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Review

The first part of the book is devoted to a general survey of the history of the...
The second part of the book is devoted to a detailed study of the...
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EAGLETON, TERRY. (2003) *After Theory*. New York: Basic Books.

*T. Piccardi **

*A.E. Balocco ***

**BOOK REVIEW THE ORTHODOXY OF CULTURAL
THEORY UNDER ATTACK**

To Eagleton, the golden years of Cultural Theory (understood as a specific way of doing Human Sciences which, from the sixties on, shaped disciplines such as the Social Sciences, Political Science, Anthropology, History, Semiotics, as we know them today¹) are gone. Pioneering work, such as that of

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¹ For a more complete definition of Cultural Theory, see pages 88-89, from which we took these lines: "cultural theory is in the habit of posing what one might call meta-questions. Instead of asking 'Is this poem valuable?' it asks 'What do we mean by calling a poem good or bad?' Instead of asking whether the novel has an implausible plot, it asks itself what a novel is anyway. Instead of asking whether the clarinet concerto is slightly too cloying to be entirely persuasive, it inquires about the material conditions which you need to produce concertos in the first place, and how these help to shape the work itself. Critics discuss symbols, whereas theorists ask by what mysterious process one thing can come to stand for another. [...] None

Jacques Lacan, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Louis Althusser, Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault are decades behind us, as well as the earliest writings of Raymond Williams, Luce Irigaray, Pierre Bourdieu, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Derrida, Hélène Cixous, Jürgen Habermas, Frederic Jameson and Edward Said. However, these authors are still widely acknowledged in dissertations and theses submitted to the best universities all around the world - and not just in Brazil, as one would imagine, on the assumption that science here is characterized by its receptivity (in general terms, a few years lagging behind) more than by its originality.

Although many theoretical propositions put forward by these authors are still considered invaluable to current thinking in different areas, Eagleton goes on, and notwithstanding the fact that many of these authors (as well as the generation who followed their steps) still produce relevant research, we are still tied to the past, in a world which has changed in many different ways from the time Foucault and Lacan started pouring their ideas onto their typewriters. Surprise? Frustration? A bit of a surprise, I guess, as all of us have gotten used to admiring these authors without questioning their relevance to present times. And perhaps a slight disappointment too (maybe even anxiety), as these authors have provided us with central arguments in our research. What are we supposed to do without them?

The author is not trying to suggest that Cultural Theory is over and that its theoretical edifice should be demolished. Those who expect to find a naïve discourse in the book, the kind of discourse that encourages us to return to a time in which what was meant by

of these meta-questions need *replace* straightforward critical questions. You can ask both kinds of questions together. But theory, in its unassuming way, is unsettled by the way in which conventional art criticism seems to take far too much briskly for granted”.

culture was reading Keats out loud in an impeccable way, or Milton with a daunting spirit, these will certainly be disappointed. The project that shaped Cultural Theory was not a mistake, of which we should be forgiven. Nor should we imagine that we should go back and pick up whatever it was that we were doing before Cultural Theory, in a time in which Ferdinand de Saussure was not even there. The question is: what kind of knowledge does the modern age require? What elements, from the knowledge produced by Cultural Theory, need to be revised? This is not about going back in time; rather, it is about facing the challenge of a critical task that requires a lot of courage.

Eagleton recognizes and makes it explicit, from the very beginning of his book, that Cultural Theory contributed to raising researchers' awareness of the importance of dealing with heterogeneous phenomena. Thus, Cultural Theory contributed to making legitimate such objects of study as gender and sexuality, the body and pleasure, popular culture, ecology and power, topics previously neglected or ignored by the academy. To achieve this, working under the influence of Marxism (either pleading allegiance to its tenets, or calling them into question), Cultural Theory had to de-stabilize concepts such as norm, authority, majority, unity, consensus, truth, all of which came to be understood negatively, as abstract categories, or "universals", which is equivalent to treating them as insufficient or obsolete categories. Along the way, Cultural Theory sanctioned perspectives which were still in vogue, such as the claim that there is no single way of interpreting a work of art, or a text (which does not mean that they may mean anything, of course); another one which says that readers are co-producers of texts; or still another one – and this is a central and controversial point - that says that culture and power shape each other, contrary to what conservatives maintain, which is that culture and power do not mingle.

In the last decades, Cultural Theory has promoted an emphasis on difference and heterogeneity, which resulted in a diversified body of thinking, as well as in an upsurge of debate in the academy, and in an intense political struggle for the rights of minorities. However, Eagleton argues, this mobilization was not enough to promote the dignity of second-class citizens, who proliferated and still proliferate around the world. The great scandal that paralyzed and still paralyzes researchers who are affiliated to Cultural Theory is that most of the world population is still to be found in the margins... What is one to do when the heterogeneous becomes homogeneous?

Lack of hope overcomes scandal in the 90's, when we witness a major break in Cultural Theory: according to Eagleton, authors like Richard Rorty and Stanley Fish in the United States, calling themselves anti-theorists of culture, argue that culture (often seen as replacing God or Nature) is not grounded in reason. Culture, according to these authors, does not need external justification; rather, it justifies itself. This is post-modernism² arguing for the impossibility of theoretical thinking on culture. This is an argument, Eagleton continues, that is not only a terrible catastrophe for the Human Sciences, but also problematic from a political point of view, as it encapsulates the foundations for claims such as the following ones: that globalization is inevitable; that the most we can expect from our paid jobs is that they increase our buying capacity; that the world is reduced to language and that we are ineluctably bound by the discourses we produce. One might argue that even non-linguistic animals act guided by some sort of rational system, but what is important to Eagleton is that man alone, as a linguistic

² Eagleton defines 'postmodernism' as "the contemporary movement of thought which rejects totalities, universal values, grand historical narratives, solid foundations to human existence and the possibility of objective knowledge." (*op. cit.*, p. 13)

animal, can act morally, raising questions about whether or not particular reasons are good or bad. To the scholar, the following questions are relevant, more than they have ever been: is what I do, or the discipline I am engaged in constructing, good enough? Does it deal with what is deemed relevant for humanity, at this point in time? It is to this dimension of their research that “humanists”³ of today (for sheer lack of a better word) should direct their attention. As Eagleton argues, “knowledge and morality, then, are not finally separable, as the modern age tends to assume”.

If Cultural Theory made a mistake in not acknowledging a reality beyond the microcosms it studied and in constituting itself in such a theoretical fashion that it reduced the world to discourses, the anti-theory of culture (of a postmodern nature, incidentally), which impregnated the first, made a mistake in arguing that there is no direct access to information about the world, seeing that the world itself IS information. On the one hand, a lack of connection between theory and practice; on the other hand, a conflation of the two. In both cases, the paralysis of action, both on a practical and on an intellectual level. Cultural theory continues to criticize universals as an idealist’s abstractions, while powerful transnational corporations spread around the world; the anti-theory of culture, in turn, has nothing to say about criticism of universals and reduces the important question of the hegemony of

³ Eagleton uses the term “humanists” to refer to researchers in the Human Sciences, not in the sense of one’s theoretical conception of the “subject”; it is obviously the case that if he meant it in the second sense he would have preferred the term “anti-humanists”, as what the authors cited in the article, who are generally broadly included in the category of poststructuralists, seem to have in common is a theoretical position against “humanism” (understood not as a movement against man, but as a movement which treats the subject as a given or ‘natural’ category, and not as a theoretical category, constructed in different ways through time and history).

transnational corporations to a matter of lifestyles... This picture shows that we are faced with an impasse.

If it was once necessary to put a lot of issues behind us to make a particular way of doing research in the Human Sciences legitimate, or to raise the status of particular objects of study, overcoming this impasse requires re-visiting the question of where we should draw the boundaries of our research, and whether or not we should broaden its scope. This brings us to a few relevant questions: are the reasons for Cultural Theory solid? Rather, what are these reasons, or what rationality guides its presuppositions? Where is all this taking us? Either we deal with these questions or we run the risk of seeing the most representative disciplines of Cultural Theory become irrelevant.

After discussing what was gained and what was lost in the Human Sciences with the advent of Cultural Theory in the last decades, Eagleton rounds off the fourth chapter stating that:

Cultural theory as we have it promises to grapple with some fundamental problems, but on the whole fails to deliver. It has been shamefaced about morality and metaphysics, embarrassed about love, biology, religion and revolution, largely silent about essences, universals and foundations, and superficial about truth, objectivity and disinterestedness. This, on any estimate, is rather a large slice of human existence to fall down on. It is also, as we have suggested before, rather an awkward moment in history to find oneself with little or nothing to say about such fundamental questions.

In subsequent chapters, the author takes up some of these issues, part of them considered taboo by cultural theorists, and the remaining parts considered disturbing, to say the least. The issues are: truth, virtue, objectivity, morality, revolution, foundations,

fundamentalism, death, evil and non-being. In this review, we single out the author's point of view about truth, leaving the other topics for other reviewers, as they are such complex theoretical concepts that each one of them would deserve a single review. The controversial concept of truth (and absolute truth) lies at the heart of the orthodoxy that prevents Cultural Theory from looking at itself from a distance, with the kind of daring attitude required for its transformation. This is what Eagleton sets out to do, and we transcribe, so to say, the author's central arguments and theoretical points.

Absolute truth

Why is this a relevant issue? It is relevant, says Eagleton, first and foremost because knowing truth is part of our dignity as moderately rational creatures. And this presupposes knowing the truth about truth. Second, the issue is also relevant as, according to the author, a ridiculous ghost has been haunting us over the use of the term "absolute" in this context; or because, if relativists have a point, the concept of truth has been deprived of its value. In a world like ours, the danger of this kind of relativization may be tragically adumbrated in the following example: if some people argue that democracy means the right of every citizen to vote, whereas others would maintain that the only ones to vote in a democracy should be those who pass a diabolically complicated intelligence test, there will always be a liberal around to argue that both are right, each one in their own ways.

As a critic, Eagleton is concerned about this issue, mainly because no other concept is as unpopular in Cultural Theory as that of truth, particularly the notion of absolute truth. In his own words, for Cultural Theorists the expression has a tinge of dogmatism, of authoritarianism, and of belief in timeless categories and in universals. Thus, polemically, Eagleton will try to defend the

concept of truth, beginning by de-mistifying the concept of absolute truth.

Absolute truth, to him, is not a special kind of truth. If we adhere to the view that “truth” is a broader category and “absolute truth” is a sub-class of this macro-category (which he criticizes), there are truths which are relative and open to change and there is another kind of superior truth which is neither relative nor open to change. Some people, supposedly those who are more dogmatic and authoritarian, believe in this kind of superior truth, while others, historians and post-modernists, for example, do not. In fact, some post-modernists maintain they do not believe in any kind of truth – but they say so because they identify truth with dogmatism and, in rejecting the latter, they do away with truth. This is a particularly unfortunate maneuver, the author goes on. If holding on to a position with conviction is something that is perceived as a slightly uncomfortable authoritarian position, whereas being fuzzy, skeptical and ambiguous is somehow considered democratic, the author wonders, what then are we supposed to say about someone who is passionately committed to democracy, in opposition to someone who is fuzzy and ambiguous about it?

Eagleton believes that people who see truth as dogmatic, and therefore want no dialogue with it, are like those who call themselves anti-moralists, on the assumption that morality has to do with prohibiting people from going to bed with one another. These people are puritans in reverse. Just like puritans, they relate morality to repression; living a moral life means living a life of sacrifices. But while puritans believe that a life of sacrifices is something positive, and particularly edifying, anti-moralists think just the opposite and therefore reject morality. In the same vein, those who do not believe in truth are very often dogmatic in reverse. They turn down a concept of truth that no rational person would actually defend.

There is no such thing as a class of mundane truths, that can change historically, co-existing with a class of absolute truths which you may believe in or not, much the same way as some people believe in angels and others do not. A few statements are true only from particular points of view: a well known example here is “France is hexagonal”, which is true only for those who see the world from a specifically geometrical perspective. But there are many other truths which are absolute without in any way being sublime or superior. A very simple example given by the author is: “The fish is fresh”. This means that, if it is true that the fish is fresh, the opposite statement can not be true at the same time, or true from another point of view. A fish can not be fresh and not-fresh at the same time. There is no possibility of doubt or ambiguity in this case. One might doubt whether the fish is fresh or not. But if one is not sure, then it is absolutely true that we are dealing with uncertainty here. One may not be sure and not sure. Perhaps the fish was good two hours ago and now it is difficult to decide whether it is still fresh or not. If this is the case, then what was absolutely true two hours ago is not any more. And the fact that it is not true now is equally true. Absolutely true, then, means simply true. The only use to which the term “absolute” can be put, to Eagleton, is in arguments with relativists who insist, as their self-designation implies, that truth is relative. Claiming that truth is absolute means simply that if something is established as true – a difficult enterprise and always open to discussion – then there are no two ways for what was established as true to be true.

A more complex example given by Eagleton is the statement “Racism is evil”. Well, if it is true that racism is evil, then this is not true to its victims only (who in principle would enunciate this). If it is true that a particular situation is racist, it follows that it is absolutely true. This is not just a matter of opinion or point of view. But, naturally, claiming that a situation is racist may not be true. Or else it may be partially true – in this case it is absolutely true

that it is partially true, as opposed to its being completely true or even not-true.

Absolutely true also means true irrespective of any context. There is no way one may evaluate the world without somehow framing it first. But this does not necessarily mean that what is true from a particular point of view is false from another. The examples given by Eagleton here, all of them around cultural differences, may be quite illuminating. Elephants may be sacred to some but not to others, considering that the difference of status in this case represents a difference in the way they are signified. But it cannot be true that elephants are really sacred, in the same way as they really have four legs. Cultures signify the world in different ways, and what some people see as a fact, others do not. So far so good. But this cannot mean that truth simply means truth-to-a few, as then, though conflicts would not arise across different cultures, the possibility of communication would not exist, neither the possibility of changing barbaric cultural customs. For example, it is a fair idea to admit that truth-to-a few is a possibility when it comes to the sacred status of elephants. But what if, within a particular culture, it is argued that forcing sexual relations with children contributes to their personal well being and psychological stability in later years, whereas the neighboring culture does not?

Absolute truth is not truth abstracted away from time and transformation. Things that are true at a particular point in time may stop being true at another, or new truths may emerge. The claim that some truths are absolute is a claim about what it means to consider something true, not the denial that there might be different truths at different times. Absolute truth does not mean ahistorical (or non-historical) truth: it does not mean a kind of truth that comes from heaven. Much on the contrary, these are truths which are found out through argument, evidence, experimentation, investigation. Many of which, considered as (absolutely) true in a

given moment, may become false one day. Many apparently closed scientific hypotheses had to grapple with a series of loopholes. Not everything that is considered true is really true. But the fact remains that it cannot be raining from a particular point of view only.

As the author says in the post-script, September 11 exacerbated postmodern irrationality. Taking up again the question of truth means acting strongly against automatic and violent reactions which threaten rationality. It means being aware that expressions which invite thoughtless action - such as the slogans "evil", "freedomfighters", "anti-American", "patriots", among many others - only function as slogans in a specific context of use, which leads us to wrongly imagine that there is nothing to be said about them. This does not mean that the word "evil" cannot be used to refer to what is really evil, neither does it mean that the word "freedom" cannot be used to refer to a cherished value. The breakthrough proposed for Cultural Theory, which we glimpsed at through discussion of the issue of truth, presupposes that symbolic systems are not seen as a universe parallel to human reality, as if the latter were split up into independent constructions which parcel up truth into truth-to-a few and truth-to-others. In other words, it presupposes accepting not only that cultural production cannot be reduced to its representations, but also that understanding the meaning(s) of what is represented, no matter how open these meanings are, should not be an activity cut off from all the rest.