Introduction
From Marx to Madonna: Theory, Culture, Politics

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Within contemporary theoretical and critical writing, there are few terms that have been more widely used and debated than "theory," "culture," and "politics." The frequency with which these terms have been invoked indicates their importance within the humanities and social sciences, but it also attests to the fact that, as with any commonly used word, we increasingly take these terms for granted, assuming that we already know what they designate, what they mean. To point out this taken-for-granted status is not to say that we can simply escape the history through which these words have come to be known. Nor is it to suggest there should, or could, ever be a priori definitions of theory, culture, or politics, much less of the relations among them. Rather, it is to argue for, as Samuel Weber suggests in chapter 1, "an incessant vigilance about how and why and what we tend to take for granted." The essays presented as the chapters in this volume, drawn from the fifteen-year publishing history of *Strategies: Journal of Theory, Culture and Politics,* are at once part of the history in which "theory, culture, and politics" are inevitably implicated and of this continuing effort to reconsider the meaning and relationship of these terms.

   Strategies began as an independently published journal with a limited circulation. For this reason, many of the essays included in this collection never received the attention that they deserved at the time of their original publication. Yet these essays were, in many ways, ahead of their time; even today, they provide thought-provoking perspectives on the intersection of theory, culture, and politics. Theory is highlighted in these essays, particularly the interactions among Marxist, poststructuralist, and "postmodern" theories. Of course, as Weber suggests, such designations have themselves become an increasingly easy means of categorizing theory, delimiting it so that we know in advance what it is and where we stand in relation to it. Thus, for example, one finds attacks on "poststructuralist theory" bent on fitting such diverse figures as Barthes, Baudrillard, and Derrida into a notion of "poststructuralism" that is defined in advance, most often as a matter of apolitical or nihilistic theoretical play. Indeed, such "knowledge" is even applied to new combinations of theoretical approaches, as in critiques that attempt

to dismiss "post-Marxist" approaches by showing them to be merely a subset of "poststructuralism," *QED.*

As these examples imply, critiques of "post" theories have often cast not only particular theorists, but theory in general as elitist and aestheticist, removed from everyday political practice and cultural realities. On the other hand, approaches that present themselves as explicitly political have at times been accused of being so rigidly "political" as to border on essentialism, fundamentalism, or even fascism—which is also to say that such approaches lack theoretical acumen or self-awareness. Cultural studies, for its part, has received criticism from several angles. To the extent that cultural studies is presented as providing political evaluations of popular culture, it is sometimes criticized for being "overly political" or "politically correct." Yet, cultural studies has also, quite commonly, been presented as too celebratory in its reading of popular culture (this complaint is generally associated with "postmodern" theorizations of cultural phenomena) and therefore complicit with cultural and political domination. At the same time, however, cultural studies has also been viewed, perhaps by virtue of its association with popular commodity culture, as not only apolitical, but as shallow and undertheorized. These sorts of characterizations are obviously caricatures, but like all caricatures, they merely emphasize already existing tendencies within contemporary debates. In particular, they point to the all-too-common tendency to treat theory, politics, and culture as distinct, a priori categories, which can then be used to evaluate or label various critical approaches in terms of how "theoretical" or "political" or "commodified" they supposedly are.

The essays presented as chapters in this volume, on the other hand, do not treat theory, politics, and culture as static, already-defined entities, but as complex, interconnected, and constantly evolving areas of inquiry. Interdisciplinary in their scope, and often provocative in their choice of materials, these essays challenge the traditional boundaries that have separated the theoretical, the political, and the cultural. They *move* from politics to theory and from theory to culture, connecting Marx and Derrida, Rodney King and "postmodern" politics, Irigaray and Madonna. Indeed, one useful way to think about the issues explored in this volume, and in the essays that constitute it, is to consider them in terms of movement and direction.

If the name of Marx has often served to represent the very idea of politics and political theory, it has also been linked to a politics defined in terms of directed movement—a movement with definite theoretical and historical aims. Conversely, the name of Madonna has frequently been invoked as emblematic of popular mass culture, often with the assumption that popular culture is in some way inimical to authenticity, including theoretical and political authenticity. Like Madonna herself, popular culture has often been accused of being shallow, simulated, inconstant, of continually shifting its position and direction over time. If politics ostensibly has been about "getting somewhere," about moving *from* where we are now *to* a different, and presumably better, place at which we will arrive in the

future, culture has often been presumed to move without direction, caught in the *to-and-fro* of cultural shifts and fads.

From this point of view, of course, leftist political theory and popular culture are necessarily defined in opposition to one another. In fact, the continuing expansion of commodity culture has often been linked to a blunting of political and theoretical direction. A common version of this argument, familiar in theoretical critiques of "postmodern" culture such as Jameson's, Baudrillard's, and Debord's, suggests that it has become increasingly difficult to maintain one's bearings—politically and otherwise—amid the constantly shifting, yet ultimately stagnant, profusion of images, signs, and data that makes up contemporary cultures. From its beginnings, in fact, mass culture has been associated with frenetic movement, but these movements are generally seen as leading nowhere, continually circling, recycling, repeating. For Horkheimer and Adorno, for instance, the figure of recurring, mechanical motions comes to define cultural production within the culture industry:

> The machine rotates on the same spot. While determining consumption it excludes the untried as a risk. The movie-makers distrust any manuscript which is not reassuringly backed by a bestseller.
>   . . . Tempo and dynamics serve this trend. Nothing remains as of old; everything has to run incessantly, to keep moving. For only the universal triumph of the rhythm of mechanical production and reproduction promises that nothing changes, and nothing unsuitable will appear. (134)

Lacking direction or aims beyond momentary consumption, the movements of mass culture churn unceasingly, but without arriving anywhere in particular. Any movement toward social or political change is therefore forestalled, caught up in the endless iterations of the culture industry. It is this seeming inability to "move forward," to "progress," that explains why what is variously represented as mass, popular, commodity, postmodern, or late capitalist culture is so often seen as inimical to politics or theory, as lacking the vision, direction, and goals that define "meaningful" theoretical or political movements.

In such critiques, mass culture is often cast as a form of capitalist contagion, a virus that infects the body—and the subject—of politics with its repetition, transience, and diffusion. Indeed, a similar critique is often extended to contemporary theory, where the multiplicity, iterability, and mixture emphasized in antifoundationalist theories are often viewed, at least implicitly, as symptomatic of a loss of theoretical and political direction. Thus, theory and politics, like mass culture, come to be figured as fickle, constantly shifting movements, governed, if they are governed at all, by the currents of the cultural marketplace, by the flows of capital.

This figuration of a loss of theoretical direction or political will is inseparable from the idea that the traditional notion of the subject has also, in some sense, become "lost." The idea of an active subject—whether individual or collective,

whether historical, political, or theoretical—has been founded on its ability to move, either literally or figuratively, toward a chosen end, in a chosen direction. Fredric Jameson, for example, highlights this linkage between subjection and direction when he argues that, amid the unsettling currents of late capitalism, we must "again begin to grasp our positioning as individual and collective subjects and regain a capacity to act and struggle which is at present neutralized by our spatial as well as our social confusion" (54).

As Judith Butler has noted, however, "For the subject to be a pregiven point of departure for politics is to defer the question of the political construction and regulation of the subject itself" (13). She therefore suggests that the direction of political, and presumably theoretical, movement also cannot be taken as preexisting, determined in advance. Indeed, Butler, borrowing from Foucault, argues that "the actions instituted via [the] subject are part of a chain of actions that can no longer be understood as unilinear in direction or predictable in their outcomes" (10). Here, the actions or movements of a subject are determined within the context of a cultural-political "chain of actions" that, although it may constrain or even direct these movements, remains multiply determined and unpredictable. In other words, culture, politics, and theory—like the subject—cannot be taken for granted. For they too are performative, determined not before, but *through,* their complex, interactive movements.

Butler's arguments suggest that a sense of political or theoretical direction cannot preexist, or stand outside, culture. The direction of theoretical or political movements can often only be determined in the aftermath of the complicated, at times chaotic, cultural movements through which theory, politics, and culture are constituted. This is not to say that the movements of culture—particularly mass or commodity culture—are not frequently restrictive, directive, and oppressive, or to argue that culture is not political. On the contrary, it is to suggest that politics and theory are inevitably implicated in the same multifarious movements and diversions through which culture is enacted. Rather than judging cultural phenomena simply in terms of some preexisting political or theoretical direction, then, we might do well to imagine a theory of cultural politics that would include diversion and unpredictability, that would emphasize its own ongoing performativity. Such a theory need not be seen merely as lacking direction or purpose. Indeed, it may simply involve recognizing that the movements of politics, theory, and even history are much more like the wayward movements of culture than is generally allowed. They instead tend to diffuse and spread, replicating themselves in different ways and places, reappearing in strange new permutations that nevertheless echo the old. It is this complex, somewhat chaotic range of movements that we hope to evoke in the subtitle of this collection: *From Marx to Madonna.*

For some, *From Marx to Madonna* may suggest that a historical shift has taken place, a movement from "political" theories to "culturally oriented" theories or from theories that rely on figures of direction, navigation, and positioning to theories that stress indirection, dissemination, deterritorialization, fluidity, and

the like. And certainly, this title is intended to acknowledge the increasingly important role that both cultural studies and theories of indirection have played in rethinking concepts of politics and theory. Indeed, an emphasis on these areas and approaches has been a hallmark of the work published in *Strategies*. Yet, the title *Strategies for Theory: From Marx to Madonna* is also intended to bring into question the opposition between directed and directionless movements on which many formulations of theory, culture, and politics have been founded. In other words, the "from" and "to" in this title should serve to suggest not a unidirectional movement or narrative, but a *range* of possible vectors and combinations, in which multiple directions, partial and ambiguous moves, diversions, reverberations, stops-and-starts, and other intricacies of motion would not be considered simply as failures of theoretical direction or political will. Thus, the essays that are gathered here under this title should suggest how complex, diverse, and also how diverting, cultural, political, and theoretical movements can be.

We have grouped the chapters in this collection into two parts that emphasize, respectively, the relations of politics to theory, and the relations of theory to culture. The chapters in "From Politics to Theory" move across the usual lines of the political and the theoretical, examining not only how theory can elucidate the political but also how theory is itself a political act of some consequence. Ranging from broad questions about how to conceive or theorize the political to considerations of the "politics" of particular theorists, these chapters nevertheless share a common interest in the interactions of Marxist and leftist thought with poststructuralist theories. Many of these chapters are concerned with what John Leavey refers to as "questions of post*.*": from Leavey's own reflections on the temporal assumptions and responsibilities implied by "post" theories to Ernesto Laclau's discussions of post-Marxist politics, from Keith Topper's consideration of "the politics of postmetaphysics" in the work of Richard Rorty to Donald Preziosi's critique of Fredric Jameson's notions of postmodern space. The idea of "postness" itself implies a certain temporal or historical direction, a "movement beyond" that can never entirely be achieved. Conventional figures of direction or movement are, in fact, brought into question in many of these chapters, whether they deal with issues of temporal movement, spatial direction, or political agency.

Thus, for example, Samuel Weber explores the relation of politics and deconstruction by way of the figure of piecework, derived from Marx's use of the German expression *aus freien Stücken* (literally: out of free pieces) in his description of the famous image of the dancing table. Following from Derrida's dual reading of the ghosts in Marx and *Hamlet,* Weber discusses how the spectral, "out-of-joint," or piecework quality of the table is related to Derrida's notion of iterability. Thus, the idea of piecework provides a model for a political "movement" that would not simply attempt to "put things in their proper place," to reunify the "disjointedness" of contemporary commodity culture and its emphasis on the present. As Weber argues, "politics may have to at least explore the possibilities of

what might be called *piecework:* a series of disjointed, but not necessarily unifiable *programs, projects* responding as much to the ghosts of the past as to the phantoms of the future."

Like Weber, Teresa Brennan also plays on Derrida's use of the phrase "the time is out of joint" in her examination of contemporary commodity culture in "Why the Time Is Out of Joint: Marx's Political Economy without the Subject." Brennan focuses, however, on radically rethinking Marx's theory of value, moving away from Marx's subject-oriented emphasis and toward a reconsideration of value in terms of time. For Brennan, the reason that time is out of joint is that capital imposes "a direction on physical processes which is other than their own." Against this imposition, Brennan attempts to open up ecologically *sensitive*—indeed *sustainable*—positions and movements, in which not only technological production, with its emphasis on speed, but also the less frenzied temporality of natural reproduction, would be seen as contributing value to the world.

In "Time Signatures: Post*.* Responsibilities," John Leavey also explores questions of temporal and political direction and of one's responsibility to the past. In a critique of unilinear, "naively historical" narratives and approaches, Leavey employs a fragmentary, aphoristic style that moves in many directions at once as it explores the complex range of issues involved in one's relation to the past and in issues of political and ethical responsibility. Moving from Derrida, de Man, Nancy, and Blanchot to critics of deconstruction and poststructuralism, and from Marx to Marxism and post-Marxism, Leavey seeks not simply to delineate or explain the bases on which political and ethical responsibilities have conventionally been posed, but to be responsive—and "responsible"—to the full range of complexities inherent in any notion of responsibility. Much like Samuel Weber, Leavey attempts to avoid taking these responsibilities for granted.

In a now famous interview, "Building a New Left,"[1] Laclau revisits his classic work with Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985), and elaborates on their post-Marxist position. Commenting on the relation of post-Marxism to poststructuralism and deconstruction, Laclau points out that "there is nothing that can be called a 'politics of poststructuralism,'" since "the idea that theoretical approaches constitute philosophical "systems' with an unbroken continuity that goes from metaphysics to politics is an idea of the past." Rather, Laclau notes, poststructuralist approaches have opened a variety of possibilities for "those political practices that go in the direction of a 'radical democracy.'" In this context, Laclau observes, "the disaggregation of essentialist paradigms is not simply a critique *of* Marxism, but a movement *within* Marxism."

In "Foucault's Fallacy," Michael Ryan draws on the provocative ideas raised by Antonio Negri's autonomist Marxism in order to critique Foucault's famous thesis that power engenders resistance. Taking issue with Foucault's reading of sexuality in Greek society, Ryan observes that Greek philosophy was bound to a "system of sexual subordination," in which "effeminacy" was necessarily excluded.

Ryan therefore points to "the threat that homosexuality poses to constructed heterosexuality, a danger of indeterminacy that elicits a violent response because it suggests how ungrounded and unstable the dominant heterosexual construction is." In this sense, "resistance is primary" and points to the instability and contingency on which discourses of power/knowledge are based.

Donald Preziosi's "La Vi(ll)e en Rose: Reading Jameson Mapping Space" provides a critique of Fredric Jameson's views of politics and of postmodern culture and space, pointing to the difficulties raised by Jameson's reliance on linear historical narratives and figures of mapping. As Preziosi argues, the "untranscendable History that Jameson would have us see, that grand master narrative plot which 'goes outside the postmodern paradigm,' is itself revealed as a romantic fiction . . . for in order to make that story visible, representable, and 'mappable,' we must ultimately position ourselves *outside* or beyond not simply 'postmodernism' itself, but outside of time, space and *history*."

In "The Politics of Postmetaphysics," Keith Topper explores Rorty's efforts to portray a "postmetaphysical culture," only to find that Rorty's radical historicist/pragmatist position leaves much to be desired in terms of understanding the embedded nature of our practices and self-understandings within a context of power and privilege. As Topper argues, "moving 'beyond metaphysics' involves something more than just overcoming foundationalism or theoretical hegemony"; it also requires combining "postmetaphysical insights" with "detailed histories of practices and power."

The chapters in the second part of this collection, "From Theory to Culture," focus on the relationship between theory—and here again, with particular emphasis on deconstruction, poststructuralist, and "postmodern" theories—and cultural phenomena. These chapters do not, however, simply follow the usual procedures of cultural studies, where cultural products and representations tend to be judged in terms of their complicity with or resistance to capitalist, patriarchal, or racist ideologies. Although many of these chapters focus on issues of racism, of gender or sexual bias, or of bourgeois ideology, they emphasize the multivalent complexity of cultural formations, from William Chaloupka's discussion of the media representations of Rodney King, to Kelly Dennis's analysis of photography, voyeurism, and "the beaver shot," to Marilyn Manners's consideration of the representation of women's sexuality in popular culture and in cultural criticism. Indeed, most of cultural phenomena explored here are treated not simply in terms of their relation to some "larger" political or theoretical issue, but as fully theoretical in themselves. Thus, for example, Iain Chambers, in looking at how diasporic and migrant movements have come to constitute contemporary metropolitan cultures, suggests the dependence of theory on cultural phenomena. The dispersive, migrant movements of culture and media are, in fact, emphasized in many of these chapters, from Gregory Ulmer's views of the dissemination of theory in popular media to Laurence Rickels's playful foray across a range of theoretical and cultural

icons. In all of these chapters, an awareness of the mixed, complex, and at times undecidable status of culture prevails over critiques that seek merely to apply theoretical or political models to culture.

In, for example, "Rodney King and the Awkward Pause," William Chaloupka scrutinizes media representations of King's words and silences, finding in them an expression of a DuBoisian "double consciousness" that cannot be reduced to fixed or essentialist notions of identity or politics. Moving from examples of television interviews with King to Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* and Nathan McCall's *Makes Me Wanna Holler,* Chaloupka underscores McCall's tendency to avoid easy categorizations of identity and Gilroy's emphasis on "tropes of movement and circulation" in theorizing black identity and politics. Thus, Chaloupka argues for, in Gilroy's words, "the inescapability and legitimate value of mutation, hybridity, and intermixture en route to better theories of racism and black political culture."

Gregory Ulmer also explores the interactions between popular media and contemporary theory in "The Making of 'Derrida at the Little Bighorn.'" Arguing that video and electronic media provide a way of enacting the insights of post-structuralist and Derridean theory, Ulmer outlines a "program" for linking theory, personal history, and popular media representations, as demonstrated in his project for a video entitled "Derrida at the Little Bighorn" (included in Ulmer's book *Teletheory: Grammatology in the Age of Video*). Ulmer's playful extensions of Derridean grammatology are echoed in the form of his piece, in which he mimics the interview format so commonly employed in popular culture. Yet, the interview is itself a fiction, written entirely by Ulmer himself for publication in *Strategies.*

In "Migrant Landscapes," Iain Chambers traces the hybrid, diasporic movements that have come to form the "secret, though invariably unacknowledged, heart" of contemporary metropolitan cultures. In these migrant movements, Chambers sees "the break-up of ideological essentialism" and "the fragmentation of a homogeneous and transcendental sense of the 'other.'" Miming the hybridity of these cultural movements, Chambers mixes extensive quotations and personal history with his own trenchant commentary, so that, as he observes, "writing becomes a travelogue, a constant journeying across the threshold between fact and fiction, taking up residence in that border country where histories dissolve into narrative."

Marilyn Manners's "All the Stupid 'Sex Stuff'" examines claims that the political and theoretical ends of feminism have degenerated into pop-cultural "fluff" and "sex stuff." Moving across a range of cultural representations of female sexuality, from Madonna and Roseanne to riot grrrls and *Ally McBeal,* Manners critiques the tendency of some contemporary feminists "to categorize rigidly, to underplay (or deplore) heterogeneity, or to mourn a lost golden age and view change and divergence apocalyptically." In these terms, Manners argues, those who parodically explore sexuality and who "split identities into more than two neat halves" are necessarily cast as inauthentic, insubstantial, and lacking in depth.

Kelly Dennis's "Leave It to Beaver: The Object of Pornography" takes another approach to representations of women's sexuality, from Dürer to Courbet to *Hustler,* in her analysis of "the politics of pornography." In the process, Dennis brings into question traditional readings of the place of voyeurism and the constitution of the "fixed" subject. As Dennis argues, "'normal' sexuality is that which maintains the fiction of the unified subject while perverse or marginal sexuality problematizes the homeostasis of the unified subject *in its willful identification as object rather than the object-disavowal of the subject.*"

In "Heretical Marxism: Pasolini's *cinema inpopulare,*" Kriss Ravetto engages the cinematic and theoretical work of Pier Paolo Pasolini, showing the contradictory, but potently political, significations of his portrayal of Medea, particularly as they relate to orthodox notions of Marxism. For Pasolini, as Ravetto observes, this departure "beyond Marx's and Gramsci's critiques of capitalism" is marked "as a movement toward the prehistoric (the prebourgeois)." Yet, Pasolini's turn toward a "mythic past" is not cast as a return to stability; rather, this past, in which "he expands the subproletariat to include the third world, homosexuals, woman," is itself presented in terms of "a fluidity of bodies and sensations that resist interpretation."

In "Missing Marx; or, How to Take Better Aim," Laurence Rickels moves playfully among a host of seemingly disparate theoretical and cultural topics—from Marx to Freud, from vampirism to AIDS, from "cultural critique" to "California culture"—in his consideration of the "politics" of groups, crowds, and masses, and their relation to electronic media. As Rickels points out, displacement and transmission have come to be crucial figures to any understanding of contemporary technological cultures: "AIDS, drugs, homelessness, and TV confront us with an uncanny truth; namely, that in an era of universal and global transmissions all of us (humans and machines alike) form one body—the tech-no-body of the group."

As is perhaps obvious in these summaries, the distinction that is implied in these parts of the book—between theory and politics on the one hand and culture and theory on the other—is, to some degree, arbitrary. One might easily argue that, for example, the chapters included in "From Theory to Culture" are every bit as "political" as the chapters in the first part. Ultimately, then, these two parts must be read in the same spirit as the title *Strategies for Theory: From Marx to Madonna:* that is, not as representing separate realms (or a movement between those realms), but as aspects of a range of intimately related, interactive phenomena. As the chapters in this volume amply demonstrate, the study of theory, culture, and politics cannot be confined within disciplinary boundaries nor reduced to a set of fixed, taken-for-granted perspectives or categories. These essays cross boundaries, mix categories, and combine perspectives.

It is precisely this movement across boundaries, this refusal to take for granted predefined categories, to be confined to a particular theoretical or political approach, that "defines" this volume. It can also, perhaps, be said to define

"theory" itself. For if theory is foregrounded here, if these essays can all be said to be emphatically theoretical, it is not because they employ the arguments and ideas of well-known philosophers and theorists, nor because they follow a particular theoretical direction. Rather, they are theoretical because they commit themselves to an incessant movement, to a continual questioning of "how and why and what we tend to take for granted." Here, in other words, theory is not simply a matter of applying existing theory to cultural or political phenomena, but of performing or enacting theory, of theorizing. Theory, in this sense, becomes a matter of *moving,* not simply *from* one theoretical, historical, or political locus *to* another, but in multiple, interdisciplinary, and often unforeseen directions. *From Marx to Madonna* is dedicated to this sense of theoretical movement.

Notes

    1. Originally published in the first issue of *Strategies* in 1988, this interview was republished in Laclau's *New Reflections of the Revolution of Our Time* (1990).

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