

INTRODUCTION

The Resistance to Historicizing Theory

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“Always historicize!” commanded Fredric Jameson at the start of *The Political Unconscious* (1981).¹ Yet curiously, this imperative, which I take to mean the investigation of the complex, reciprocal relations between texts and sociological, political, and/or economic events, has largely bypassed theory itself. Even though the last thirty years or so have witnessed a resurgence of historical studies, a resurgence largely predicated upon rejecting the New Critical paradigms of the verbal icon and discoverable, transhistorical meaning, the discussions surrounding theory and its career in the academy are more often than not surprisingly ahistorical.² Ironically, most metatheoretical work uncannily replicates the old History of Ideas approach, which views texts almost exclusively in relation to previous texts and only rarely in relation to the political or social events surrounding and informing them.

Frank Lentricchia’s *After the New Criticism* (1980) exemplifies this phenomenon.³ While Lentricchia begins his book by promising an “historical account of what has happened [in the United States] since the American New Critics passed out of favor” and describes his project as a “critique of various forces that have shaped contemporary thought about literature and the criticism of literature,”⁴ what he actually gives the reader is something very different. By “historical account,” Lentricchia evidently does *not* mean an account of theory’s intersection with, say, the Sixties, the protests against the Vietnam War, or anything analogous. We are told that Northrop Frye published “his monumental book [*The Anatomy of Criticism*] in 1957,”⁵ but nothing we are told about what outside circumstances surrounded and shaped Frye’s work, how it might have arisen from, or intersected with,

nascent Canadian nationalism or, perhaps more obviously, the Cold War. Instead, Lentricchia situates Frye's text strictly in relation to other examples of literary criticism, such as Frank Kermode's *Romantic Image*, and philosophical works by Ernst Cassirer and Susanne K. Langer.⁶

Similarly, Lentricchia begins his chapter, "History or the Abyss: Post-structuralism," with this sentence:⁷

When in late October of 1966 over one hundred humanists and social scientists from the United States and eight other countries gathered at the Johns Hopkins Humanities Center to participate in a symposium called "The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man," the reigning avant-garde theoretical presences for literary critics in this country were Georges Poulet, to a lesser extent members of the "Geneva school" associated with him, and, in the distinct background, in uncertain relationship to the critics of consciousness, the forbidding philosophical analyses of Heidegger (*Being and Time*), Sartre (*Being and Nothingness*), and Merleau-Ponty (*The Phenomenology of Perception*).

Although Lentricchia situates this famous conference chronologically, he tells us nothing about what else was going on in the world circa 1966 that might have shaped the papers presented and their reception, for instance, the Vietnam War, the growing antiwar movement, the growing counterculture, the different cultural circumstances surrounding the European and American papers presented at this conference, and perhaps even the musical soundtrack to the Sixties by such groups as the Beatles and the Rolling Stones.⁸

Lentricchia's project, however, is not exploring how deconstruction overlaps with, or arises from, a particular set of social or political events, but how Paul de Man's or Jacques Derrida's ideas relate to the previous ideas of Claude Lévi-Strauss, Northrop Frye, Roland Barthes, E. D. Hirsch, or Meyer Abrams. The ahistoricism of Lentricchia's argument particularly reveals itself when he writes that "Sometime in the early 1970s we awoke from the dogmatic slumber of our phenomenological sleep to find that a new presence had taken absolute hold over our avant-garde critical imagination: Jacques Derrida," or when he states that Derrida published his astounding essay, "Structure, Sign, and Play," in 1968.¹⁰ Although he promises the reader an "historical account," Lentricchia makes no attempt to link Derrida's thought to the student uprisings in France that culminated in May '68, or the protests over the Vietnam War, or Algeria, or the widespread dissatisfaction with Western culture that permeated the 1960s and a good part of the 1970s.¹¹

The lack of historical texture in Lentricchia's *After the New Criticism* represents less a failing by its author (the book is superb and rightly elevated Lentricchia to the rank of an "academostar") and more an example of an approach to understanding theory that continues to dominate contemporary

critical discourse. For example, both Jonathan Culler's *On Deconstruction* (1982) and Christopher Norris's *Deconstruction* (1982) continue the tradition of situating deconstruction within the context of continental philosophy to the exclusion of investigating how Derrida might have been consciously or unconsciously influenced by the political and social events surrounding the writing of his seminal works,¹² and one finds this uninterest in history in much more recent treatments of deconstruction (and French theory in general) as well.¹³

Perhaps because the New Historicism rather obviously concerns itself with the relationship between texts and events, there has been marginally more work done on its relationship to social and political developments. In a volume published in 1987, both Don E. Wayne and Walter Cohen noted the connections between 1960s radicalism and theory,¹⁴ and Jonathan Gil Harris has published an essay on the relationship between Stephen J. Greenblatt's subversion, containment thesis and the Cold War (an updated, revised version appears in this volume, *Historicizing Theory*).¹⁵ Brook Thomas also scatters interesting observations about the relations between theory and history throughout *The New Historicism and Other Old-Fashioned Topics* (1991).¹⁶ But three essays and occasional comments in a book represent a miniscule fraction of the over four hundred items listed in the Modern Language Association International Bibliography (MLAIB) on the New Historicism,¹⁷ and twelve years separates the publication of Harris's essay from the two in *Shakespeare Reproduced*. Clearly, historicizing the New Historicism is not (yet) a "hot" topic.

Instead, the vast majority of work on the New Historicism follows the same trajectory as that on French theory. For example, in the introduction to his 1989 anthology simply entitled *The New Historicism*, H. Aram Veeger notes that after the seminal texts were published at the start of the 1980s, "In a decade the New Historicism has mustered able cadres across several periods and disciplines and produced a substantial body of publications."¹⁸ But neither Veeger nor any of his extremely able contributors (including Greenblatt, Louis A. Montrose, Catherine Gallagher, Jonathan Arac, Gerald Graff, Lentricchia, Vincent Pecora, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Stanley Fish) devote significant attention to unearthing what conditions made the New Historicism attractive to these "cadres" or what social, political, or economic circumstances contributed to the formation and dissemination of this particular approach. In fact, with one exception, the issue is never even raised.¹⁹ Again, my intention is not find fault with Veeger's anthology, but to point out that this book, like Lentricchia's *After the New Criticism*, continues to represent the state of discourse, for the subsequent work on Greenblatt and the New Historicism has been largely uninterested in historical or sociopolitical matters.

The question, therefore, is why has historicizing theory engendered such indifference, if not resistance? Why, at a time when—to give a few admittedly

random examples—critics have no problem situating Geoffrey Chaucer's *Miller's Tale* in the context of the Peasant's Rebellion, More's *Utopia* in the context of humanist debates over the morality of Europe's actions in the New World, John Milton's *Paradise Lost* in the context of the English Revolution, and Daniel Defoe's fiction in the context of the South Sea Bubble, when, in other words, the act of historicizing literature (however broadly construed) has become almost axiomatic in both scholarship and the classroom, has there been little sustained interest in historicizing *theory*?²⁰ And why is the narrative history of theory almost identical to the narrative history of literature that theory helped to supplant with one more sophisticated and historically rooted?

There are several answers to this question. First, the generational issue. It is, perhaps, unreasonable to expect the founders of theoretical discursivity to historicize themselves. That project generally requires some distance from the events themselves. Consequently, Terry Eagleton, born in 1943, can situate the social and political roots of the New Criticism, whose founders, John Crowe Ransom and Cleanth Brooks, were born, respectively, in 1888 and 1906. Yet, significantly, Eagleton, like Lentricchia, stops historicizing once he reaches poststructuralism, at least partly because he belongs to their generation.²¹ The task of historicizing theoretical developments after the New Criticism, it seems, has largely fallen to the "Next Generation" of literary critics, a group I define elsewhere as academics who "received the various approaches and epistemologies signified by the shorthand term *Theory*, second-, if not thirdhand."²² In other words, the academic family dynamic seems to have students historicizing their elders. The contributors to *Historicizing Theory* (with the sole exception of Morris Dickstein) are all members of the "Next Generation," and as this volume demonstrates, their attention is now turning to precisely this issue.

But in addition, the resistance to historicizing theory arises from the connection, noted by Montrose, Wayne, and Cohen but not at the time or subsequently explored in any depth, between theory and the Sixties. The reluctance to digging any further, I suggest, stems from how this connection has so often been used as a means of *discrediting* theoretical approaches. Starting with Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987), there has been a steady stream of crediting French theory (and often theoretical approaches in general) with the decline of Western Civilization. Bloom, for example, bemoaned the abandonment at Cornell University in the Sixties of "the old core curriculum" to a professor of comparative literature, whom Bloom explicitly and snidely identifies as "an assiduous importer of the latest Paris fashions," who of course defends this development.²³ Following Bloom, Roger Kimball remarks that:²⁴

It has often been observed that yesterday's student radical is today's tenured professor or academic dean. The point of this observation is not

to suggest that our campuses are littered with political agitators. In comparison to the situation that prevailed in 1968, when colleges and universities across the country were scenes of violent demonstrations, the academy today seems positively sedate. Yet if the undergraduate population has moved quietly to the Right in recent years, the men and women who are paid to introduce students to the great works and ideas of our civilization have by and large remained true to the emancipationist ideology of the Sixties.

Dinesh D'Souza, in *Illiberal Education* (1991), also asserts that "Older, traditionally liberal professors are retiring and making way for a new generation, weaned on the assorted ideologies of the 1960s," and substantiates this charge with a series of quotes taken from interviews and articles in the popular (as opposed to academic) press from such prominent figures as Henry Louis Gates, Jay Parini, and Annette Kolodny attesting to the roots of their scholarship in the protests of the 1960s.²⁵

Perhaps the most extraordinary instance of the Sixties being used as a club against theory is the "affair" surrounding Cambridge University awarding Derrida an honorary degree. Cambridge's proposal occasioned a letter to the *Times* (London), signed by twenty philosophers from all over the globe, urging the university to not go through with this plan. The reason for their dismissal of his work is as follows: "M. Derrida's career had its roots in the heady days of the 1960s and his writings continue to reveal their origins in that period. Many of them seem to consist in no small part of elaborate jokes and the puns 'logical phallusies' and the like. . . ."²⁶

In the interview concerning this letter, Derrida responds in the two ways we have come to expect. The first is to completely ignore the charge, and for most of the interview, both the questioners (the editors of the *Cambridge Review*) and the subject do not address the topic of what Derrida's work may owe to the Sixties. But toward the end, one question delicately points to the main charge against Derrida:²⁷

It has often been alleged of your work (but not of yours alone) that it is intimately bound up with not only a French, but a distinctively Parisian, intellectual situation, and indeed that it loses its force and some of its intelligibility when removed from this context. There is obviously an implicit charge of parochialism here: how would you respond to this allegation?

Derrida's response is instructive. At first, he seems to admit the historical embeddedness of his work: "It is true that what I'm trying to do, *especially back in the 1960s* and principally in *Of Grammatology* will be better understood if aspects of the French, and more narrowly, Parisian university and cultural scene are taken into account . . ." (my emphasis).²⁸

Derrida seems about to situate his work in the uproars roiling the Parisian university scene, and it is important to note that a reader familiar with his work might very well expect such a response, for despite the supposed ahistoricism of deconstruction, Derrida has explicitly invited this type of analysis. In the introduction to a much earlier essay, "The Ends of Man," Derrida pinpoints with great precision its historical parameters. He conceived this essay in

the month of April, 1968: it will be recalled that these were the weeks of the opening of the Vietnam peace talks and of the assassination of Martin Luther King. A bit later, when I was typing this text, the universities of Paris were invaded by the forces of order—and for the first time at the demand of a rector—and then reoccupied by the students in the upheaval you are familiar with. This historical and political horizon would call for a long analysis.²⁹

Furthermore, in "Deconstructions: The Im-Possible," published in the recent anthology, *French Theory in America* (2000),³⁰ Derrida repeats this invitation (although with typical complexity, he also undercuts this invitation) for a "long analysis" of theory's relationship to historical events of whatever type:

Let's suppose the historical analysis of a paradigm in the sense of [Thomas] Kuhn or an episteme in the sense of [Michel] Foucault, some "themata," or as they say, an historical analysis of givens, a configuration that explains that at a certain moment an invention was made possible, that it became practicable under certain conditions, technical, economic, social, psychological, scientific, et cetera. According to this analysis that I hold to be necessary and, to be sure, legitimate, and which we must push as far as possible, the invention of this possible will have done nothing but make explicit . . . that which was already there. . . .³¹

Yet, to return to the Cambridge University affair, when Derrida actually has an opportunity to speculate on the "historical and political horizon" of his work, he declines, preferring to conclude the sentence thus: "for example, the hegemony of structuralism, of a certain Althusserian Marxism, of Lacanian psychoanalysis, of [Maurice] Blanchot, Lévi-Strauss, Foucault, Barthes, and so on."³² When Derrida refers to the "Parisian university and cultural scene" surrounding his work, he pointedly does *not* mean what is going on in the streets (or the hallway outside his office). He does not mean *Sixties* culture. Instead, by "cultural," Derrida means *intellectual* culture, or what is more generally known as "intellectual history." The occupation of the university is forgotten, as are the "certain conditions," be they technical, economic, social, psychological, scientific, or whatever, which surrounded the origins of Derrida's seminal works.

Derrida's response to this question demonstrates a key aspect of the resistance to historicizing theory. First, granting the connection between deconstruction or New Historicism or any other flavor of theory and the Sixties seems to play directly into the hands of one's enemies (e.g., Bloom). As we have seen, between the writing of "The Ends of Man" in 1968 and the Cambridge Affair in 1992, theory in general and Derrida in particular were consistently denounced as "relics" of the Sixties. Therefore, it is better strategically to deny the connection altogether or at most, to grant it the most cursory treatment and to quickly move on.³³ Consequently, most sympathetic discussions of theory, including Derrida's own, prefer minimal contact with this topic. Hence Derrida's simultaneous invitation to, and denigration of, historicizing theory. The tendency to regard history as the enemy of theory was unfortunately strengthened by the revelation of de Man's anti-Jewish wartime newspaper columns, which obviously invited invidious comparisons between his earlier and his later writings.³⁴

Therefore, the strategy of shifting attention toward theory's intellectual or philosophical roots, to see theory in the context of the Western metaphysical tradition—C. W. F. Hegel, Heidegger (who obviously has his own problems), and Edmund Husserl, to analyze its relationship to less problematic (in terms of public relations) roots than, say, the invasion of "the universities of Paris [by] the forces of order," constitutes a *defensive* move. Put bluntly, the association of theory with the Sixties does not work to theory's advantage, does not enhance its credibility, and in the face of considerable hostility from nonacademic writers (who have, truth be told, many sympathizers within the university), I suggest that the interpretive community of metatheoretical scholars implicitly decided to not only quarantine this area of investigation, but to direct attention away from history and to move attention toward theory's relationship with philosophy.³⁵

Historicizing Theory seeks to break this pattern and to begin a concentrated effort at situating various theories and theoreticians within their manifold social, political and economic contexts. In "The Poetics and Politics of Culture," Montrose argues that part of the burden of New Historicism is to recover "the cultural specificity, the social embedment, of all modes of writing," recognizing that such recovery will inevitably be partial and proceed "from our own historically, socially and institutionally shaped vantage points."³⁶ Montrose's main object is, of course, early modern writing, but his statement can, I think, be applied with equal effect to theory itself. That, in short, is this anthology's burden.



The organization of this volume is roughly chronological. Evan Carton, in "The Holocaust, French Poststructuralism, the American Literary Academy,

and Jewish Identity Poetics” situates poststructuralism within the parameters of the second World War in his discussion of the ambivalent subtextual struggles of a generation of postwar French intellectuals with the fact of the Holocaust. Imported in the 1970s, with little attention to its historicity (its encipherment of Auschwitz and its implication in the longer French cultural struggle with *la question juive*), this body of thought came to comprise the field of “theory” in the American literary academy, and thus to shape the disciplinary inquiries of professors and students of English into matters of language, reason, history, knowledge, and power. A curious feature of this phase of poststructuralism’s journey was its embrace and institutionalization by Jewish American critics for whom literary studies’ disciplinary legitimization crisis coincided with a more personal crisis of spirit, of cultural community, and of Jewish self-identification. Carton’s essay traces out some of the chains of circumstance and meaning that connect the Holocaust to French poststructuralism and to the recent history of the American literary academy, which connect Jewish “identity poetics,” whether in France at early or midcentury or in the United States at century’s end, to the issue of the intellectual vocation.

Karen Raber’s “Michel Foucault and the Specter of War” historicizes Foucault’s early work as a response to the French experience of World War II, suggesting that the historical vision that underwrites Foucault’s politics and philosophy is mobilized both by the historical events of the war, and by France’s attempts at revisionism about its role in cooperating with the Nazi Occupation in the years following Liberation. Raber connects Foucault’s understanding of the medicalization of crime, the function of the state in policing public hygiene and purifying the “body” of its people, and the creation of the disciplined “docile” body of the individual, with the institutions and expressions of Nazi thought whether manifested in the rhetoric and actions of the Vichy government or through the direct presence of Nazi rule during Occupation.

James J. Paxson, in “Historicizing Paul de Man’s Master Trope, Prosopopeia: The Nazi *Volkskörper*, and Allegories of the Body Politic,” bridges continental developments and theory’s career in the United States. Although the mandarin theories of language, literature, and tropes developed by de Man continue to see explication in sporadically appearing articles and books, and in the wake of the fact that the historical scandal of de Man’s at-times anti-Semitic and potentially collaborationist “wartime writings” of the early 1940s has faded from the current scene in theory, Paxson proposes to historicize de Man’s greatest theoretical tool: his “master trope,” prosopopeia, by showing how the Nazi rhetoric of *Gleichschaltung* (coordination or organic synthesis) and its subjacent master trope, *Der Volkskörper* (People’s Body), find phantom regeneration in de Man’s mature theoretical master trope of poetics, prosopopeia, or personification.

Lee Morrissey's "Nostalgia' and Jacques Derrida's Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" situates Derrida's highly influential essay, "Structure, Sign, and Play," in terms of the relationship between Paris and Algeria, especially in the context of the Civil War of the late '50s and early '60s. What emerges, as Morrissey writes, "is a Derridean argument much more politically and historically aware than his work is generally thought to be, especially in the earlier essays."

"Jean Baudrillard and May 68: An Acoustic Archaeology" by Andrea Loselle takes as its historical source material the noise of May 68 and contemporary developments in sound technology and portable gadgets. In his early books and in his essays for the journal *Utopie*, Baudrillard examined the role the media played in neutralizing student and worker protests. Loselle's piece links his reading of the media's participation with other more powerfully resonant images underlying the post-'68 feminist movement in France and the then gendered technical divisions between the plugged-in, noisy, domestic gadgets destined for women and the comparatively soothing, self-absorbing, portable gadgets advertised for men. Baudrillard, however, has been known more for his treatment of visual images and objects, not noise, audio gadgets, and gendered technical divisions. His involvement in May 68 and his recollections allude to these latter topics in a way that invites historicizing his emphasis on the visual through them. By placing Baudrillard's work in the cultural context of noise, it is possible to historicize, in turn, the fragmentation of the traditional stage of revolutionary action, the street, and the "multiple self-referential spaces of personalized passage and mininarratives of cultural accumulation" produced by the spread of public gadgets that channel and process the unpredictable subversiveness of noise.

In "Stephen Greenblatt's 'X'-Files: The Rhetoric of Containment and Invasive Disease in 'Invisible Bullets' and 'The Sources of Soviet Conduct,'" Jonathan Gil Harris historicizes Greenblatt's infamous theory of subversion and containment with respect to its language. Even as Greenblatt reacts obliquely against Reaganism, the rhetoric of his essay "Invisible Bullets" uncannily parallels that of an important Cold War-era document written by "X," aka George F. Kennan, the architect of the U.S. foreign policy of Soviet containment. Both Greenblatt and "X" reproduce a rhetorical nexus in which "containment" is figured in relation to invasive disease; as a consequence, both Greenblatt and "X" attribute the origins of social pathology and change to factors external to the social organism. The paradigm of invasive disease that informs their rhetoric has a long history; it is a prominent feature of both Renaissance English political writing and mid-twentieth-century functionalist anthropology. In all of its incarnations, the rhetorical nexus of containment and invasive disease serves a largely conservative role, deflecting responsibility for social ills from what often are contributory internal factors.

Ivo Kamps, in “New Historicizing the New Historicism; or, Did Stephen Greenblatt Watch the Evening News in Early 1968?” gives what some may call a “New Historicist treatment of the New Historicism.” Noting that significant work has been done in recent years to trace new historicism’s theoretical lineage, Kamps’s essay addresses an as yet barely explored dimension of new historicist criticism, namely, that of the historical conditions that went into its own making. There is something odd about a critical method that vigorously professes to historicize the objects it investigates but apparently has little interest in historicizing itself, and Kamps sets out to begin the rectify this situation. Employing something like a new historicist method himself, Kamps turns to one of the most traumatic periods in the Vietnam War, the Tet Offensive of early 1968. In particular, Kamps revisits the television coverage of the Tet Offensive by such reporters as Morley Safer and Walter Cronkite to investigate how both the style and substance of their coverage may have shaped the synchronic, associative tendencies of new historicism, as well as new historicism’s fondness of anecdotes.

Loren Glass, in “The End of Culture,” argues that the New Historicist work of Walter Benn Michaels—and particularly his theorization of the term “culture”—must be understood in the historical context of the Reagan era. Reagan’s domestic and foreign policies—dismantling the welfare state at home and trumpeting American economic and military superiority abroad—formed the cultural milieu of Michaels’s major work. Glass aligns Michaels’s participation in the “Against Theory” debates with the rise of a neo-conservative and xenophobic orthodoxy in American English departments, and then connects Michaels’s theorization of the ubiquity of capitalism in his first book, *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism*, to America’s incipient “victory” in the Cold War and the associated globalization of American free-market ideology. Finally, Glass offers *Our America* as a complex allegory of these very historical developments, which symptomatically elides the very decade that formed Michaels’s generation of literary critics. Thus Glass concludes that a consideration of the Sixties is crucial to an understanding of the contemporary debates over “culture.”

Marc Redfield’s essay, “Literature, Incorporated: Harold Bloom, Theory, and the Canon,” explores ways in which Bloom served as a symbolic representative and peculiarly literalized embodiment of “the Canon” during the era of the canon wars in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Redfield suggests that both Bloom’s writings and his theatrical self-fashionings display an anxiety about those aspects of literariness that resist aestheticization as an embodied canon. A synonym for such literariness, in the late twentieth century, is “theory,” particularly the sort of theory associated with the work of de Man. Redfield suggests that we read Bloom’s theatrical engagements with de Man as a phantasmatic recoding of anxiety as personal agon, and proposes that the

specter of literariness as theory may in turn be aligned with what Walter Benjamin termed the “shock experience of modernity.”

David R. Shumway in “The Sixties, the New Left, and the Emergence of Cultural Studies in the United States” argues against the common assumption that the Cultural Studies movement in the United States originates in the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. Shumway, however, proposes an alternative genealogy by arguing that cultural studies in Britain and the United States derive from differing New Left movements and their academic offshoots. In the United States, left-wing political movements of the 1960s produced, besides campus protests, changes in the knowledges taught and studied at universities. There are four of these that help account for the rise and particular character of American cultural studies: (1) the rise of mass culture as an object of academic study; (2) the widespread rejection of the belief that genuine knowledge is politically disinterested; (3) the rise of academic feminism and the development of women’s studies; and (4) the growth of African-American studies and the recognition of racism as pervasive cultural evil that universities should address. This essay will argue that these changes in the American academy fostered the emergence of cultural studies here, and that the influence of Birmingham, while certainly significant, came late and provided, in Richard Ohmann’s words, “a way of gathering and naming a so-far inchoate movement.”

H. Aram Veeseer looks to how Edward Said’s engagement with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) stands at the fountainhead of postcolonial theory. In 1989, Said engaged in a series of angry exchanges with Yaser Aberdrabbo, the PLO spokesperson in Tunis, and Veeseer finds in this public debate paradigmatic postcolonial questions about hybrid identity, geographic determination, and catachretic ruptures of Enlightenment-style reasoning. These three concepts are, not coincidentally, essential to postcolonial theory, and we can see in Said’s exchange with the PLO an attempt at convincing them to adopt his own enthusiasm for permanent exile, unlocatability, and a complete break with the past.

Benjamin Bertram, in “The Spectrality of the Sixties,” is concerned with the tradition of Sixties utopian thinking in critical theory. Bertram proposes that Jacques Derrida’s notion of the “messianic” in *Specters of Marx* (1994) is one of many indications that radical utopian thinking has not died out since the Sixties, and he compares Jameson’s notion of utopia and Derrida’s “messianic” as a means of thinking about the complex legacy of Sixties’ utopianism for contemporary critical theory.

The book concludes with an afterword by Morris Dickstein. After first situating himself within the theoretical developments and the sixties and seventies, wryly noting that if his first book on Keats’ verse “was an advance on the New Criticism of the mid-1960s it must have looked hopelessly backward

ten years later,” after the advent of Derrida, Foucault, Barthes, and de Man, Dickstein both praises and critiques the project of historicizing theory. While, he grants, there is obviously much to be gained by this project, there are drawbacks also, such as a potential lack of rigor, and the possibility of diminishing “writers and movements by reducing them to their local circumstances. Yet, Dickstein concludes, while one can argue over details, the larger justification for historical interpretation is twofold. First, we want to know as much as possible about writers who have so profoundly affected our intellectual lives. But also, “historical interpretation is an indispensable way of comprehending culture and shedding light on the theories and practices through which [theory] has always tried to make sense of itself.”



A confession: this volume began its life by taking seriously the common perception that various theoretical discourses originated in the Sixties. I wanted, in other words, to transform an accusation into an opportunity. But as *Historicizing Theory* developed, it became increasingly clear that my sense of chronology needed to be significantly broadened. Clearly, some of theory’s origins lie in the Sixties, and a number of essays in this book investigate precisely those connections. Yet as proposals came in and as the essays themselves went through various drafts, I learned that theory’s historical roots are both longer and shorter than conventionally understood. That is to say, events preceding the Sixties, for example, World War II, Algeria, and the Holocaust, as well as developments after this decade, such as the Reagan/Thatcher era of the Eighties, including the Canon Wars, also shaped theoretical writing of various kinds. *Historicizing Theory* thus seeks to correct two widely shared misapprehensions: the first is that history is unimportant to theory, and the second is that theory’s historical roots are largely restricted to the Sixties. While we disagree with Derrida’s assessment that this project “will have done nothing but make explicit . . . that which was already there,” *Historicizing Theory* accepts Derrida’s invitation for a “long analysis” of theory’s “historical and political horizon[s],” and we hope that this volume marks the beginning, not the end, of a concerted, concentrated effort at understanding how history shapes theory, in all its guises.

NOTES

1. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 9.

2. There have been a few, scattered instances of historicizing theory over the years. In addition to Terry Eagleton’s *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1996) (see n.

21), Vincent Leitch makes some gestures in this direction in *American Literary Criticism from the Thirties to the Eighties* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), in particular his chapters on Marxist criticism in the 1930s (1–23), the New York Intellectuals (81–114), and “Leftist Criticism from the 1660s to the 1980s” (366–407); Gerald Graff generally historicizes the profession in *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). See also Aijaz Ahmad in *Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London: Verso, 1992); Jeffrey Williams, “Packaging Theory,” *College English* 56.3 (1994): 280–98; “The New Bellestrism,” *Style* 33.3 (1999): 414–42; and “The Posttheory Generation,” in *Day Late, Dollar Short: The Next Generation and the New Academy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 25–44. These essays, however, are the exceptions that prove the rule.

3. While Frank Lentricchia published *After the New Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980) over twenty years ago, in many ways it set the standard for discussions of poststructuralist criticism. Furthermore, *After the New Criticism* is still being read. As of this writing (2004), the book remains in print (both paperback and textbook editions) and it is the subject of an interesting exchange on *amazon.com*.

4. *Ibid.*, xi.

5. *Ibid.*, 3.

6. *Ibid.*, 4–5.

7. *Ibid.*, 157.

8. This list is meant to be illustrative and suggestive rather than delimiting the area of inquiry. The open-endedness of “the Sixties,” and the term’s lack of historical specificity, is what makes it useful for my purposes. My point is that an infinity of stuff is going on in the world, but the literature on theory has, for the most part, chosen to make use of almost none of it.

9. Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism*, *ibid.*, 159.

10. *Ibid.*, 169. “Structure, Sign, and Play” would appear in America in 1973.

11. French critics, on the other hand, have been much more open to this kind of analysis. See, for example, Luc Ferry and Alain Renault, *La pensée 68: essai sur l’antihumanisme contemporain (French philosophy of the sixties: An essay on antihumanism)* (1985; reprint, Paris: Gallimard, 1988).

12. Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory & Practice*, chapter 1, discusses deconstruction’s relationship to structuralism and to the New Criticism.

13. For example, *Deconstructions: A User’s Guide*, ed. Nicholas Boyle (New York: Palgrave, 2000), Norris, *Deconstruction and the ‘Unfinished Project of Modernity’* (New York: Routledge, 2000); and *The Emperor Redressed: Critiquing Critical Theory*, ed. Dwight Eddins (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1995).

14. In “Political Criticism of Shakespeare,” Walter Cohen devotes exactly two paragraphs to the social origins of theory (Cohen, “Political Criticism of Shakespeare,” in *Shakespeare Reproduced: The Text in History and Ideology*, eds. Jean E. Howard and Marion F. O’Connor [New York: Methuen, 1987], 18–19). Don E. Wayne, in his essay

in the same volume, explores at greater length the issue of how “the political crucible of the 1960s” influenced the shifts in understanding Shakespeare (Wayne, “Power, Politics, and the Shakespearean Text,” 47–67).

15. Jonathan Gil Harris, “Historicizing Greenblatt’s ‘Containment’: The Cold War, Functionalism, and the Origins of Social Pathology,” in *Critical Self-Fashioning: Stephen Greenblatt and the New Historicism*, ed. Pieters Jurgen (Peter Lang: Frankfurt, 1999), 150–73.

16. Brook Thomas, *The New Historicism and Other Old-Fashioned Topics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991). See esp. 19–20. Even so, historicizing the New Historicism is not the main burden of Thomas’s work.

17. As of this writing (2004), the MLAIB lists 448 items.

18. H. Aram Veese, Introduction, to *The New Historicism* (New York: London, 1989), xiii.

19. Louis A. Montrose is the sole contributor to *ibid.* to address this problem:

the reorientation in the field under way since at least the beginning of the 1980s is largely the work of scholars who were students during the turbulent ‘60s, and who have responded to the radically altered socio-political climate of the current decade—and perhaps, to their own discomfortable comfort within its academic establishment—with intellectual work that is explicitly sociopolitical in its manifest historical content, although not always such in its own historical positioning. (Montrose, “The Poetics and Politics of Culture,” 25)

20. The major exception to this rule is feminism, which has been copiously historicized, and I imagine that the reason is that this mode of analysis originates *outside* of academia, and its history is more obviously bound up with political events. Furthermore, the history of feminism (in practice, if not in name) stretches at least as far back as the early modern period (see, e.g., Constance Jordan, *Renaissance Feminism: Literary Texts and Political Models* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990]).

21. However, in the afterword to the second edition of *Literary Theory* Eagleton gives a very broad history of developments in theory since 1982 that is historical in orientation. I am grateful to Edith Frampton for alerting me to Eagleton’s afterword.

22. Peter C. Herman, Introduction: ‘60s Theory/’90s Practice to *Day Late, Dollar Short: The Next Generation and the New Academy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 1.

23. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 320.

24. Roger Kimball, *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education* (pbk. edition, Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1998), 5–6.

25. Dinesh D’Souza, *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus* (New York, Free Press, 1991), 17–18. Annette Kolodny, for example, proclaims, “I see my scholarship as an extension [*sic*] of my political activism” (D’Souza, 18, quoting Alan Sanoff, “60s Protesters, 80s Professors,” *U.S. News & World Report*, 16 January 1989, 54).

26. "Letter from Professor Barry Smith [editor of *The Monist*] and Others," in *Jacques Derrida, Points: . . . Interviews, 1974–1994*, ed. Elisabeth Weber, trans. Peggy Kamuf et al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 418.

27. *Ibid.*, 415.

28. *Ibid.*, 416.

29. Jacques Derrida, "The Ends of Man," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 114.

30. Ironically, the one essay in *French Theory in America* that promises to fulfill this invitation, Sande Cohen's "Critical Inquiry, October, and Historicizing French Theory," follows the pattern I have been sketching in this introduction. In place of looking at the various extratextual circumstances that attended or made possible the reception of French theory in America, Cohen emphasizes, as Derrida himself does, intellectual history, in particular the debt these two journals owed to Nietzsche and to the Frankfurt school (*French Theory in America*, eds. Sylvère Lotringer and Cohen [New York: Routledge, 2000], 191–216).

31. Derrida, "Deconstructions: The Im-Possible," in *French Theory in America*, 23.

32. *Ibid.*, 426.

33. Another example: in his interesting and useful primer, *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism* (New York: St. Martin's, 1996), John Brannigan admits the influence of conservative politics on both sides of the Atlantic on the work of Alan Sinfield, among others (10), but does not include contemporary politics in his chapter significantly entitled "Key Contexts and Theorists." Reagan's America and Thatcher's England, in other words, do not constitute a "key" context. On the other hand, Brannigan devotes several pages each to Marxism, Raymond Williams, anthropology, and the like. He returns to the connections between New Historicism and Reagan's ascendancy later in the book, noting (without providing sources) that "To some commentators, then, new historicism in its eager confirmation of, and relentless focus on, Renaissance modes of power, has succeeded more fully in propagating and reinforcing power in the late twentieth century" (78). But he cites this sentiment only to diminish its importance ("To assert that these criticisms are valid about all new historicist critics is to believe that all new historicists are the same . . . [78–79]).

34. See, for example, David Lehman, *Signs of the Times: Deconstruction and the Fall of Paul de Man* (New York: Poseidon Press, 1991). The many contributors to *Responses: On Paul de Man's Wartime Journalism*, eds. Werner Hamacher, Neil Hertz, and Thomas Keenan (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989) perforce historicize de Man's writing, but it is clear that the act feels both unnatural and traumatic. Also, most of the contributors are deeply troubled by any connections between de Man's earlier writings and his later theoretical project

35. In "Interpreting the *Variorum*," Stanley Fish gives this definition:

Interpretive communities are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions. In other words,

these strategies exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read rather than, as is usually assumed, the other way around. If it is an article of faith in a particular community that there are a variety of texts, its members will boast a repertoire of strategies for making them. (Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980], 171).

My point is that history's unimportance to theory constitutes exactly such an "article of faith" for the interpretive community of literary theoreticians.

36 Montrose, "Poetics and Politics of Culture," in Veaser, *New Historicism*, 20, 23.