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The Significance of Theory

Terry Eagleton

The Significance of Theory

I want in this lecture to theorize about theory – to engage, as they say, in 'meta-theory' – and this, at least as far as literary theory is concerned, would already seem to put me at five removes from real life. First there is the meta-theory; then the literary theory it takes as its object of enquiry; then literary criticism, which much literary theory reflects on; then literature, the object of critical investigation; and then 'real life', the object of literature itself. It is difficult to engage in this enterprise, in other words, without feeling that one is falling off the edge. But of course this sharp polarity between 'theory' and 'life' is surely misleading. All social life is in some sense theoretical: even such apparently concrete, unimpeachable statements as 'pass the salt' or 'I've just put the cat out' engage theoretical propositions of a kind, controvertible statements about the nature of the world. This is, admittedly, theory of a pretty low level, hardly of an Einsteinian grandeur; but propositions such as 'this is a beer mug' depend on the assumption that the object in question will smash if dropped from a certain height rather than put out a small daintily coloured parachute, and if it did the latter rather than the former then we would have to revise the proposition. And just as all social life is theoretical, so all theory is a real social practice.

What distinguishes the human animal from its fellow creatures is that it moves within a world of meaning – or, more simply, that it inhabits a *world*, rather than just a physical space. Human life is sign-making – 'significant' – existence. It is not that, unlike other animals, we have physical activities but signs as well; it is that living among signs transforms the whole meaning of the phrase 'physical activity'. The activity of a human animal is not behaviour plus something else; because we have that something else – language – our biological behaviour is transfigured into history. I do not mean to suggest that we do not share a great deal of importance with other animals, or that language is the only way history comes about; we could not have history, for example, if we could not labour in certain ways, ways which language helps to make possible. But the edge we have over other creatures makes a vital difference to the activities we share with them. For one thing, it makes our whole existence a good deal more precarious. Because we deploy signs, we can overreach our bodies to the point where we can undo them, as in warfare. If squirrels, as far as we know, are not at this moment busy secretly constructing nuclear weapons, it is not particularly because they are a nicer crowd than we are but because they cannot deploy our kind of signs. Their monotonous, species-determined biological existence is a good deal safer and more stable than ours. One reason why we have theories is in order to stabilize our signs. In this sense all theories, even revolutionary ones, have something conservative about them. But if we extinguished this precariousness which language brings us we would extirpate our creativity too, and so, as they say in Britain, you have to take the kicks with the ha'pence.

If all human existence is in some sense theoretical, then theory is an activity which goes on all the time, even when putting the cat out and smashing beer mugs. But when you get a really virulent outbreak of theory, on an epidemic

scale, as we have been witnessing in the literary institutions for the past twenty years or so, then you can be sure that something is amiss. Since this sounds the kind of statement more likely to be advanced by Professor Bloom than by myself, I should perhaps explain it. (I mean the Professor Bloom of the University of Chicago, not the real Professor Bloom.) For much of the time, our intellectual and other activities bowl along fairly serenely, and in this situation no great expenditure of theoretical energy is usually necessary. But there may come a point where these taken-for-granted activities begin to falter, log-jam, come unstuck, run into trouble, and it is at these points that theory proves necessary. Theory on a dramatic scale happens when it is both possible and necessary for it to do so – when the traditional rationales which have silently underpinned our daily practices stand in danger of being discredited, and need either to be revised or discarded. This may come about for reasons internal to those practices, or because of certain external pressures, or more typically because of a combination of both. Theory is just a practice forced into a new form of self-reflectiveness on account of certain grievous problems it has encountered. Like small lumps on the neck, it is a symptom that all is not well.

Whether and when this actually happens to a human practice is a highly variable matter. A long time ago, for example, people used simply to drop things from time to time. But nowadays we have physicists to inform us of the laws of gravity by which objects fall; philosophers to doubt whether there are really any discrete objects to be dropped at all; sociologists to explain how all this dropping is really the consequence of urban pressures; psychologists to suggest that we are really trying to drop our parents; poets to write about how all this dropping is symbolic of death; and critics to argue that it is a sign of the poet's castration anxiety. Now dropping can never be the same again. We can never return to the happy garden where we simply

wandered around dropping things all day without a care in the world. What has happened, rather, is that the practice has now been forced to take itself as its own object of enquiry. Theory is just human activity bending back upon itself, constrained into a new kind of self-reflexivity. And in absorbing this self-reflexivity, the activity itself will be transformed, as the production of literature is altered by the existence of literary criticism.

This, however, would seem to involve a curious paradox. For one of the effects of rendering our practices self-conscious in this way, of formalizing the tacit understandings by which they operate, may well be to disable them. Perhaps we only did what we did because we **were** *not* conscious of the problematical assumptions underlying our conduct. Indeed many theorists, from Friedrich Nietzsche to Sigmund Freud and Louis Althusser, have claimed that such amnesia or oblivion is an essential condition for any purposive action whatsoever. To objectify a procedure is to turn it into a potential object of contestation, which is why it is always safer for a ruling order to follow the English path and not do anything as vulgar and perilous as actually committing its constitution to paper. If you think too hard about how to kiss someone you are bound to make a mess of it. Theory, then, potentially destabilizes social life; but I have said already that it is also a conservative force. It is conservative in so far as it often seeks to supply us with new rationales for what we do, ordering and formalizing our meanings; but it cannot do this without making us freshly conscious of what we do, and this may always raise the possibility that we should do something else for a change.

The object of theory is, in a vastly broad sense, 'history'; but this formulation will not quite do, since theorizing is itself of course an historical event. An act of theory takes history as its target, but then finds itself joining the very history it ponders, altering it in the process. In order to

understand *this* occurrence, we would need another act of theorizing by which to do so; but this 'meta-theorizing' is in turn an historical event, will be absorbed into the history upon which it reflects, and will thus require yet another act of theory to show how all *this* comes about. We find ourselves, in other words, in an infinite regress, as 'theory' and 'history' chase each other's tails in an apparently ceaseless dialectic. The only way we could arrest this chain would be by arriving at the Theory of Theories, the Grand Global Theory which would not itself constitute an historical event. This solution has only one drawback, namely that it is impossible.

The reason why we are still afflicted by the fall-out of the great theoretical explosion which has taken place over the past two decades is that we have still not solved the problem of which this outburst of theory is the symptom. That problem has in my view nothing to do in the first place with literature or literary criticism; it has to do with the role of the 'humanities' in late capitalist societies. Theory would not have had the pervasive, perturbing effect it has had if it were simply a matter of whether to talk about signifiers rather than symbols or semantic overdetermination rather than poetic texture. Nobody outside a few thousand politically unimportant people is much concerned with these matters, and the fact that a few years ago in Britain a controversy about structuralism at Cambridge University made it onto the front page of the 'quality' newspapers has more to say about the brittle glamour of Cambridge than the hunger of the masses for a correct solution to the structuralist problem. (A *Punch* cartoon at the time portrayed a working man reading his morning newspaper and being asked by his wife: 'Have they caught the Cambridge structuralist yet?', evidently under the impression that he was a murderer on the loose.) If theory matters, it is surely because it touches a sore point at the very centre of Western society: the fact that

the humanities are in one sense exceedingly important to its corporate existence, and in another sense hardly matter at all. It is hardly surprising that the guardians of the humanities – literary critics and others – should experience under these circumstances what Jacques Lacan might have called a 'fading of the subject' or crisis of identity, and seek anxiously for solutions to it through new modes of self-reflection.

The phrase 'the crisis of the humanities' is a good instance of what the rhetoricians call tautology. For crisis is as native to the humanities as haggis is to Scotland, and has dogged them from the very outset. It is not that there is an assured body of values known as the humanities which rather recently hit some worrying problems; on the contrary, crisis and the humanities were born at a stroke. Indeed the very idea of constructing a certain privileged enclave called the humanities, relatively marooned from the common activities of social life, in which the most precious values of that life might be nurtured and contemplated, is part of the problem rather than of the solution. Historically speaking, the idea of the humanities, at least in the modern period, arises at a point where certain kinds of positive human values are felt to be increasingly under threat from a philistine, crassly materialist society, and so must be marked off from that degraded social arena in a double gesture of elevation and isolation. How *could* the humanities not be in crisis in social orders where it is perfectly clear, whatever their own protestations to the contrary, that the only supremely valuable activity is one of turning a fast buck? Yet it is just as clear that the humanities are not thereby a mere hypocrisy, icing on the cake of capitalism; on the contrary, they still have an enormously significant role to play in the construction and reproduction of forms of subjectivity which that society finds ideologically indispensable. Most human societies, perhaps all of them, carve out some sacred discursive space

within the clamour of their more instrumental idioms, where what can be reflected upon for a precious moment is not this or that particular technique or utilitarian practice but the very meaning of the human as such. You may call this space myth or religion or a certain kind of philosophizing or increasingly, in our own epoch, literature. How blessed to be able to savour the human *as such*, shorn of its specific social, sexual, racial and historical embodiments! And what a pity that this whole notion is no more than an ideological myth in its turn.

That this brand of transcendental humanism is indeed no more than a myth was becoming painfully evident throughout the 1960s – the period in which literary theory as we have it today first took off the ground. (Many of the actual theories in question, of course, run back far beyond that date; but it was in that era that they were refurbished and reconstituted into the loosely connected set of discourses which we now know as literary theory.) At the height of capitalist consumerism, American imperialism and the Civil Rights movement, it was becoming more and more difficult to conceal the fact that those areas of disinterested humane enquiry known as academic institutions were in fact locked directly into the structures of technological dominance, military violence and ideological legitimation. A new, more socially heterogeneous student body, who could not be expected any longer spontaneously to share the cultural class-assumptions of their teachers, thus effected a kind of practical 'estrangement' of those assumptions, which forced them in turn into the new forms of critical self-reflection I have talked about already. 'Theory' was born as a political intervention, whatever academic respectability it may since have achieved.

No theory, however, has built into it a self-evident political orientation, any more than has a literary form. This is not to say that theories and literary forms are politically *neutral* – rather that they are politically

polyvalent, capable of generating a multiplicity of sometimes quite contradictory social effects. It was shrewd of Goebbels, Hitler's Minister of Propaganda, to offer a job under the Nazis to Erwin Piscator, Germany's greatest Marxist theatre director and mentor of Bertolt Brecht. Goebbels saw quite correctly that there was no reason why the theatrical technology which Piscator had harnessed to the cause of an emancipatory politics should not be hijacked for quite opposite political ends. Theory suffers from a similar ambivalence. If the humanities are in deep trouble, then theory may either be used to expose their disreputable ideological roots, or deployed to refurbish them in glamorous new ways. Theory can be seen as providing a flagging literary critical industry with a much-needed boost of spiritual plant and capital, largely imported from the nations of the European Economic Community. In the post-war years, cultural modernism had become increasingly institutionalized in the West, as *Ulysses* entered the university syllabuses and Schoenberg sidled regularly into the concert halls. Theory was then one place in which that subversive modernist impulse could take refuge: what was developing was not simply a 'theory of modernism' but, more excitingly, a 'modernist theory'. But that in its turn proved progressively vulnerable to incorporation, as Bakhtin and Benjamin assumed their revered places beside Balzac and Beckett in the academic bookshops.

Speaking as an outsider, it seems to me that the most quintessentially American utterance these days, apart from 'Have a nice day', is 'They can incorporate anything!' American liberals and radicals tend understandably to be something of a gloomy, fatalistic bunch, painfully conscious as they are of the rapidity with which even the most revolutionary work of art can be placed in the lobby of the Chemical Bank, or of the alacrity with which the Pentagon can hire its clutch of semioticians and deconstructionists. This was not, on the whole, a problem which

greatly dogged the revolutionary avant-gardes of the early Soviet Union or the Weimar Republic. How idealist to imagine that art, or theory, could in itself resist political power! If your cherished revolutionary artefacts could be integrated into the system, then this surely only meant one thing: not that they were not outrageous or subversive enough, but either that they had no real roots in a mass oppositional political movement, or that they did, but (as with the Soviet and Weimar cases) those movements were finally defeated. The question of 'incorporation' is a question of politics, not in the first place of theory or culture. If the current system continues, then it is no doubt true that there is in principle no theory or cultural production which it cannot turn to its own squalid ends. If an oppositional movement succeeds, then the ruling order will be unable to incorporate a thing because it will have been incorporated by its opponents. The one thing which that order cannot incorporate is its own defeat. Let it try putting *that* in the lobby of its banks.

The question of the uses of theory, then, is in the first place a political rather than intellectual one. Literary critics do not in my view divide most importantly between those who are enthusiastic about theory and those who regard it as the final death rattle of the Free World. They divide, rather, between those who understand what Walter Benjamin meant when he declared that there was no document of civilization which was not also a record of barbarism, and those who do not. You do not need 'theory' to understand the meaning of this claim; many of those subjected to barbarism, bereft of academic education, understand its meaning perfectly well. You may, however, require theory to work out some of its implications. Benjamin did not presumably mean by his statement that documents of civilization were nothing *but* records of barbarism. He meant that there is a way of reading – difficult and delicate – which can, so to speak,

X-ray the text in order to allow to emerge through its affirmative pronouncements the shadowy lineaments of the toil, misery and wretchedness which made it possible in the first place. The only good reason for being a socialist, in my opinion, is that one cannot quite overcome one's amazement that the fate of the vast majority of men and women who have ever lived and died has been, and still is today, one of fruitless, unremitting labour. As Bertolt Brecht might have said, it is the non-necessity of this which is its tragedy. 'Culture' has its dubious roots in this unprepossessing soil, and like human beings themselves is always eager to repress its own disreputable origins, fantasize that it sprang fully fledged from its own loins. A materialist criticism is one which seeks to undo this Oedipal fantasy and remind culture of its criminal parentage. What method, theory, approach or technique it employs for these ends is an entirely secondary matter.

Once an emancipatory theory has succeeded in this task, then there will be nothing left for it to do and it should allow itself to wither away as quickly and decently as possible. It is a mistake, in other words, to imagine that emancipatory theorists – socialists, feminists and others – hold their beliefs somewhat in the way that Buddhists and vegetarians do. The latter presumably wish to remain faithful to their beliefs for as long as they survive; the former wish to get rid of them as soon as possible. Their aim is to help bring about the material conditions in which their theories would no longer be essential, or even, after a while, fully intelligible. If there are political radicals around in fifty years time it will be a grim prospect. All emancipatory theory thus has built into it a kind of self-destruct device, and moves under the sign of irony. In the just society, there would be no need for radical theorists to engage in laborious expositions of the social mechanisms by which one group of individuals comes systematically to dominate another, since people

would just be horrified or incredulous at the very thought that this could happen. Those who regard such a view as impossibly romantic or utopian forget that there are millions of people in the world today who have no understanding of systems of domination, and who might well find the whole idea appalling. These people are known as children. Children make the best theorists, since they have not yet been educated into accepting our routine social practices as 'natural,' and so insist on posing to those practices the most embarrassingly general and fundamental questions, regarding them with a wondering estrangement which we adults have long forgotten. Since they do not yet grasp our social practices as inevitable, they do not see why we might not do things entirely differently. 'Where does capitalism come from, mummy?' is thus the prototypical theoretical question, one which usually receives what one might term a Wittgensteinian reply: 'This is just the way we do things, dear.' It is those children who remain discontent with this shabby parental response who tend to grow up to be emancipatory theorists, unable to conquer their amazement at what everyone else seems to take for granted. Bertolt Brecht used to instruct his actors to perform with such an amazement well in mind, in what is known as the 'alienation effect'. Good social actors are those who have come spontaneously to internalize their allotted roles, and thus tend to be awarded medals for good citizenship. Brecht, for his part, much preferred amateur actors, since they were generally less skilled at such spontaneous internalization and so continually created unwitting alienation effects. The point of emancipatory theory is to regress us to childhood, or encourage us to be inept actors. Theory is often felt to be difficult because it uses phrases like 'hermeneutical phenomenology', and it is certainly the case that no discourse devoted to exposing the complex mechanisms by which a society works can hope to sound like the kind of thing one might hear on

the top of a bus. 'Jargon' just means a language not natural to *me*; but one person's jargon is another person's ordinary language. The true difficulty of theory, however, springs not from this sophistication, but from exactly the opposite – from its demand that we return to childhood by rejecting what seems natural and refusing to be fobbed off with shifty answers from well-meaning elders.

Imagine a group of people trapped, Buñuel-like, in a room, discussing possible ways of getting out. A new person enters – this room, let us conveniently imagine, has only a one-way obstacle – and settles down to listen to the talk. After a while it occurs to her that though some of the talk is indeed constructive, much of it is more of a symptom of the situation than a strategic response to it. Perhaps these people are actually fearful of leaving the room, and their wranglings are to this extent a form of displacement. The newly arrived member of the group is then faced with a problem. What she needs to do is fashion a form of discursive intervention which will somehow succeed in illuminating the relation between the talk and the situation; she must find some 'meta-discourse' (which may only be such for these particular purposes) which will persuade her trapped fellows to grasp their talk as bound up with their material conditions rather than simply as a potential solution to them. But any statement she makes is clearly in danger of merely being absorbed into the already-established circuit of discussion, heard as just another helpful suggestion rather than as an attempt to transform the entire scenario. This newly arrived individual, note, does not need to be 'disinterested', and indeed cannot possibly be so: why then would she be anxious to intervene? It is not necessarily that she is in possession of some superior knowledge; it is just that she is following a different rule from the others, a rule which includes the injunction: 'always listen to discourse as at least in part symptomatic of the material conditions within which it

goes on, rather than as a thing in itself.' In this situation, the new individual is the theorist, and the ones already in the room are the ideologues. Those radicals or liberals who feel somewhat uncomfortable about such an example because it seems to suggest that the theorist is 'superior' to the rest should remember that the corollary of rejecting a title ever to tell anyone else anything helpful is rejecting ever being told.

Despite this claim to superiority, emancipatory theorists are on the whole unlikely to fall prey to megalomania. They are unlikely to do so because their own materialist theories inform them that, in any process of actual emancipation, their own role is hardly a central one. This is not to say that those in need of emancipation do not crucially require self-reflection – that since the theorist's role is hardly central, he or she has no role at all. It is simply to insist that political emancipation, like eating or drinking, is by definition (not just contingently) an activity one can only carry out for oneself. And this is partly because the most difficult form of emancipation is always a matter of freeing ourselves from ourselves. Liberal humanism is fond of imagining an inner space within the human subject where he or she is most significantly free. A sophisticated liberal humanist will not of course deny that human subjects are externally or even internally afflicted by all kinds of grievous determinants and constraints; it is just that what these forces seek to determine and constrain is some transcendental core of inner freedom. The bad news for the liberal humanist is that this 'inner space' is actually where we are least free. If we were simply hedged round with oppressive powers, we would no doubt have a reasonable chance of putting up some active resistance to them. But no dominant political order is likely to survive very long if it does not intensively colonize the space of subjectivity itself. No oppressive power which does not succeed in entwining itself with people's real

needs and desires, engaging with vital motifs of their actual experience, is likely to be very effective. Power succeeds by persuading us to desire and collude with it; and this process is not merely an enormous confidence trick, since we really do have needs and desires which such power, however partially and distortedly, is able to fulfil. Among the various modes of production of any social order is the mode of production of human subjects, or forms of subjectivity; and this mode of production is made up of a whole range of institutions, from church and family to school and culture. The apparatuses of production of forms of subjectivity are just as historically variable as modes of producing economic goods. Literature, in our day, is one such (somewhat subsidiary) apparatus, devoted to the inculcation of certain affective codes and disciplines within subjects. It is in this way that it has a part to play in the more general processes of political power.

To claim that the 'inner space' is an inappropriate metaphor for picturing human freedom is not, of course, to deny that freedom's existence. It is just to deny that human freedom can ever be usefully thought of as 'inner'. Rather, it is the capacity to make something of that which makes us, and the portmanteau word for that is history. For power to inscribe itself effectively within subjectivity there must be something in it for individuals themselves. We must be in some ways gratified as well as frustrated by it; otherwise the state will be forced to have recourse to naked coercion, thus suffering a drastic loss of ideological credibility. But if there is not enough gratification for individuals, then they will demonstrate their freedom dramatically by rebellion. It is quite as certain that people will rebel in the long run against forms of oppressive power which allow them too few fulfilments, as that they will tend to submit to such power when those fulfilments are available. Individuals are in this sense as naturally revolutionary as they are naturally conservative. But the

run can, of course, be a long one; and meanwhile, in societies like Britain and the USA whose rulers desire not simply to combat radical ideas but to erase them from living memory, 'theory' is necessary, among other reasons, for keeping those energies warm.

Art after Auschwitz: *Adorno's Political Aesthetics*

An 'aesthetic' thought is one true to the opacity of its object. But if thought is conceptual, and so general, how can 'aesthetic thought' be other than an oxymoron? How can the mind not betray the object in the very act of possessing it, struggling to register its density and recalcitrance at just the point it impoverishes it to some pallid universal? It would seem that the crude linguistic instruments with which we lift a thing towards us, preserving as much as possible of its unique quality, simply succeed in pushing it further away. In order to do justice to the qualitative moments of the thing, thought must thicken its own texture, grow gnarled and close-grained; but in doing so it becomes a kind of object in its own right, sheering off from the phenomenon it hoped to encircle. As Theodor Adorno remarks: 'the consistency of its performance, the density of its texture, helps the thought to miss the mark'.[1]

Dialectical thinking seeks to grasp whatever is heterogeneous to thought as a moment of thought itself, 'reproduced in thought itself as its immanent contradiction'.[2] But since one risks eradicating that heterogeneity in the very act of reflecting upon it, this enterprise is always teetering on the brink of blowing itself up. Adorno has a kind of running solution to this dilemma, and that