

“Theory,” the Humanities, and the Sciences: Disciplinary and Institutional Settings

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In what follows, I want to reprise some brief remarks I offered at the 2016 and 2017 meetings of the Modern Language Association on panels devoted to the topics “Theory Now” (in Austin) and “Humanities vs. STEM: Two Cultures Reboot?” (in Philadelphia) regarding the current state of play between the Humanities and the Sciences in North American academia. To begin to address this issue, I think you have to have a theory of disciplinarity, and in particular of how knowledge production happens in the contemporary university. To make such an observation is not, in my view, to say anything negative or “debunking” (to use Kenneth Burke’s wonderful phrase) about the kind of work that university intellectuals do; it is simply to observe how the sociological account of knowledge production that we get from Niklas Luhmann and others extends and sharpens observations already made by Michel Foucault in his early work about disciplinary formations, about what he calls “specific” vs. “organic” intellectuals, and so on.¹ For both Foucault and Luhmann, to pretend that current ideas such as “posthumanism” or “animal studies” (to take two labels that have been associated with my own work) emerge on the scene because they have some more proximate, veridical relationship to the truth is to believe in what Foucault called the intellectual as “the spokesman of the universal” (67)—a belief that utterly flies in the face of the historical phenomenon called “modernity” or “modernization” as Foucault understands it: what Luhmann characterizes as a process of “functional differentiation” of society into discreet social systems that try to manage increasing social complexity, not in the name of getting closer to the truth, but in the name of functional adaptation to an increasingly complex and opaque environment. And what this means, for both Foucault and Luhmann, is that the *form* of rationality changes under modernity—a fact that has everything to do with what we call “disciplines.”²

As was already clear in Foucault’s early work, disciplines and the concepts they engender take their specificity not from some more or less natural or veridical relationship to their objects of attention, but from the particular protocols of their discourses. As Foucault put it, the issue here is “not a change of content (refutation of old errors, recovery of old truths), nor is it a change of theoretical form (renewal of paradigm, modification of systematic ensembles). It is a question of what *governs* statements, and the way in which they *govern* each other so as to constitute a set of propositions which are scientifically acceptable” (54). Or as Luhmann puts it in somewhat more pointedly technical form in his landmark essay “The Modernity of Science,” “a first step toward the comprehension of modernity therefore consists in the distinction between problems of reference and problems of truth” (64).

And what this means—to turn back now to the changed, and indeed paradoxical, form of rationality under modernity—is that disciplines and the forms of knowledge and concepts they spawn, *universalize by being specific*. This is precisely how social systems such as education and the disciplines within them attempt to respond to a changing environment, so that “animal studies” or “queer theory,” for example, arise at a specific historical moment in response to broader social changes

and forms of awareness about sexuality or non-human life as an attempt to achieve resonance with and, as it were, be responsible to those broader social changes: *in this way and not others*. This is far from a process of just “making things up,” of course, because disciplinary formations produce and depend upon the systematicity of their own protocols to authorize and recognize what counts as knowledge, producing their own elements of their own autopoiesis (such as journals, recognized publishing venues—and not others—conferences, research groups and grants, shared protocols of professional advancement and recognition, and so on). And this build up of internal complexity within the educational system—what is sometimes called “specialization” or, more moralistically, “fragmentation”—enables a far more sensitive and nuanced apparatus for responding to social change: for noticing all sorts of things in the broader environment, you might say, than a blunter, more one-dimensional apparatus would allow.

Against this backdrop, I want to return to a point of emphasis in my own work on what has come to be called “posthumanism”: that it forces us to pay attention not just to the object of inquiry but also to the specific *modes and protocols* of thought in and through which those objects are engaged. It’s not just what you are thinking about, in other words, it’s how you’re thinking about it that is crucial. So for example—as I point out in *What Is Posthumanism?*—animal rights philosophy as developed by both Peter Singer and Tom Regan may be called “posthumanist” in the sense that they both seek to unseat anthropocentrism in ethics; but they are “humanist” in the sense that *how* both philosophers think this problem is humanist through and through (in Singer, utilitarianism; in Regan, neo-Kantianism), leading both to reinstate a normative concept of what constitutes the subject of ethical standing who ends up looking an awful lot like us. And this, in turn, only obscures the value of non-human ways of being in the world that the theories set out to recognize and respect in the first place (124).

This point about posthumanism—not *what* is thought but *how* it is thought—is especially important to remember for the role of “theory” and the Humanities at the current moment, and here I want to revisit a couple of observations I’ve made in my past work. First, we have to ask what the current and future role of theory, and of the Humanities more broadly, might be, but we have to situate that question in the context of hegemonic disciplinary norms and the changing nature of the university as an institution at the current moment. Crucial to such a contextualization, I think, is the emergence of the “corporate” university, its protocols and values, and how they overdetermine particular knowledge practices.

More specifically, theory (and the Humanities more generally) has a critical role to play in interrogating the growing popularity—and growing funding—of various attempts not just to articulate what is often characterized as “materialism,” “realism,” or “empiricism,” but (and perhaps more importantly) to ground it or back it with the cash value of some scientific “grounding” in the form of statistical data or experimental results. Often, as many of us know, such efforts are accompanied by grant proposals for this or that Humanities “lab”—and if you don’t already have one in your professional neighbourhood, you will soon. Now, I do not mean to suggest, of course, that all such endeavours are intellectually suspect; but I *do* mean to suggest that there is a set of dangers here—not just intellectual but institutional—in which theory and the Humanities more broadly can and should intervene. Here, I would follow the especially lucid and incisive work on these questions by Richard Rorty, Barbara Herrnstein Smith, Donna Haraway, Jacques Derrida, Vinciane Despret, Paul

Feyerabend, and Bruno Latour (just to name a few) for its refusal to see the role of the Humanities and theory as providing more accurate or detailed access to an ontological substrate upon which various projects—be they interpretive or political—might be grounded.

At this nexus, theory has a central role—indeed *the* central role—in what Richard Rorty calls the need “to find a position which is beyond realism and antirealism,” and also beyond the larger “representationalist” idea of theory that gets resuscitated, either through the front or back door, in the mobilization of such terms (49). Let me be clear about this: There is no question in my mind that pursuing interchanges, and increased mutual literacies, between the Sciences and the Humanities is a good thing. Indeed, in my own work I have drawn upon life sciences such as zoology and cognitive ethology (among others) and have insisted that we largely have the sciences to thank for making clear the evolutionary and biological bases of the complexity and fullness of the mental, emotional, and social lives of non-human animals—a fact that the Humanities otherwise surely would have been even slower to register.³ In many ways, we have the Sciences to thank for what is now called “Animal Studies.” But what I *am* saying is that such claims need to be mounted within a fully elaborated and carefully articulated context of inquiry in which the status of scientific truth claims is not treated as essentially unproblematic, much less automatically more “legitimate” or “real” or—and here is where the rubber meets the road—more worthy of legitimation via institutional support.

The issues in the context I want to open here are not so much epistemological (or anti-epistemological) as they are institutional, for as Rorty notes, the sort of change in “intellectual habits” he encourages—getting rid of the notions of “objectivity” and “truth” in any seriously epistemological sense, moving beyond realism and anti-realism,

would put an end to attempts to set up a pecking order among cultural activities and among parts of our lives. . . . [I]t would stop the “hard” sciences from looking down on the soft, stop both from looking down on the arts, and end attempts to put philosophy on the secure path of a science. It would stop people from worrying about the “scientific” or “cognitive” status of a discipline or of a social practice (6-7).

I would like to put an even finer point on Rorty’s observation, however—two points, actually. First, the broader context in which Rorty’s observation about the unequal split between the “two cultures”—serious/scientific/objective vs. non-serious/literary/subjective—may be understood as fully political is what Smith calls “the increasingly ‘production’-centered ethos” of the “corporate university” (122). The tendency and growing pressure here is “to identify intellectual activity and achievement with the production of palpable, visible, measurable and more less immediately applicable knowledge”—a view of knowledge whose very paradigm, both in and out of the academy, is, of course, the natural sciences and engineering (122).

Here, I think, theory has a *constitutive* role to play on behalf of the Humanities in defamiliarizing the hegemonic habits and conventions of the corporate university. And it’s worth remembering a point made by Smith that perhaps receives insufficient emphasis in Rorty’s work: that the asymmetries between the Humanities and the Natural Sciences

are commonly joined and amplified by the more general public partiality toward *traditional* views. That is why terms such as “fashionable” or “trendy” do so much work so cheaply. Like political incumbents, intellectual incumbents have a strong advantage over newcomers, and for many of the same reasons—greater name familiarity, more visible marks of authority, readier access to public platforms, more control over the procedures of institutional certification (degrees, titles, awards) and so on (122).

The task of theory is thus made doubly formidable when the corporate ethos of the university is wedded to the intellectual traditionalism that furthers it, as it were, by other means.

How true this seems to be at the current moment of interdisciplinary engagement between the Humanities and Sciences. From my own perusals, and based on conversations with my informants in the scientific community, it seems to me that we are witnessing at this very moment—under the strength of important new research in epigenetics, immunology, and the microbiome (among others)—a paradigm shift away from the neo-Darwinian reductionist model, with its mania for the genome, that has held sway in the academy for the last thirty years or more, and this shift dovetails very readily with theoretical work in the Humanities of the sort that I do.⁴ I mean, when a philosopher of Thomas Nagel’s temperament and background publishes a book called *Mind & Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly False*, you know there’s something going on.

“False” is not a word that either I, or Foucault, or Luhmann, would use in this context, but “hegemonic” certainly is. And on that point, we would do well to remember—to circle back to where I began—Foucault’s point that the work of the “specific” versus “universal” intellectual brings us closer to the ground, where the intrication of knowledge and power happens in a thousand everyday ways that has nothing to do with the “truth.” As he puts it, “Intellectuals have become used to working, not in the modality of the ‘universal,’ the ‘exemplary,’ the ‘just-and-true-for-all,’ but within specific sectors, at the precise points where their own conditions of life or work situate them” (68). And so one additional role that theoretical work in the Humanities has to play is to ask after the curious fact that, in the context of the corporate university—where the imbalance in prestige and resources between the Sciences and the Humanities could not be more pronounced—the neo-Darwinian reductionist paradigm continues to hold sway, even as much of the most interesting and innovative scientific research seems to be moving in the other direction. Perhaps the larger challenges on the horizon for the relationship between the Humanities and the Sciences, then, are institutional rather than intellectual ones. After all, ideas are easier to change than the material, institutional, and political networks that make them “true.”

Notes

1. On the “specific” intellectual, see Foucault. On what Burke calls “the virtues and limits of debunking,” see *Attitudes Toward History*, p. 256 and especially the chapter “Comic Correctives,” pp. 166-175.
2. On “functional differentiation,” see Luhmann, *Social Systems*, pp.123-129.
3. See, for example, Wolfe, *Animal Rites*, pp. 78-94, and Wolfe, *Before the Law*, pp. 63-72.
4. An excellent example of this sort of current work in the field of theoretical biology is Kauffman.

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