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After the End of Theory. Why do Cultural Studies need to be Reinvented?

Summary. Contemporary humanities are confronted with a search for new forms of legitimization. Processes that enforce such a necessity stem from the technicization of contemporary culture. The methodologies of the humanities, and even their status as a group of academic disciplines, are questionable. The aim of the article is to argue that these external and internal problems in the humanities are interlinked with the state of being after the end of theory. This assumption is grounded on the thesis that the humanities need to find a solution to the impasse which could be described as the questions of what theory means and why society should be concerned about it.

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There are many different thinkers, researchers, cultural critics, theoreticians and artists who have tried to reinvent the area of cultural studies and prepare it for the XXI century.¹ When it comes to theory, it should be noted that disciplinary problems are more of interest than identifying and solving problems. They are not as popular as the most appreciated cultural theorists of the XXI century. I will not argue that their thinking is at the same intellectual level as their predecessors. Obviously, it is not.

¹ V.G. Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, London 1978; E. Morin, *Method. The Nature of Nature*, New York 1992; F. Guattari, *Chaosmosis: and Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm*, Bloomington 1995.

But at the same time, this thinking has many values that the great cultural theories of the XX century lacked. Here, there is a different point of distribution. Thinkers who were working in the XX century, in comparison to contemporary researchers, had the privilege of being able to think slowly. Theoretical work that approached the most important problems could be realized over many years. In the XXI century, changes in culture mean that we do not wait for a proper theory. So researchers must invent solutions in real time if they want to be considered relevant. The reason why there are no new great paradigms of thought in the XXI century is that the humanities are now suffering from a transitional phase. The main task is to work out how not to lose their essence, based on different methods of understanding, and at the same time be able to come up with adequate solutions to contemporary problems. Technology is now considered as the main driver of cultural change,² realized in the form of technological acceleration. This situation forces the humanities to confront the actuality of culture. There is also the possibility of escape. The main ways of avoiding responsibility are historicization and aestheticization. In both cases the end of theory is being overlooked. Instead of conceptualizing the necessary actuality of relevant problems, the humanities defend their own territories in which they feel comfortable. The end of theory is understood as the end of monolithic hermeneutics that function in closed circuits of interpretation – both historical and aesthetic. But there is also another meaning of the end of theory that enables the reinvention of cultural studies. What is needed is motion sensitive theory that could be instantly rearranged, deconstructed, updated and changed so as to meet the requirements posed by contemporary problems that cannot wait to be solved. Culture does not wait for cultural studies research to understand it. Driven by technological acceleration it goes further, whether theoreticians agree to that or not. The current state of cultural studies reflects these changes in a specific way because this discipline is open to relevant problems. It can become immediately immersed in these problems, leading to the creation of new, though still under construction, solutions. Cultural Studies as a discipline is grounded on interdisciplinarity. It is probably the only discipline in the humanities that has such a wide range of methodologies and openness to change and innovation. Cultural studies need to be reinvented for several reasons:

There are not many adequate theories. Understanding requires theories, even when they are speculative and philosophically infused. The lack of contemporary theories leads to disciplinary blindness. This is mainly a question of institutions. University, as the main institution, must direct itself towards the future, highlighted by

² M. Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and other Essays*, New York 1998; G. Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen. Über die Seele im Zeitalter der zweiten industriellen Revolution*, München 1985.

the prevalence of technologically driven cultural change. Thinking about the future is necessarily connected with failure, and cultural studies for the XXI century should acknowledge failure as a possible outcome. The dominant paradigm of effectivity excludes innovation because it blocks the possibility of failure – the theory must be perfect. This state should be replaced by interdisciplinary research methods that are constantly under construction. Funding is directed almost entirely towards make-shift pragmatic research or research based on theories that no longer fit reality.

In the humanities there could be a better distinction between important and less valuable ideas. The lack of general ideas concerning the world, society, global culture and the human condition is the main reason why the contemporary scene is dominated by the flawed hermeneutics of randomness. Because there is no agreement as to what is important in a general sense, then there can be no intellectually suitable way to proceed with research which benefits culture. The end of theory in this sense means a necessary shift in thinking about new theories and an acknowledgement that the old ones can no longer solve all the world's complex problems.

There is an aversion towards theory. What is considered most valuable is researching countless examples of cultural artifacts and practices. Theory is being excluded from cultural studies as too "philosophical." This is a mistake and is a negative aspect of the state of being after the end of theory.

Research paradigms in cultural studies are in decline. They have been replaced by turns in which there is no place for general theory, only for small applications. Tracing the roots of cultural studies does not lead to general theory outside of philosophy. Reinventing cultural studies means finding new ways to think about it in relation to philosophy.

There should also be a strong ontological assumption. Cultural studies did not invent its own vocabulary. It is mostly dependent on other academic disciplines, especially philosophy, anthropology, literary studies and hermeneutics. This weakens the interdisciplinary character of cultural studies because it implies that mixing different theoretical and practical approaches is a necessity. But it could also be considered as an opportunity to overcome the shortcomings of particular academic disciplines. Interdisciplinarity is a reaction to complexity. No single discipline can grasp the increasing complexity of global arrangements. Cultural studies can accomplish what other disciplines from the humanities and the social sciences could not.

The disciplinary, economic and methodological situation of cultural studies suffers from what has been discussed above. If cultural studies need to be reinvented then we should ask: How can it be done?

We are reaching a certain point in the evolution of the humanities which needs very urgent consideration. All the humanities' goals are directed not by theoretic-

cal problems but by cultural and social ones. This means that researchers can no longer maintain their distanced status, especially when this is established by speculative theory. This does not mean that theory should be abolished nor that it should be subordinated to empirical problems. Rather, I would propose thinking about the goals of the humanities. Cultural studies are being considered here as a discipline that could serve as an adequate starting point. Looking at the history of the discipline, it is evident that cultural studies are struggling to reach maturity as an academic discipline and in their own right as a social practice. This double commitment stems from its closeness to culture. Philosophy as the discipline that preceded cultural studies and influenced it the most could maintain a distance from culture.³ A border could be drawn between cultural studies and philosophy, not by distinguishing different goals or methods of research, but from the perspective of direct immersion in culture. In that sense, the philosophy of culture would view culture from an irreducible distance. Researchers in cultural studies are immersed in culture, even to the point of integration. Philosophers have the privilege of looking at culture as though they were never involved in everyday life activities. For researchers in cultural studies that would be impossible to maintain because their research is driven by the imperative of engagement. An objection could be made here that this kind of attitude is not scientific in terms of valuation and inter-subjective communication, because investigated problems are chosen arbitrarily and for this reason are difficult to communicate. This also poses a problem when it comes to understanding the most general concepts such as humanity and culture. Cultural studies researchers tend to overlook these crucial aspects and see problems without a broader ontological grounding. But this discipline, because of its specificity, is appropriate for questioning the state of humanities today. It can also not be overlooked that many disciplines are heading in their goals and methods toward cultural studies. Anthropology, sociology and philosophy are being consciously or unconsciously infused with the problem of culture. This increasing resemblance is not a coincidence nor a scientific fashion. It could not even be fully grasped as a popular cultural turn. All humanities disciplines tend toward cultural studies because the problems of culture are gaining more importance in a technologically globalized world. If any discipline chooses to be the correct tool for solving problems it needs to acquire the state of interdisciplinarity that has been the core of cultural studies from its beginning. The imperative of change precludes the reaching of full maturity as theory. This state under construction shows the future of theory. It also poses a direct question – what

³ W. Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility, and other Writings on Media*, Cambridge, Mass. 2008.

do researchers need it for? In an interdisciplinary approach, there is no answer to such a complex problem. Rather than choosing one theory that could solve all or at least create a matrix for most of the relevant problems that are troubling culture, there is a need to develop an intellectual response from different traditions, perspectives and ontologies, but not in the sense of a postmodern collage which cannot be translated into a whole paradigm. The state caused by the problem of the end of theory needs a new kind of systemic thinking that could solve complex problems with adequate theories. It is also the point of the constant reinvention of cultural studies. Researchers need to "kill the theory" each time it leads to no results in the hermeneutic task of understanding the contemporary problems of the XXI century. This kind of murder enables a return to immersion in everyday life. And after first hand observation, to create theory which reinvents cultural studies and modifies the levels of complex interdisciplinary systemic analysis.

No other discipline besides cultural studies can be interpreted as experimental, serving the goal of reconsidering the future of theory and the role of the humanities. It could also be understood as a pragmatic toolbox for testing other research methods. Philosophy, sociology and anthropology are being driven toward cultural studies, not for a conscious merging with them but rather to test their own actuality. That is the main reason for the contemporary gravitation of the humanities toward cultural studies. The specificity of this discipline lies in the fact that it has never been fully developed. It could be said that its basic state is grounded in the mode of being developed from the beginning. The reasons for this are different: the need to choose the tools to analyze problems that do not neatly fit a particular research methodology. Here, interdisciplinary methodology merged with systemic thinking and the imperative of being under construction enables the creation of such a connection.

Cultural studies are constantly being reinvented due to their specific status as being after the end of theory. It is too early to say which destination such a tendency will lead to. Rather, as a point for discussion, a no less ambitious subject has been chosen. Precocious theories arise and they are quickly forgotten, in an effort to escape the contemporary shortcomings of theory for the humanities. This task is guarded by a paradox. Not in the shape of a Sphinx that is asking the questions but rather a Hermes, that needs answers right now, in the real time of global cultural change. The main question for cultural studies is: how can the slowness which is necessary for developing theory be attuned to the demands of an accelerating world? This problem is also the main task for the humanities of the XXI century. One may simply reject theory and postulate narrowing research methods toward distinct empirical studies. There is no need to defend speculative thinking by pointing out its historical roots. Theory is a very important tool for understanding connec-

tions. Even when researchers do not value its dominant aspects, as in the case of philosophy, one cannot deny that theory is necessary to create an interdisciplinary approach. That is rather a minimal requirement on which the approach should be built. Without mediation in theory, different research methods could be not linked together. But cultural studies must be constantly reinvented, by questioning its own roots. The reason for such a practice is not Cartesian doubt, rather a requirement of a constantly changing technologically globalized world.⁴ The humanities have faced many ends. One could even acknowledge that apocalyptic rhetoric has become a common way of expressing the importance of relevant subjects. Daily experience teaches us that the ends postulated by critically infused authors are absent or hard to recognize. Humanities and especially cultural studies should move from the state of the end of theory toward reinventing the discipline as one which is considered as being under construction. That means creating new theory. Rather than doubting or creating from the start there is a need to abolish the apocalyptic rhetoric in favor of the post-apocalyptic. The state of being "after the end of theory" forces researchers to understand that there will be no great catastrophe of sense, at least no greater than that which emerged in XX century culture. This post-apocalyptic thinking is not pessimistic as a worldview, but belongs to the interdisciplinarity that can see ahead of its own end. Representatives of the humanities are keen to acknowledge the importance of historical theories. Even so called turns are being interpreted as new paradigms. What needs to change is the gaining of a post-apocalyptic attitude toward the possible death of theory in its actual shape. This does not mean a complete refutation or erasure but rather being able to withdraw from it when it no longer serves the understanding of reality. From this perspective, an open interdisciplinary system methodology would be considered as constantly changing and through that it could realize the task of matching the accelerating state of the world.

Theory as a goal in itself is no longer relevant. In the XXI century, global, technologically mediated culture is facing many problems that cannot be solved by being reduced to the theoretical. This also enables cultural studies to fully develop its potential. Especially important is the possibility of involvement in concrete problems.⁵ Particular areas of cultural life do not need theory but many problems emerge because there is no theory that could grasp the complex relations emerging in global culture. Arguments against theory are still relevant and should be subordinated to the process of questioning actual research methods. But the end of theory is only a moment not a goal. It would be sufficient to monetize theoretical research that

⁴ V. Flusser, *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, Minneapolis & London 2011.

⁵ B. Latour, *We have Never Been Modern*, New York 1993; S. Turkle, *Second Self*, Cambridge 2005.

is related to important problems. But without complex theory one cannot decide properly what needs to be researched. And this leads to a focus mainly on historical problems using theories that do not fit this task. There is also a second possibility that is similarly destructive. It consists of developing abstract theories, especially grounded in history, for the sole purpose of cultivating it. These are the two main traps when developing relevant research today. Unfortunately, universities as institutions which fund research grants commit both of these mistakes. The state of cultural studies after the end of theory necessitates not only theoretical and practical investigation but also institutional. Who will fund research that could lead to the creation of temporary solutions, when humanists are being asked to show that the effects of their work will be permanently relevant and empirically verifiable even if it means publishing a book which is merely a material artifact proving that research has taken a visible form that can be understood by the bureaucratic system?

Creating research utopias cannot be avoided in the process of reinventing research methods, especially in the humanities. But this inderdisciplinary utopianism of cultural studies must not be restricted to postulates present in manifestos and cultural turns. What is to be done is to connect what has been dispersed in cultural turns. Scattered ideas, research methods and thinking in a multiplicity of cultural turns need to be linked again. By that, I am not thinking about some Hegel-inspired enquiry into the wholeness of global culture, grasped in one single theory. Rather, a network methodology that could link all that is being researched inside individual turns. Turns are a necessary step towards the creation of a dispersed systemic network paradigm for the theory of cultural studies. From that perspective, along with general ideas there will connected thinking from above (top-down, based on generalization) and from the bottom (bottom-up). From the bottom we have many cultural turns that are very sensitive to changes in culture (cultural change) that can help correct and navigate general ideas. These will be theoretically driven by looking at the culture itself. From this perspective, the problem of the relationship between theory and practice is eluded. Theory without looking at practices has no value and detailed analysis of practices without grasping them in the wider scope of cultural change is methodological shortsightedness.

Ideas and methodologies of interdisciplinary research should be loosened up to enable spontaneous crossing over of disciplines. Complexity theory as an example of an interdisciplinary research method was strictly following its cybernetic lineage.⁶ Its role consisted in synthesis which was concerned with the cybernetic search for the most general theory. While not abandoning this cybernetic research method, we

⁶ E. Morin, *Complexity*, New York 2008.

should loosen up many connections and let them interchange, even at the cost of failure. Cultural studies is not a strict research method based on the social sciences or even on natural science, but rather a system in which molding, connecting, experimenting and exchanging takes place within all the elements. This includes research methods, paradigms, thinking, ideas, examples, ways of seeing, writing, experiencing. Only this kind of interdisciplinarity can at the same time be subordinated to the systemic paradigm and also be open to change.

Other disciplines will not be replaced by cultural studies. Rather, it will serve as a test of different research approaches. Constant reinvention of cultural studies stems from its particular importance to the question of the future of the humanities. This shows that the discipline should not try to mature its research methods and theories at all cost. A decidedly more important effect would be creating theories based on systemic thinking. Constantly reinventing cultural studies will lead to the development of new ways of connecting and mixing research methods in flexible methodologies. The state of post-apocalypse may be considered here rather as a task, not as an obstacle. Cultural studies is not a discipline, but rather a way of thinking. It is a paradigm for the humanities of the XXI century.

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