourse to put them to work in a different political and disciplinary context, to fashion an unprecedented transdisciplinary discourse *outside* of the philosophical discipline, even if more permeated than ever before with scattered fragments of philosophy. And, to make things worse, with or without the ill-named 'French Theory', theory is much more of an English *and* American cultural tradition than a French or even a Continental one. The former has been obsessed, since the mid-nineteenth century, with literary theory or else with general models in law and economics, while the latter, at least the French tradition, keen on lyrical speculations and metaphysical overtones, has never *liked* theory, at least in the traditional sense. Illustrations are easy to find, such as this one from Marcel Proust's *Finding Time Again*, at the very end of *Remembrance of Things Past*: 'a work where there are theories is like an object on which one could still see the price [tag].'

In sum, there is much more theory, both as a signifier and as a type of discourse, among the users, recyclers and strategic politicizers of late-twentieth-century French thought than there is in the latter itself. But, at the same time, if one envisions philosophy and its extra-philosophical users, or even English-speaking and French intellectual scenes, as all part of the same continuum of discourse – that is, in the intellectual historian's approach to all conceptual propositions in terms of *discourse* – then French thought from Louis Althusser to late Jacques Derrida ought to be included in this inflation of theory as a new transdisciplinary discourse in the broader field of humanities. It ought to be fully associated, even if it is less explicit (or ostentatious) about it, with this theoretical *demon* which began to possess the Western intellectual body around forty or fifty years ago, as a systematic

debunking of common sense, as a 'certain convergence of the aesthetic and the political' (in Fredric Jameson's terms), as a career strategy in the more trivial terms of the academic job market, or simply as the most vivid polemical object – famously exemplified in the hotly debated 1982 issue of US journal *Critical Inquiry* titled 'Against Theory'. Even beyond the discursive limits of intellectual rituals and academic games, it has been justifiably argued, even by some of the French thinkers in question, that theory in this new sense was more genuinely practised by musician John Cage or architect and critic Robert Venturi than by professional academic theorists.

But 'theory' in what sense? What is 'theory' in such uses? And what does French thinking of the late twentieth century have to do with it? Such questions can only be addressed, not exactly in *historical* terms, knowing theory's famous wariness with regard to the historical paradigm (in favour of genealogies, synchronic structures, or becomings), but at least in terms of an internal turn within the realm and the meaning of theory. According to such a *Kehre* in intellectual history, in France, in a matter of a few years, approximately between the beginning of the Algerian war and the end of May 1968's aftershock (1955–80), to take two directly *political* dates, theory has evolved dramatically. It has changed from a specific dialectical position to a metonymic or hybrid discourse-inducer, from a form of dialectical comprehension in science, law or philosophy, to an almost intransitive counter-discourse, from a Hegelian and post-Hegelian seizure of given objects to a detotalized *objectless* approach, or again, from transitive thought to a mere kind of meta-philosophy, while evolving also from Franco-French quarters to a newly formed international intellectual arena, and from well-demarcated disciplinary contexts to a transdisciplinary open field, loose yet closely related to literature, politics and psychoanalysis, and to the battle sites these three have become.

Or else, to make this long story shorter as well as more trivial, and go this time to the heart of the matter, closer to French thought than to the inflation of campus-based theory, one could propose the following: theory used to make sense, if not to frame sense, and sometime in the third quarter of the twentieth century, in France but not only there, theory joyfully *stopped* making sense, and began cracking all existing frames. In other words, theory used to be reasonable, more than strictly *rational*, and for some reason which remains to be fully explained theory turned *crazy*: it went mad, a madness that involves an internal split of theory, a strange parting from oneself, a radical assumption of

contradiction, but all in a non-dialectical way. Madness in that sense is what happens to theory in the absence of the solid safeguards (*garde-fous*) which dialectics used to provide. Out of (a) place and out of time, dangerously close to subjective aporias and the politics of feelings, lost on the map and in the family tree, theory became the name of a mad(wo)man's discourse, on the brink of nonsense.

### **Althusser and the crisis of dialectics**

So, it all started with a breach. Something had to break for this type of change to occur. What we are dealing with here is well known to historians of philosophy: it is the Continental, and again mostly French, crisis of traditional theory, the internal crisis of general dialectics. Let's not forget that theory's traditional definitions are neither strictly philosophical nor very exciting. The dictionary refers to an organized set of concepts, a structured set of oppositions, or simply a general doctrine or school of thought. And in the middle of the twentieth century, right before the breach in question, theory was present as a key signifier in various fields. In the sciences a hard or soft theory is a general model or a viable working frame. In mathematics it is a set of propositions of which some are undecidable. In law it is a general solution to an unprecedented problem. In economics it is a fully structured explanatory model. In American pragmatist thought it is a specific practice within philosophy's investigation about truth, but a practice neither joyful nor tragic in the light of Charles Sanders Peirce's cautious motto: 'in order to be profound it is necessary to be dull.' In American generative linguistics or transformational grammar (in the works of the early Noam Chomsky or of his mentor Zellig Harris) it is a general and organized hypothesis on the workings of language. And in Continental philosophy, what is theory, or at least what *was* it then?

While it is already, if marginally, present in Immanuel Kant's epistemology, theory in the classical sense of modern philosophy is derived above all directly from Hegel's dialectics. Although the word is not at all uncommon in Hegel's work, theory is one specific moment of the dialectical process, located between practical spirit and free spirit (as stated in his *Philosophy of Spirit*), way before dialectics' fulfilment in *speculative* spirit, that 'objective dialectics immanent to the real', more powerful than the practical stage: in so far as 'theoretical work produces more effects in the world than practical work ..., it can revolutionize the kingdom of representation and destitute reality'. The change undergone by this dialectical concept of

theory within Marx's critique of Hegel summarizes the broader orientation imposed by Marx to the entire dialectical process: theory with Marx is both a more specific stage, dialectically articulated to practice, or *Praxis*, in a precise historical tension, and a more intense moment, as it involves a consciousness of the historical process and thus conditions revolutionary agency. But in both cases, Marx's and Hegel's, theory is circumscribed, being one stage or one character in the adventure of the world's transformation, in the *Bildungsroman* that dialectics offers us to unveil a certain Subject of history, if one is to use the narrative terminology deliberately chosen by Judith Butler in her very first book, devoted to 'the French Hegel': *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France*. It is this specific yet problematic *location* of theory within the general dialectical process which was suddenly lost, or dispersed, certainly set in crisis, and put in question, in the French Hegelianism and Marxism of the mid-twentieth century, and most spectacularly maybe in the work of Louis Althusser.

Theory is a recurrent word in Althusser's work, and the title of the famous book series he ran at Éditions Maspéro for many years ('Théorie'). But it is already a kind of *maddened* theory, as if Althusser's work was bridging the gap, more or less willingly, between nineteenth-century dialectics and late-twentieth-century anti-dialectical French thought. Theory in his work is not only a superior form of historical knowledge, as when Althusser reinterprets Marx as a theoretician (*théoricien*) of capital – against his then dominant readings, his socio-economic or humanistic (moralistic) interpretations – but it is also the only sustainable way to separate science from ideology, to turn dialectical materialism into a scientific *demystification* of ideology, to deactivate reversed representations of labour, culture and power relations, and to reveal reality as a product of ideology, or as an 'effect of structures'. But at the same time, being given such an endless task, theory in Althusser is precisely the problem, and the point where critical labour can also turn against oneself, the point where dialectics brushes on madness, and suspicion threatens to make that very task impossible, or in(de)finite. It is the site of a growing self-criticism of philosophy's work, an internal struggle between theory and theory, leading to Althusser's great final work on Machiavelli in which he denounces what he labels the 'theorist deviation' (or *diversion*) in favour of a melancholic praise of Machiavelli's political and practical genius.

It is also leading, beyond the normalized dichotomy between life and work, existence and the thinking

process, to Althusser's own autobiographical reflections of the 1980s in which depression and delirium, which he got to know so tragically, are explicitly compared with the self-development of theoretical discourse – as in a late admittance of the sadness brought forth by theory's conceptual self-fulfilment, the realization that theory severed from the grounding of truth takes historical melancholy to a point of no return. And takes Marxism, in that logic, to a state of impotence: theory in its ambitions as revolutionary science has become the key point of Althusser's late critique by fellow Marxist thinkers, whether they are of the humanistic or intensive type – theory seen as a dead end when its locked-up logic makes it the site of a certain *impossibility* of the revolution, of a 'dispowerment' of revolutionary forces, as in the famous critical essay against Althusser written by British historian E.P. Thompson, aptly titled *The Poverty of Theory* (1978).

In the meantime, what has happened to theory, in France and way beyond, is something like the inescapable extension of the *outside* at the expense of such absolute inner logic. That is, the *historical* outside, with such awkward events for Marxist theory as the Cold War and the 1960s' youth protests (including of course the French May '68, unexpected and immediately derided). But also the *intellectual* outside, beginning with the initial rise of structuralism, as disciplinary lines became more and more blurred, and lines between activism, culture and theory were crossed back and forth. What happened in France in the 1960s and 1970s, from the streets to the classroom, beyond hysterical politics and dogmatic discourse, was an unprecedented attempt to produce thought, or philosophy, *from the outside*, to depart from philosophy only in order to rediscover it elsewhere, or, as in the famous words of Gilles Deleuze, to produce philosophy from outside in (*produire la philosophie du dehors*). A true burst, of events as much as of desires, of interconnections as much as of discursive rhetorics, in which the old workings of theory get caught, invalidating for good the age-old fantasy of theory's *exteriority*.

As a consequence theory's philosophical practitioners have all, one way or another, to acknowledge their delusion, to experience in their very work the end of theoretical exteriority, or of philosophy's distance, and the subsequent need to reinvent a theoretical gaze more in tune with the prodigious changes of the time, and with new modalities of violence and control. Thus they will turn theory at one and the same time into a dead language *and* into a new practice, into what's dead and what must be transformed, the site, in short, of a still unresolved ambivalence or schizophrenia making

past and future, or life and death, properly undecidable, which somehow resembles madness – quite far from Dr Hegel's all-encompassing theory. Which is to say: *La théorie est morte, vive la théorie!*

Before going into specific texts, it is important to consider the general discourse resulting from this crisis of theory, from this unprecedented discrepancy between life and dialectics, or between theory and the event – approaching the madness of theory from the outside before tackling its inside. Theory at that distance is nothing specific; it is a loose discursive frame, or a discursive engine – theory re-enchanted as weapon, or toolbox, more often than not theory 'reloaded' as counter-discourse. No wonder that commentators outside of theory's realm, or critical of theory's radical rhetorics, often see it as nothing more than a form of 'discourse-against' exhausting itself in the fictitious *other* it creates, a discourse deprived of any substance.

### Theory as discourse-against

At a certain point in Continental intellectual history, right after the middle of the twentieth century, what is in crisis is a triple presupposition of modern philosophy: the *logical* presupposition of a separate reality or reference to which deliberative reason would connect itself through language, which it would manage to grasp; the *metaphysical* presupposition of actual substances, or transcendental objects, on which the great concepts of philosophy would be based; and the *cultural* presupposition of a commensurability between figures and language, between images and the possibility of a linguistic account of them. Thus, if theory in a new sense can come out of this crisis, such theory will be, respectively, *antireferential*, *antifoundational* and *antirepresentational*. The discourse of theory embarking under these three auspices is sure to find on its way an ever-renewed list of enemies, all denying or mocking the rationale of such a negatively defined discourse: in their view theory 'reloaded' can only exist as opposition, or resistance, as denial, or fuzziness, always as the infinite labour of the negative. In that respect, the only evidence we have of the existence of this still blurry, discursive, undefined object named 'theory' is the number of hateful reactions it will raise, the number of aggrionamentos and backlashes it will serve to justify, from metaphysicians, from dialecticians, from logical positivists wary of philosophy as 'literature' (or simply of French Fog...), from the many empiricists and functionalists working at safeguarding the disciplines of history and the social sciences from the dangers of conceptual relativism, and more broadly from the

various voices of an age-old anti-intellectualism claiming an ethical right at the heart of the public space. This means, of course, Anglo-American anti-intellectualism, in the name of ordinary language, rational empiricism and lay people. But also a renewed French anti-intellectualism in the very name of the intellectual caste and its mythology of *engagement* (humanitarian commitment and moral blackmail as the new secular preaching: don't do theory, theory kills, just choose between good and evil), as with the marketing genius and conceptual poverty of France's 1976 Nouveaux Philosophes, neither new nor philosophical, but emerging in the late 1970s against the very thinkers and theorists in question here, and staying on the front stage of French public debate ever since.

But in having to defend theory's right against its many enemies' wrongs, the new transdisciplinary discourse of theory born from the intellectual crisis of the 1960s got itself into a discursive spiral, trying to catch its moral and political enemies in the web of discursive and linguistic relativity, always on the edge of *relativism*, forced to overstate aporias and the deconstructive nature of language as the best retaliation against such attacks, and often losing track of the political or ethical stance which had first inspired them to reload theory, in favour of an endless regression into the all-discursive argument. This is a spiral to the extent that the new tenets of theory have often unwittingly vindicated those who had reduced their various endeavours to a late, postmodern version of the famous 'linguistic turn'.

In other words, if the frequent 'resistance to theory' is a resistance to the use of language about language, or even a reluctance to criticize language – according to the famous paradox set forth by Paul de Man in his *The Resistance to Theory* (1979) – then theorists themselves feel doomed to resist such resistance by overemphasizing the paradoxes and tricks of language, the condition imposed on us by our sophisticated linguistic limitations. It is only in the logic of such an institutional and discursive spiral that theory 'reloaded', theory working against our certainties and to outbid its many reactionary enemies, can be called 'relativistic' or 'postmodern', judgements rather than descriptions even if they have become canonical ever since Fredric Jameson wrote a few famous articles in the 1980s. The 'vocation of Theory', he wrote in *Ideologies of Theory*, juxtaposing for the sake of his argument French philosophers and their Anglo-American critics and commentators, is 'not the discovery of truth and the repudiation of error but rather a struggle about purely linguistic formulations', making theory 'a

semi-autonomous form of what must be called post-modernism generally’.

But is *that* theory? Can theory as a philosophical wager in 1960s’ and 1970s’ France be reduced to its discursive strategies and trajectories? To a dialectical reading, precisely, according to which by reversing the old discourse of dialectical theory, various academics of a new generation would just have produced a structurally similar *counter*-theory, a theory-against, bound to extend ad infinitum the limits of linguistic paradoxes and to disseminate the new cultural dogmas of late capitalism? What is missing in that picture is the *desire* of theory, an unacknowledged libidinal drive towards theory, and the social and subjective life of theory, all in all a non-discursive impulse which has driven a few thinkers to think over from scratch the enigma of theory away from the endless logic of discourse, whether to replace the linear reading of History by a multilayered set of ‘discursive formations’ (Foucault), or to replace the referential reading of texts by the notion that ‘there is nothing outside the text’ (Derrida). This is where the actual arguments put forward by a small number of French thinkers have to be examined, at last, less in terms of a specific crisis or historical turn than of an older desire to have life and theory converge intimately, life enhanced through theory, fostered with the help of a detotalizing theory, as in the old Leninist slogan of theory *on the side of life* – as little Leninist as such French thinkers might have been.

### Theory from within: fragmented practice

Common to the various thinkers often gathered under the American-born label of ‘French Theory’ is an experience of theory as conceptual practice, as gesture as much as desire, and as a unique way to unconceal rather than to frame multiplicity. But does Foucault, Deleuze, Lyotard, or even Derrida even *like* theory? How can they attack theory as a totalizing discourse and call for a renewed *theory* understood as practice, be it conceptual or textual practice? Is theory such a split concept, or is their approach such an ambivalent one? By following the arguments of a few of them I just want to suggest that their peculiar – and common – endeavour has been to explore the cracks of rational thinking, to depart from a disembodied totalizing world-view in favour of the powers of life, the powers of the weak and the power to survive, the powers of intensities and productive gaps, as so many of their contemporaries did in the context of counterculture and radical protest. But with this difference: unlike others, they did this by taking the theoretical with

them, bringing it to the other side of that invisible border between reason and madness, between norm and the abnormal – maddening theory (*affoler la théorie*), using it as the only viable compass for their foray into contemporary chaos, especially the then-new chaos of late capitalism.

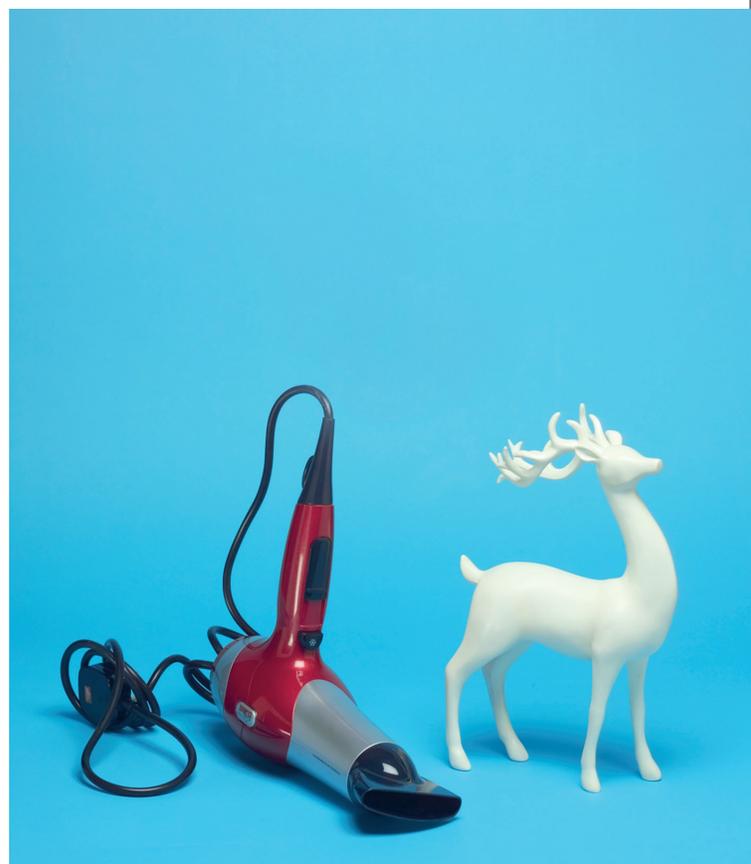
In short, whereas counter-theory as the new form of academic theoretical discourse amounts to mimicking the original gesture of theory, by reversing it and turning it against figurative enemies, theory in that short-lived French sense did truly depart from the old dialectics, cutting the apron strings, severing the connection with what had for so long defined Western metaphysics and politics: from dialectics and phenomenology, from Hegel and Marx (albeit to discuss their presuppositions ad infinitum, since criticizing language can only be done through language, and deconstructing metaphysics – this rallying call in so many academic corners – can only be done in complicity with metaphysics, as Derrida never ceased to insist). Nothing is more tricky, madly intermingled, than the operational relation between these three (rather than just two) meanings of the word theory: theory old style as Explanation, or as totalizing dialectics; theory new style as discourse-against and institutional posture; and theory *as* style, or at least *with* style, understood as an experimental practice of concepts, from Foucault to Deleuze and, as they often seem to suggest themselves, from John Cage to Lewis Carroll.

Let’s briefly examine three French takes on ‘theory’, by Lyotard, Foucault and finally Roland Barthes – leaving aside for now such interesting, and different, approaches as Gilles Deleuze’s, who used to define theory as a practice of concepts interconnected with other practices, and which ought to ‘never be more abstract than its object’ (*Cinema II*), or even Jean Baudrillard’s, who liked to describe theory as a chameleon, taking on some of the shapes and colours of its very objects, becoming fluid and tradey when theorizing capitalism, or fatal when exploring the mystery of death: a sort of Stockholm Syndrome whereby theory would be taken hostage by the very object it had set out to analyse, or would simply disappear in the endless production of its effects.

Jean-François Lyotard directly addresses *la théorie* and *la théorique* in the enigmatic last subchapter of his *Economie libidinale* (1975), titled ‘La théorique en tant que libidinale’. Theory’s text, he writes, ‘offers a tautological body that can’t be taken, locked up as it is in its white identity, deprived of external reference’, as passionate in this as is its alternative, the hermeneutic text with its endless return to origins. In both cases

there is *jouissance* in such tautology, in such faithful replication. By denying discrepancies, heterogeneities, polymorphy, the good and motionless form of theory's text, with its obsession for transparency and the end of all dissimulation, relieves the reader of his/her anxiety. Lyotard adds: it requires clear signs, as lovers do. 'That very coldness is theory's own warmth.' In theory, repetition comes first, this robot-like, productive, serial repetition being what theory has in common with capitalism. But in these same pages, in the specific madness of that book, and of its mid-1970s context, theory in that ambiguous sense can also open on to another theory, can overflow itself when delirium wins against motionlessness, the displacement of all certainties over thought's spontaneous conservatism, thus depriving theory of a subject, and science of any object, as is the case in the final lines of this chapter – and book – when Lyotard calls for a more risky, libidinal, arbitrary kind of theory, its mobility open for uses, and its 'unpower' (*impouvoir*) working effectively as a counterpower. One typically Lyotardian formula summarizes the mad project of this slippage of theory away from itself: 'let's make theory antitheoretical' (*Faisons la théorie antithéorique*). As if in the circular madness of self-sufficient, old-style theory, always threatening to get locked up in itself, there lay dormant the potential of a performative, desiring mode of theory, if only a slippage could occur, or madness be finally assumed.

Things are of course very different with Michel Foucault, as can be seen at the beginning of the very first class of his 1976 course at the Collège de France, 'Society Must Be Defended'. Foucault starts by indicting 'the inhibiting effect of totalitarian theories, global and encompassing, which indeed can still provide locally usable instruments: Marxism and psychoanalysis are evidence of this', but under the condition that 'the unity of theoretical discourse be suspended, at least sliced, torn, cut in pieces, turned upside down, displaced, caricatured, dramatized' (note the diversity of verbs, and options, listed here). Thanks to this active way of losing, or breaking, theory's old unity, Foucault goes on to say, an evolution has begun over the last fifteen years or so (he is referring to activism, art, counterculture; but also the intellectual labour of 1960–75) towards 'a local dimension of critique', not naive empiricism, he insists, nor soft eclecticism or intellectual asceticism, but 'a sort of autonomous, non-centralized theoretical production, which does not require the stamp of a common regime to assert its validity'. From there on he praises, in his quintessential implicit fashion, the 'returns [or feedbacks?] of



knowledge', quoting a home-made motto from 1960s' France: 'no more knowledge, but life!' and speaking of a larger 'insurgency of all subjected forms of knowledge'. These 'lower forms of knowledge' (*savoirs bas*) have proved more efficiently critical than 'high theory', Foucault suggests, because such *savoirs bas* are made of the 'various forms of historical content which have been buried' but remain the only way today to 'rediscover the real dividing line of struggles and confrontations which systematic organizations are set to dissimulate'.

Detotalized knowledge, in this respect, is the only form of knowledge available for social and political resistance; it is the 'disqualified, non conceptual, naive, inferior forms of knowledge such as the ones of the psychiatric or medical patient, of the nurse, of the doctor even, all on the margin of scientific knowledge'. Foucault concludes this introduction to his main course on social critique by stating that 'critique was finally made possible through the reemerging of such local, disqualified, people's forms of knowledge'. Theory anew, in this sense, is not to be found within the boundaries of academic discourse or art's experiments but at the crossroads of intellectual labour and creative activism, in specific yet radical, pragmatic yet critical forms of political activism. Such formulations ought to be set against the backdrop of Foucault's short-lived activist phase (agitating for prisoners, immigrants, psychiatric patients). But they also point to another aspect of theory, one to which his entire body of work testifies: that is, *genealogy*, in the sense Foucault

gives to that word against theory and also history, to the extent that both operate as totalizing discourses that silence those who are subjected. Genealogy, or theory *made* genealogy, one could add, is the only way, in Foucault's view, to let such struggling types of knowledge rise again against today's new forms of domination and control.

A third example, closer to the discursive nature of theory discussed above, comes from a surprising 1970 interview with Roland Barthes in literary journal *TXT*. Questioned on literature, Barthes replies on theory, connecting theory in general (singular) to a postdisciplinary, freely fragmented, subjectively performative form of enunciation, far removed from older theories (plural) of science and abstraction, 'a certain discontinuous, fragmented nature of examination, almost comparable to aphoristic or poetic types of enunciations', which Barthes sets against 'theory as the rule of the signifier which never ceases to dissolve the multiplicity of the signified' in favour of 'monology, origin, determination, everything that does not account for multiplicity'. Against this, theory in the new sense amounts to a 'struggle to crack Western symbolics', not so remote, for a literary theorist, from the ethical and political impulse of intensive philosophers to fight on the side of emancipated forms of knowledge, in defence of the positivity of desire. Theory, in the immediate aftermath of 1968, is seen by Barthes as an emancipatory experience with(in) enunciation.

### The threat of madness?

As an endnote one could speculate on a more arguable connection, to a non-intensive, non-French thinker at that: Martin Heidegger's meditation on theory in a short text from 1954 (in 'The Question Concerning Technology'). Heidegger begins by recalling that the verb *to theorize* comes from two Greek root words, *thea-rao*, and proceeds to attempt to account for the degradation of theory into science. *thea-rao* could be translated, Heidegger suggests, as 'to look attentively on the outward appearance (*thea*) wherein what presences becomes visible (*rao*) and, through such sight, to linger with it'. This meaning is degraded, according to Heidegger, in the later Latin translation of *theoria* as *contemplatio*, with its root word *templum* (to cut, part, seize). In this translation 'there comes to the fore the impulse, already prepared in Greek thinking, of a looking-at that sunders and compartmentalizes', even before modern rationality and science started 'entraping and securing the real'. Heidegger continues: 'science challenges forth the real specifically through

aiming at its objectness, science sets upon the real', all the way to physicist Max Planck's famous words: 'that is real which can be measured'.

Heidegger's outmoded indictment of reason and technology in the name of poetic language and the incommensurable presence of being takes us far from French theory, even if some of its key representatives did initially find Heidegger on their way to philosophical reinvention, but still, it is somehow ethically connected to more recent theoretical struggles against the aggressive totalizing gesture of classical theory. We are not so far, in both cases, from the inner splitting of theory, from the split destiny of theory, which is both available to finally let the silenced speak *and* doomed to encapsulate the multiplicity of what is. Not theory as the problem *and* the solution – that would take us back to the totalizing gesture of dialectics – but theory as a ridge, a line of radical ambiguity along which the separate realms of discourse and change, of legacy and invention, can be connected to each other, and along which the inner struggle of intellectual labour against its own institutional inertia, can be endlessly upheld. Right up to the threat of madness – a vital risk taken by several mid- to late-twentieth-century philosophers the way nineteenth-century poets and painters took it.

One last word of conclusion: the loose historical frame in which this crisis and further reinvention of theory are implicitly located, this madness of theory and parting of theory from itself, could very well resemble less an actual *Kehre*, a radical change in orientation and episteme, than a bracketed episode, a short-lived enclave in time and space whereby theory and desire, politics and radical critique have indeed been able to try to work side by side. Or at least they tried to, before a global counterrevolution swept it away. This backlash has taken peculiar forms in France, especially in the French intellectual field: moral blackmail, civilizational conservatism, the reinforcement of age-old abstract universalism and republicanism, a series of 'returns to' (an absurd notion even for a student of History 101); returns to democracy, to Kant, to Reason, to social peace, all with so many quotation marks. In the atmosphere of this backlash, despite a new generation of intellectuals, despite new political and artistic uses of theory, the feverish atmosphere of that era of maddened theory remains utterly unimaginable today. But beware nostalgia: the power of theory is not on best terms with the powerlessness of nostalgia, and somewhere in the middle, right where they could interact, we should stop and watch, and see how still today, if in unprecedented fashions, theory's peculiar politics can open on to new becomings.