



Against *Theory*

by Barbara Carnevali

A simulacrum of philosophy has risen in university departments all over the world: *theory*, fake philosophy for non-philosophers. We are not talking of the theories of some great author, since, among the most acclaimed “theorists” there are, too, philosophers in the proper sense, and even in the philosophical school, which has taken for itself the name of “Critical Theory:” but of a sort of collective thinking, of a *koine*, well-known to anyone who teaches in a field of the humanities at a university: a mix of ideas and phrases coming from varied disciplines (mainly philosophy, psychoanalysis, and sociology), refer to a canon of authors disparate but grouped under a generic “radical” tension (Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Gramsci, Derrida, Lacan, Foucault, Deleuze, Bourdieu, Agamben, Said, Spivak, Butler, Žižek, the omnipresent Benjamin, the newcomer, Latour) blended into one melting pot, in varying doses and combinations.

Formed in a DIY fashion inside a limited thematic agenda—power, gender, desire, the subject and the multitudes, the dominated-dominating couple—*theory* is defined and recognized mainly by its pragmatic use. Those who cultivate it, coming from other disciplinary sectors—mostly comparative literature, art theory and criticism, and cultural studies—seek to justify their own research inside a wider and more “committed” framework, that is programmatically turned towards the challenge of the present. The success of the line of thought called “biopolitics” highlights clearly this phenomenon. The notion which, in Foucault, had a fully philosophical dimension, has become a marketing product, designed for American and European departments of comparative literature.

Differently from philosophy, which functions under long, frustrating timings, and very rarely reaches any certainty, *theory* is quick, voracious, sharp, and superficial: its model is the “reader,” a book made to help people make quotations from books that are not read. Exactly for that reason, it functions as a common language and a ground for transdisciplinary aggregation. Those who teach risky subjects such as aesthetics and political philosophy have begun to worry a long time ago.

Let me clarify something: when defining *theory* as “fake philosophy for non-philosophers,” I do not intend to suggest a snobbish argument against the extra-disciplinary uses of philosophy. Quite the opposite: nothing would be more beneficial today than a dialogue between philosophy and the other forms of knowledge: this dialogue would not only remedy, in Simmel’s words, to the tragedy of a fragmented and parceled culture, always more autonomous and removed from the very life-world

which generated it, and which, only, can give it back a direction and a purpose; but it would also accomplish the irreducible mission of philosophy at the time of scientific specialization, that is the ability of keeping the memory and the nostalgia of totality. The complementary, legitimate demands of the student of the humanities and of the political militant are symptoms of this need for philosophy as an inspiration to the all. Eventually, they are looking for the same thing in the “theoretical gesture:” a way of reconnecting culture and life, of forcing it to start again addressing the requests for meaning and justice.

The main weakness of *theory* is the loss of all the specific attributes, which have allowed to define philosophy in its different traditions: it does not have the rigor, the clarity, the solidity of definitions and argumentations, which characterizes the practice from a formal viewpoint; it does not have the ability to raise truly defamiliarizing questions, and, above all, it does not have a taste for a passionate search for truth. Not only does *theory* not exceed the *doxa*, but it produces a second level thereof. Therefrom comes the paradox of a “radical” gesture, which becomes a habitus, conformist and predictable. We already know how a book of *theory* will end before having opened it; and it is exactly this sense of *acknowledgement*, of moral acknowledgement of one’s own certainties and of one’s own best intentions, which guarantees its success. *Theory* makes one feel fully at home in one’s fake conscience.

Indeed, who has, at least once in a lifetime had the experience of reading a book of philosophy, equally and especially in a non-professional attitude, knows that it is an exercise very different from reassuring and edifying. The theories of Kant, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, do not make us feel at home; they perturb us. And what it disturbs is really the collapse of what one would like to be true, what would allow one to acknowledge oneself and feel confirmed in our certainties and commitments, in front of the naked truth. It is clear that one cannot ask from any reader of philosophy to live through the turmoil of Heinrich von Kleist, who, after having finishing Kant’s first *Critique*, wrote to his fiancée that he didn’t see any more reason for living, or of Thomas Buddenbrook, crushed in front of *The World as Will and Representation*. But neither should be we let believe that philosophy can be reduced to a supermarket for ideas, pieces that could be assembled as pleases, at home, like Ikea furniture. Instead of engaging with postmodern DIY, it would be more formative to teach to think with depth and rigor about a problem, to develop completely an intuition or a hypothesis, guided by a classic and a good teacher. But before anything else, we should strive to take into consideration the original “radical” aspiration of philosophy, able to break so-called self-evidence. If someone would like to make a theory, let him learn first to raise right questions, original and personal, and not pre-made. Let him do some philosophy.

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