

## History, Theory, Poetry

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The *Theses on Theory and History* call, crucially, for a two-way relationship between history and theory, for “theoretically grounded history and historically grounded theory.” History grounded by theory, not merely decorated, as with a clever epigraph, or even just informed, borrowing a concept or an analytic gesture. Theory grounded by history, not merely contextualized.

The *Theses* specify what history gains from this two-way relationship with theory: a history that is not merely “tales told by victors and moralists”; a history that reveals “the operations of power and sources of injustice”; a history open to “alternative epistemological inquiries”; a history, above all, unburdened from the bad empiricism that renders the archive, with its ignorances and inequities, an image of reality.

The *Theses* suggest that this project has been stymied by conservative forces in the discipline of history. But I think we should attend, not only to disciplinary prohibitions, but also to the hard work of writing and thinking, the work that Heidegger calls *Dichten* -- poetizing, the noun poem made a verb. This is not the same as versifying, although it certainly does not preclude versifying. *Dichten*, Heidegger tells us, is that astonishing act of language that establishes relations among things, worlds, and words. Astonishing to the historian, that experience of channeling language, the language of others, in archival documents, for example, and the language of the Other that seems to arrive from the outside but comes out of our inside, as our writing. What Lacan calls “extimacy.” We might shift our focus, borrowing a gesture from Foucault, from the prohibitions against theoretically grounded history and historically grounded theory to the *ars erotica* of the practices this formulation names.

Let us start with “historically grounded theory.” I think the authors are too quick, in thesis I.6, to distance themselves from *American Historical Review* editor Alex Lichtenstein’s project of “decolonizing the AHR” by including, in their words, “sociologically diverse authors and geographically diverse topics.” They acknowledge these changes as “welcome and overdue reforms,” but I think the fight against Eurocentrism should be joined more vigorously than this phrase suggests. They rightly criticize the limitations that Lichtenstein places upon his own decolonizing project by leaving the gatekeeping, prohibiting, process of peer review unchanged. The mutual exteriorizing of the projects of “Decolonizing the AHR” and the *Theses on Theory of History* burdens, I think, each of them, but does not make either less important and timely.

The inclusion of “sociologically diverse authors and geographically diverse topics” is indispensable for producing “historically grounded theory,” and thus for the larger project of the pamphlet. For one thing is clear about the body of texts identified by the term theory: they begin with a set of European philosophers, maybe Paul Ricoeur’s “masters of suspicion” – Marx, Nietzsche, Freud – or maybe some other list. If we generalize this European thought as universal,

we do not merely repeat the “tales told by victors and moralists” that we should be destroying. We also misunderstand these thinkers, who did not, after all write in a European vacuum. Fanon’s “Europe is literally the creation of the Third World” is as true for theory as it is for any other field.

Marx and Freud learned to speak about the fetish because West Africans and Portuguese traders invented the concept, found it handy in their trucking and bartering. Created a world from which our world still draws.<sup>i</sup> Nietzsche’s borrowings from Buddhism, at least via Schopenhauer, are similarly clear, similarly in need of a non-Eurocentric historicization. Foucault learned to think about the prison from the Black Panther Party, though he did not properly acknowledge this, renarrated this knowledge as a story about European history that we are to read as both exclusively European and, simultaneously, universal.<sup>ii</sup> Properly historicizing this theory, producing historically grounded theory, requires, precisely, ceasing to exclude “sociologically diverse authors and geographically diverse topics.” It is not a banal step tangential to the project of the *Theses* but in fact, as I read them, essential to their project.

Theory, the pamphlet argues, is not something that history simply should use and accept but rather something that grounds history, even as history grounds it. This relationship is beautifully, hermeneutically, circular, loving even. The relation of history and theory is an oscillation between whole and part, concept and reality, negation of negation and negation. Do history and theory ever really appear as discrete moments in our writing? The theory part and the history part, acting on each other?

And the *Theses*, precisely where it is most audacious, shows us a way, not out of this circle, but into it. The pamphlet begins and ends in poetry, verse at the beginning, prose poem at the end. This does not, I do not think, imply that we should abandon history and theory for poetry, but rather suggests that poetry, broadly conceived, is a field in which we might answer the call for “theoretically grounded history and historically grounded theory.”

Maybe what really matters about theory is its ability to make strange, to form improbable alliances among words and worlds and things, to poetize (*Dichten*). And theory does poetize, even when used most superficially. Take the common experience of reading history driven by bad empiricism, by the practice of rendering the archive, not as a particular configuration of bodies and pleasures, of domination and dispossession, but as reality in need of ‘writing up.’ Then even a bit of theory, even some terrible jargon, offers relief from the overtight relationship between writer and archive. Each polysyllabic, slightly incomprehensible delight a kind of bongload, reminding that this is not all as it might seem and sound, that there is a crack. But there is also more than this.

Perhaps it is at the level of writing, of poetizing, that we should direct our work. Not the ‘good’ writing vaunted by many historians, an orthopedic prose occasionally enlivened by talk about the weather – as if in admission that even that ultimate nothing to talk about, the weather, is more than the something about which these historians claim to write. But something else. I think I have found myself writing a prose-poem about the American Civil War, sort of without intending it, is why I bring this up. This feels more prohibited than doing theory.

At least as much as theory, poetry is what we are not supposed to write. Who would not disavow a poem? Not the authors of the *Theses*, who begin and end their pamphlet with poems, the first one even in verse. And that I find as encouraging and as emancipatory as any theory I have read. Poetry is that working upon language and world that unconceals their unseparation. Are those words combined for sound or to form a true phrase? The poet Ben Lerner writes: “part of what I loved about poetry was how the distinction between fiction and nonfiction didn’t obtain, how the correspondence between text and world was less important than the intensities of the poem itself.” And: “neither fiction nor nonfiction, but a flickering between them.”<sup>iii</sup> Not nonfiction, negation of negation. But not fiction either. Is there such a thing as a false poem? A true history? Probably. It would be interesting to specify what that would mean in each case.

And that prose-poem at the end, that wonderful image, the navel of the dream! The dream is full of the past, full of history. The day’s residues, Freud called those bits. But the dream is not those residues, the dream is what desire does with those residues. And the prose-poem invites historians to do something other than muck around in those residues. The dream portrays the wish, the wish clothed in residues of the past, the wish fulfilled in the dream’s present. We awaken to find, perhaps to our dismay, that the desire we imagined through the past, dreamed fulfilled in the present, was just a dream, a desire until then prohibited/inhibited: a revolution drawing its poetry from the future.

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<sup>i</sup> William Pietz, “The Problem of the Fetish, I,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 9 (April 1, 1985): 5–17.

<sup>ii</sup> Brady Thomas Heiner, “Foucault and the Black Panthers,” *City* 11, no. 3 (December 1, 2007): 313–56.

<sup>iii</sup> Ben Lerner, *10:04: A Novel* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2014), 171, 194.