

QUO VADIS?: REVISITING THE PAST TO SHAPE THE FUTURE OF THEORY

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Abstract

My paper is an attempt at mapping the future of theory in the light of its past. The English word “theory” comes from the Greek root “theoria” which means “looking at,” “viewing” or “ beholding.” It can also mean “knowing,” “explaining” or “understanding.” Put very simply, theory is an attempt to explain in a systematic and comprehensive manner. The paper briefly adumbrates the evolution of theory in the western world since Plato, generally looked upon as the first great theorist and identifies the various kinds of theories. The development of literary theory in the twentieth century is brought under focus. This analysis is shot through with the awareness that several theories succeeded in shattering discipline boundaries. It is asked what the future of theory would be like .Evaluating the present is easy; explaining the past is easier; predicting the future is hazardous. However, the last of the above is precisely what the paper hopes to do. The various trajectories that can be taken by theory in the future are located and their strengths and weaknesses identity.

Keywords: *theory, understanding.*

Introduction

The English word “theory” comes from the Greek root “*theoria*” which means “looking at,” “viewing” or “beholding.” It can also mean “knowing,” “explaining” or “understanding.” It has been part of the English vocabulary from at least the sixteenth century. However it was only in the nineteenth century that the word came to be subjected to widespread use.

Though it was Socrates who called down philosophy from the skies, it was Plato who is looked upon as the first great philosopher of the Western world. He was a very systematic and meticulous theoretician. The theoretical framework that he developed was comprehensive, torching practically all areas of human experience.

Plato’s only rival for the position of the Western world’s first theorist is his disciple, Aristotle. The relative reputations of Plato and Aristotle have sea-sawed through history and it is now difficult to say which of the two has been more influential on the evolution of Western theory. Perhaps we should not

attempt to identify the father of Western theory. Theory has two fathers: Plato and Aristotle. Plato has, in general, been more influential in the humanities and Aristotle in the sciences.

Theory is an ocean. It embraces all spheres of human experience from Astrology and Astronomy through Chemistry and Climatology, through Economics and Engineering, through Linguistics and Literature, through Mathematics and Medicine, through Philosophy and Physics, through Sociology and Statistics to Zen Buddhism and Zoology and beyond them. Wherever there is an attempt to observe, analyse, comprehend, evaluate, there is theory. With some exaggeration one can say that to speak is to theorize.

It may not be out of place here to adumbrate briefly the rise of Anglo-American literary theory in the twentieth century. An appropriate starting point would be Matthew Arnold who was never tired of proclaiming not just the aesthetic value of literature but also its cardinal position in the socio-cultural life

of a community, something agreed to by T.S. Eliot who attempted to trace a great European cultural tradition. Partially sharing the perspectives, but more focused on the text, was I.A. Richards who developed Practical criticism in the U.K. and the New Critics of the U.S. The Russian Formalists attempted to develop a theory of literariness and their influence on English criticism turned out to be profound. The same could be said of the structuralism practiced by such French theorists as Claude Levi-Strauss and Roland Barthes which is ultimately rooted in the work of Ferdinand de Saussure. The developments in Marxism, feminism, black theory and postcolonialism need to be mentioned. Deconstruction and postmodernism were responsible for the poststructuralist revolution. This revolution was taken further forward by the work of Michel Foucault and Jacques Lacan. And it, in a way resulted in the rise of New Historicism and Cultural Materialism.

What about anti-theorists? A supreme example of an intellectual who spent an entire lifetime combating theory is F.R. Leavis. Leavis made it the mission of his life to establish that there is no such thing as theory. But we theorists are unfazed. We say that Leavis is a theorist himself, and a very fine one at that; only that his theory is that there is no theory.

The question, "Quo vadis?" remains to be answered. The Latin phrase is much older than Christianity. However, according to Christian tradition, Peter fleeing from likely crucifixion in Rome at the hands of the government meets a risen Jesus

on the road outside the city. Peter asks Jesus, "Quo Vadis?" or "Whither goest thou?" or "Where are you going?" Jesus replies that he is going to Rome to be crucified again. I would like to pose the question, "Quo vadis?" to theory which appears to laymen to suffer repeated crucifixion at the hands of its practitioners. Students fleeing from theory classes can easily identify themselves with Peter fleeing from likely crucifixion.

Will theory come to an end? In his 1989 essay "The End of History," published in the international affairs journal *The National Interest*, Francis Fukuyama speaks of history coming to an end. Of course, he does not mean that events will not happen or that history per se will cease. He holds that western liberal democracy will be universalized and thus further sociopolitical evolution will not take place. Similarly, will there be an end of theory? Far from it, I feel that we are on the threshold of a remarkable expansion of theory. The number of universities, academic institutions and professional academics has now scaled heights never before reached. They are working day and night and a theory explosion is inevitable. Let Jesus be crucified again.

Works Cited

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