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The Relevance of Theory

LA Résonance de la théorie

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Theory and its spectres

In self-conscious echo to the 1993 *Whither Marxism?* colloquium in Riverside, California, the University of Paris X - Nanterre opted, in 2003, for *Whither Theory?* as a conference title, and included, in its call for papers, a telling paraphrase of Marx and Engels' celebrated opening line from the 1848 Communist Manifesto: "A Spectre is haunting English Studies: the Spectre of Theory." Discussions took place with a view to exploring the mixed fortunes and future of theory (the question *Whither Theory?* reflected institutional and disciplinary uncertainty but did not exclude a future, while Jean-Michel Rabaté's book *The Future of Theory* (2002) which nourished and shaped much of the debate, bravely assumed that future). The 2008 conference urged participants to address the issue of theory's relevance¹, and the framing text returned explicitly to the figure of the spectre, in strikingly upbeat fashion : "Four years later, it appears the spectre is doing rather well [...] the rosy hue of health adorns its gaunt cheeks. In the disciplines that make up English studies [...] the need [...] to defend [theory's] role, is no longer felt so strongly: what is needed today is less a political defence of

¹ The French version of the CFP had 'résonance' in the place of "relevance", inviting a different approach to the question ("resonance" *affirms* the presence of theory and invites one to gauge, quantify or localize its effects). From the outset one is made to ponder theoretical questions of (non)-equivalence and translation.

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[...] theory than an assessment of its relevance.”² Leaving to one side the buoyancy of this appraisal, which I think invites comment (if theory were thriving and its future assured would we need to “assess” its relevance rather than simply demonstrating it?), I am struck by two features, which will serve as a springboard for the discussion that follows.

The first is a rhetorical move: the tactical replacement, in the 2003 call for papers, of the signifiers “Marxism” and “Communism” by the signifier “Theory”; the second is the persistence of the spectre, resurgent in the framing texts of *both* Nanterre conferences. In fact the *topos* of spectrality runs throughout the three conferences mentioned above and well beyond, in the sense that *Whither Marxism’s* celebrated offshoot was Derrida’s *Spectres de Marx* (1993), which in turn generated the symposium *Ghostly Demarcations*, a response to Derrida by prominent left-leaning scholars (1999). This collection of essays included Derrida’s reaction to his critics (the essay *Marx & Sons*), where the concept of spectre and its linguistic derivatives were further refined. The French version of this text was later published separately in 2002. Conjoining as it does Marxian and Freudian motifs, the spectre has attracted considerable attention across the disciplines in recent years.

In the most immediate sense, the substitution of “Theory” for “Marxism” in *Whither Theory?* affirmed ties of solidarity and filiation with an illustrious predecessor. It made “Marxism” a major referent and intertext. It also translated a genuine *malaise* and spirit of interrogation concerning the place of theory within the micro-climate of Anglo-American studies in the French university, where it had been observed that an explicit commitment to philosophy in the practice of literary criticism was liable to provoke institutional censorship. Were we witnessing a New Academic Order in which theory was to go underground, forbear to speak its name, and be content to embellish commentary with “discretion” and “elegance” if it was to survive?³ In a

² The text is available at <http://tropismes.u-paris10.fr/document.php?id=93>. Retrieved 18 October 2008.

³ See M. Duplay, “La Théorie et le miroir de la lecture”, *Tropismes* n°12, 2004, 26-27.

wider Anglo-American context, a stream of publications advertised the imminent demise of theory, heralding the advent of a post-theoretical age, intensifying the climate of uncertainty. The portentously periodizing “post-” routinely affixed to key notions in critical debate (post-identity, post-humanity, post-feminism, post-politics...) intensified the sense of an ending, to quote Frank Kermode; although other critics took a more robustly sceptical approach, reading the trend as symptomatic of the ephemerality of intellectual fashions in advanced capitalism. David Harvey’s analysis in *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1990) is instructive in this regard. Harvey speaks notably of the staggering speed with which the future is “discounted” into the present.⁴ “Discounted” is an inspired lexical choice. A paroxysmic present disregards (discounts) the future but also buys it up or cashes it in (discounting it in the commercial sense) before it is due. Semantically, the prefix *post-* would often appear to function in this way, pre-emptively, disregarding futures, or buying them up/ cashing them in (at favourable rates) before they are due, in the haste to have the past packaged and “compressed into some overwhelming present” (Harvey 291). Packaged, compressed, discounted – in short, commodified – theory falls victim to its built-in obsolescence and we await – as the expression so aptly has it – the Next Big Thing.

Notwithstanding such currents of scepticism, the chorus of voices proclaiming theory as a spent force seemed insistent enough, in 2003, to justify asking whither theory was bound. So much for local politics and context. But the signifier, as we know, has its own associative and substitutive rules for generating sense, and the sudden appearance of “Theory” in the place formerly occupied by “Marxism” can be made to tell other stories. Does the “Theory” in *Whither Theory?* obliterate “Marxism” or retain it *in absentia*, as a spectral presence, perhaps? The substitution relates a miniature parable of sorts; it traces

⁴ See David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 291: “We can link the schizophrenic dimension to postmodernity which Jameson emphasizes [...] with accelerations in turnover times in production, exchange, and consumption that produce, as it were, the loss of a sense of the future except and insofar as the future can be discounted into the present.”

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a history, the recent history of Marxist thought, absorbed – some would have it – by a theory-driven and theory-hungry literary and cultural studies in search of powerful analytical tools. In his book *Theory Matters* (2003) Vincent Leitch, general editor of the *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (2001), has commented on theory's power of absorption in this regard:

Within the fields of literary criticism and cultural studies, Marxist theory provides key elements of analysis. I'm thinking of concepts such as ideology, hegemony, base/superstructure, modes of production, commodification. All of these are essential tools in contemporary criticism and theory, including, to be sure, many non-Marxist kinds of theory. One might be doing postcolonial criticism or race studies and be using the routine idea of hegemony without quite recalling that it is coming from Marxism. In recent decades there has been a broad dissemination and naturalization of Marxism. (72-73)

“Dissemination”, “naturalization”; now appropriated by diverse strands of theoretical discourse (post-Marxist social theory, feminism, postcolonial studies), ousted by the forces of global capitalism, Marxism appears bereft of its original revolutionary energies, without purchase on the real. “Tous les marxismes,” writes Etienne Balibar, “sont devenus imaginaires.” (Balibar 1996, ii). A rhetoric then, no longer a praxis. But can such dichotomies still hold in the present theoretical conjuncture? In the wake of Austin and Althusser on the one hand, Deleuze on the other, are word and act still opposable? Marxian concepts bear a heavy sediment of sense, accruing from an intense history of debate. Whatever ends these concepts are made to serve, this sense can neither be wholly overwritten nor erased. Context may be overdetermined but is, in the last instance, as we know from Derrida, unsaturable, and the signifier possesses an autonomy and citationality that no hegemonic configuration may entirely control or subdue. Its meaning is the open set of its textual reinscriptions, past, present and future. Bearing this in mind, the “Theory” in *Whither Theory?* might be better (and more optimistically) understood not as that which engulfs, supplants and domesticates Marxism’s revolutionary programme, but

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as that which *relays* it – or, more appropriately, given our theme is “relevance”, that which *relieves* it, where the verb *relieve* must be taken in two related senses – to rescue, succour or assist in dire straits; to release from guard, or watch, by providing a substitute (*OED*). I borrow this latter sense from Derrida’s inspired deployment of it in his intervention on translation, *Qu’est-ce qu’une traduction “relevante”?* (2005) with its brilliant variations, at the confluence of French and English, on “relève”, “relever”, “relevant”, “relevance”. This debt requires a few words of explanation.

In his essay, Derrida reads and proposes a translation of Portia’s celebrated speech “The quality of mercy is not strained...” from Act IV Scene i of Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*. The verb “relieve” is introduced by Derrida as he translates the lines: “And earthly power doth then show likest God’s/ When mercy seasons justice...” Derrida proffers the verb “relever” to render the English “seasons”, which gives us “...quand le pardon relève la justice.” Now, Derrida provides no less than three justifications for his choice, two based on semantic affinity and overlap, but it is the third, more properly philosophical argument which interests me here. He alludes to the difficulties he encountered in 1967 when faced with the challenge of translating Hegel’s key terms *Aufheben* / *Aufhebung* into French. He selected the verb “relever” and the noun “relève” (now the canonical translations) on the following grounds:

Cela permettrait de garder, les conjoignant en un seul mot, le double motif de l’élévation et du remplacement qui conserve ce qu’il nie ou détruit, gardant ce qu’il fait disparaître, comme précisément, bel exemple, par exemple dans la marine, la relève de la garde. Ce dernier usage est d’ailleurs possible dans l’anglais « to relieve ». (65)

Relay, relief : perhaps this is how theory might be imagined to conserve the spirit of a project imperilled and discredited in our time. *Une théorie “relevante”* – one potential argument for the relevance of theory?

Turning now to the second point that struck me as I traced the brief genealogy of today’s conference: the sense of continuity implied by

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the figure of the spectre. If the replacement of “Marxism” by “Theory” can be taken to signify that the latter subsumes the former while guaranteeing Marxism a spectral presence across the theoretical field, we are perplexed to learn, as we return once more to the framing text of the conference, that theory – now cast explicitly as transmitter or relay – is *also* assumed to be spectral. A spectre, albeit in rude health (“rosy cheeks”) is still a spectre. Pragmatic responses might wish to invoke the questionable relevance of teaching or “doing” theory in an institutional climate dominated by the desperate urgency to professionalize the student body – the ubiquitous reference to the *parcours professionnalisant*, which the university is putting in place with alacrity while bending its energies to smooth a graduate’s entry into the world of work, a world subjected more than ever to hegemonic norms of performance and profitability, an *ethos* of optimized input/output ratios (to use the language of Lyotard’s *Postmodern Condition*). A university forced to make this the major criterion of its credibility in the academic marketplace will be more than happy to keep theory spectral – in the common acceptance of the term, where spectrality implies a virtuality-without-agency or derealization – in order to protect this *rationale* from the forces of scepticism and dissidence.

But this is to assume, perhaps too hastily, that theory is always synonymous with dissent. It has been argued that, in the present conjuncture, theory is no subversive ghost but quite the obverse: to borrow Hamlet’s words, “... too, too solid.” Certain currents of theory (broadly labelled “postmodern”) have been read as perfectly consonant with the *status quo*, particularly by critics of Marxist persuasion (Harvey, Eagleton, Jameson, Žižek). In their analysis, advanced capitalism has extraordinary power to instrumentalize (perhaps even pre-empt) theory; there is, indeed, a market *for* theory and a market *in* theories. Semiotics, narratology and discourse theory go hand-in-glove with advertising, brand development, the cynically commercial strategies of cinematic serialization. The purported breakdown of metanarratives aggravates an already rampant individualism and heightens the sense of social fragmentation. Identity claims and positions in the gender area are instantly co-opted by the fashion and music industries. It has been observed that the practice of radical

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gender politics under capitalism leads not to social transformation, but to that “false aestheticization of the empirical world” (Bernstein 11)⁵ promoted by Adorno’s culture industry: the illusion of change where there is only masquerade. In the most pessimistic reading, capitalism’s absorption of theory is limitless, hence the advocacy of a violent *passage à l’acte* (Žižek, Badiou) – a position which, if taken to the letter, hardly augurs well for the future of theory.

From a philosophical perspective, and taking “spectre” in Derrida’s sense, we might ask if there is not something inherently spectral in all theoretical endeavour, given the irreducible multiplicity and heterogeneity of its expressions. To elaborate on this, I would need to return to Derrida’s analysis; so I propose to consider the opening remarks to the first chapter of *Spectres de Marx*, where the philosopher comments on the plural form adopted in the title of the book:

Les spectres de Marx. Pourquoi ce pluriel ? Y en aurait-il plus d’un ? Plus d’un, cela peut signifier une foule, sinon des masses, la horde ou la société, ou encore quelque population de fantômes avec ou sans peuple, telle communauté avec ou sans chef – mais aussi le moins d’un de la pure et simple dispersion. Sans aucun rassemblement possible. (21, emphasis original)

In his allusion to radical dispersion without possibility of synthesis, in his insistence on the irreconcilable plurality of the Marxist legacy (“Un héritage [...] n’est jamais un avec lui-même” (40)) Derrida outlines a concept which strongly recalls that of “dissemination”, an earlier avatar of “spectrality”. The key difference being that the spectre

⁵J. M. Bernstein’s introduction (1991) to Adorno’s *The Culture Industry* (Routledge Classics, 2002) is well worth reading in its entirety. In the opening remarks of Adorno’s essay “The Schema of Mass Culture”, Bernstein discerns the identification of what he calls : “... the controlling movement of postmodernism: the collapse of the difference between culture and practical life, which [...] is the same as the false aestheticization of the empirical world, an aestheticization of empirical life which does not transform it in accordance with the ideals of sensuous happiness and freedom, but rather secures the illusion that empirical life realizes these ends to the degree to which such [sic] is possible.” (Bernstein 11).

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poses, as dissemination does not, an ontological problem – what manner of thing is it? Can it, strictly speaking, be said to *be*? If we examine the spectre (or should that be “spectres”) of theory in the light of the above, we might venture the following observations: the spectre is manifestly *plus d’un* if we identify theory with the constantly augmented mass of theories tied to specific disciplinary fields (the origin of the universe, climate change, language acquisition notoriously attract divergent if not incompatible theories), *moins d’un* since this mass cannot cohere into a stable body of thought – a unified field – underwritten by some transcendental, metatheoretical guarantee; at once *plus d’un* and *moins d’un* because a theoretical trajectory is not unifiable but dehiscent (theory’s self-resistance and epistemological breaks, the “two” Marxes, the “two” Freuds, and so on); at once *plus d’un* and *moins d’un*, finally, since the names of theory are ineluctably plural. What exactly is meant by “theory” here? A sceptical mode of enquiry, driven by a hermeneutics of suspicion (Leitch, Rabaté)? “French” theory (Cusset)? An “unbounded corpus” of texts that fertilize thought “in domains other than those to which they ostensibly belong” (Culler 1994)? Upper-case Theory (as in Althusser’s “general” Theory with its keen eye for ideological distortion and its metatheoretical powers of discrimination)? Grand or “high” theory secure in its epistemological foundations, monumental in its compass? *Literary* theory? Not if we choose to follow Culler, who remarks, with some regret, that “... what we call “theory” for short is manifestly not theory of literature.” (Culler 2000, 276). It should be clear that the theory referred to here is that mode of thought which proceeds, in accordance with the postmodern crisis of legitimation, “... without assured knowledge, [...] without a pre-established sense of where it is heading or what it might discover.” (Davis 158) In its generality and deliberate unspecificity this description of theory does not foreclose the spectral manifold of theoretical discourses, and avoids the pitfalls of definition (no attempt at definition can halt the semantic play between and among the senses of theory enumerated above. Nor should it). Theory, in any case, will not admit of definition; the copula linking subject and predicate comes too close to asserting/ arresting the existence of a

phenomenon whose specific virtue is precisely to complicate relations between the existent and the inexistent.

A word of explanation. The “inexistent” in question here is a term borrowed from Badiou’s recent tribute to Derrida⁶. Badiou identifies Derrida’s philosophical project as an attempt to inscribe the inexistent (*inscrire l’inexistant*), and stresses the importance of distinguishing this inexistent from the *non-existent*, the “néant”. To confuse the two in Derrida’s work is to commit what Badiou has somewhat emphatically called “... l’erreur métaphysique par excellence” (Badiou 130). The inexistent is indeed *nothing, rien*, but only so within a given situation or state of affairs : “... être rien,” explains Badiou “c’est inexister *de façon propre à un monde ou à un lieu déterminé* [...]” (131, italics mine). The inexistent anticipates a re-ordering of the world such that it may, one day, come *to be*. That this re-ordering is indefinitely deferred means that a spectre is not, as traditionally assumed, a revenant or relic from the past, but always, in some sense, in waiting, in a state of imminence – “Au fond, le spectre, c’est l’avenir”, says Derrida, “il est toujours à venir, il ne se présente que comme ce qui pourrait venir ou re-venir...” (1993, 71). Returning to my theme, I would suggest that theory, as production and creative transformation of concepts, shares the temporality of the spectre. It straddles an untraceable origin (the history of concepts and their interactions) and an indefinitely deferred future as it decants, unforeseeably, the inexistent into the here-and-now. In Deleuzian terms, theory might be thought of as a pure event, likewise described as always-already having occurred and yet-to-come in a perpetually receding future⁷. Theory is not to be confused with its empirical exposition or with the applications that put it to work. The

⁶ First pronounced in 2005 at a conference organized by the Ecole Normale Supérieure, rue d’Ulm, this text was subsequently published in Badiou’s *Petit panthéon portatif*, Paris, La Fabrique, 2008.

⁷ Robert Sasso gives the following definition of the Deleuzian ‘pure event’: « Non pas ce qui arrive (l’accident) mais la part éternelle et ineffectuable de tout ce qui arrive, entité impassible toujours déjà advenue, aussi bien qu’encore à venir, se subdivisant sans cesse en de multiples événements singuliers, et les réunissant en un seul et même Événement... » See R. Sasso et A. Villani, dirs., *Le Vocabulaire de Gilles Deleuze*, Le Cahiers de Noesis, N° 3, printemps 2003, 138.

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spectres of theory are not amenable to incarnation. We should take heed when Derrida warns of the dangers of subjecting such spectres to what he calls a “traitement ontologique” (1993, 150), of gambling on their materiality, of banking on their truth.

Whatever speculations we may hazard as to its nature and forms, it emerges clearly from the above that theory is a term under serious contest. It is tempting to read this cognitive loop or conundrum as a symptom of postmodern *malaise* – the implosion of “high” Theory following philosophy’s renunciation of its legislative role, the splintering of grand narratives, the proliferation and jockeying for position of incommensurable language games. The wholesale dismissals or rebuttals of theory cast it as a homogeneous *milieu*, whereas we find theory internally riven, resistant to predication, or, when “ontologised” for purposes of argument, an incitation to extreme partisanship and storms of passion. A contentious as well as contested term. But then our (apparently consensual) times secrete a powerful problematic of division and dissent, as it increasingly falls to philosophy and its concepts to *relay* or *relieve* the confrontational élan that appears to have deserted the social arena – thus *agon*, the *différend* (Lyotard), *mésentente* and *malentendu* conjoined in the figure of *dissensus* (Rancière)⁸, antagonism (Laclau and Mouffe, Žižek), aporia, the double-bind, *différance* (the Frankfurt School, deconstruction). If discord permeates our current structure of feeling, that feeling too has a name and theory : Heidegger’s *Sein und Zeit* has recently been rewritten as *Zorn und Zeit – Anger and Time*⁹.

Within cultural/ literary studies *agon* prevails, as every major critical category becomes, in its turn, “the site of the systematic

⁸ « Mésentente et malentendu peuvent être ramenés à une figure commune, celle du dissensus, c’est-à-dire de la rupture d’une harmonie entre le sensible et le sens, entre le compte des corps et celui des significations. Le dissensus, c’est la reconfiguration des rapports entre sens et sens, c’est-à-dire entre présence sensible et signification. » Interview with Jacques Rancière published 20/09/2007.

Retrieved at <http://www.vox-poetica.org/entretiens/ranciere.html>,
20 October 2008.

⁹ P. Sloterdijk, *Zorn und Zeit*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp Verlag, 2006.

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fighting-out of [an] instability...” (Riley 1988, 5). Inspired by Derrida’s reflections on the fate of the Marxian legacy, and broadening his argument, we might view such contests as endemic to theory understood precisely as an inheritance in permanent dispute; we might want to suggest that, like the Marxism which it both encompasses and relays, theory carries an injunction, an “*il faut*”, its fractious spectres a necessary by-product of the impersonal, imperious necessity of thinking-through: “*Il faut* veut dire *il faut* filtrer, cribler, critiquer, *il faut* trier entre plusieurs des possibles qui habitent la même injonction” (Derrida 1993, 40; italics original).

Pursuing this train of thought, I would like to focus on one term only from those currently in dispute (culture, gender, woman, feminism, literature, canon...) – that of “identity”. In a sense, this category could be said to subsume the others since the struggle over their meaning has much to do with the impossible semantic *self*-identity or stabilization of the terms in question. And with the signifier “self” we are reminded that contemporary debates on this issue play themselves out in the long shadow of John Locke’s reflections on identity and diversity in the *Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1690) with its accent on selfhood and the person, its momentous “invention” of consciousness as a fully-fledged philosophical concept (as Balibar argues in his substantial introduction to the bilingual edition of Locke’s work¹⁰). In positing consciousness as the major criterion of personal identity, Balibar claims that Locke brings about a philosophical revolution, “révolution théorique dont nous sommes encore tributaires jusque dans nos critiques du psychologisme, du primat de la conscience et de l’impérialisme du sujet” (Balibar 1998, 10-11). It was the invention of consciousness, argues Balibar, that made it possible for its other – the unconscious – to be thought, which means that in a wide variety of theoretical discourses, if only at an implicit level, “c’est [...], encore et toujours, la conceptualité lockienne qui travaille, lors même qu’il s’agit d’engendrer ses renversements”

¹⁰ E. Balibar, « Introduction : le traité lockien de l’identité », John Locke, *Identité et Différence*, présenté, traduit et commenté par E. Balibar, Paris, Seuil, 1998, 9-101.

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(101). Locke's self is not the French *moi* or *je*, but characterized, as John Rajchman puts it, "by individual "ownership" (*myself, yourself*) and sameness over time (identity)" (Rajchman 12). Running almost diametrically counter to Locke's, a powerful strain of contemporary thought evacuates concepts of identity and selfhood altogether, in a strong reading of Hume's empiricism – the reference here is to Gilles Deleuze, who builds on Hume's insight that the self is a fiction or "incorrigible illusion of living" (Rajchman 12). The concepts of "becoming", "individuation", "singularity" are set against those of "being", "individualization", "particularity". Rajchman suggests that the late Deleuzian concept of *a life* – "impersonal and yet singular" (8-9) should be contrasted to that of *a self* bounded by an individual existence and its private vicissitudes. The Lockean concept of personal identity with its connotations of fixity, sameness over time and self-ownership undergoes further critique in psychoanalysis (of Freudian and Lacanian persuasions) where the emphasis is on process (identification, identity-formation) not result; it comes under attack in the Althusserian theory of interpellation (identity does not pre-exist the momentous act of hailing; it is in the process of responding that the subject identifies herself as such). Identity thus becomes a site of philosophical contest, the ramifications of which filter, inevitably, into cultural and literary studies.

Registering the sheer number of identities on offer in the burgeoning landscape of the interdisciplines, one sorely feels the need for a taxonomy of some kind. There follows a token attempt to source some of those presently in circulation. Social constructionists/historicists (Judith Butler, Denise Riley) have left a strong imprint on the debate; we find identities that are variously *negotiated, manufactured, self-fashioning, constructed, produced*. Both women offer critical support for a concept whose contingency and potentially exclusionary character they are nevertheless quick to recognize – and condemn¹¹. Theorists of transnational in-betweenness and cultural

¹¹ Denise Riley's remarks are exemplary in this regard: "... it may be strategically necessary to wield an identity to approach some desirable outcome. Later, it may become imperative to fight one's way out of that identity if it has come to characterize the entirety of the person in a

dislocation (Appadurai, Bhabha) and their successors have posited *interstitial*, *hybrid*, *diasporic* or *transnational* subjectivities/identities. Postcolonial studies have famously given us *subaltern* and *emergent* identities. The gender/race/class paradigm has generated its own clutch of subject positions (*queer*, *postgender*, *ethnic*, *marginal*...). The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman gives us the concept of a liquid modernity, where identities are correspondingly unfixed and fluid; in advanced capitalism, presumably, all that is solid... liquefies. Liquidity and interstitiality, positionality, standpoint theory, the careful appeal to identity as “strategic provisionality”¹² – these de-substantialize identity in ways that set it at a very distant remove from John Locke’s all too palpable self. Spectralized in this very literal sense, “identity” in its heterogeneous uses cannot fail to recall Derrida’s evocation of that splintered and dispersed inheritance, the spectres of Marx. Like the latter, identities – those turbulent spectres that are the joint legacy of Locke and Hume – are manifestly not in humour to be reconciled.

One area in which the notion of identity finds itself particularly liable to attack is that of identity politics and identity claims in general. Chief among the accusations, coming from the left, is that identity politics constitutes a kind of massive self-indulgent distraction, a narcissism of petty differences at a time when energies should be communally directed to the infinitely more pressing issues of US imperialism, globalisation *etc* and their cortège of iniquities. “Identity” is not only assumed to have lost emancipatory power; it has been found, in one account, to be consubstantial with capitalist processes of fetishization¹³. We have come a long way from the classic Statement of the Combahee River Collective (1977), where the expression “identity politics” was first launched in an attempt to mobilize and empower *inexistent* communities. Thirty years on, the notion of an “oppressed

manner which inhibits and distorts its earlier emancipatory impulse.” D. Riley, *The Words of Selves*, 145.

¹² J. Butler *et al.* in discussion, *The Identity in Question*, 131.

¹³ J. Holloway, *Change the World Without Taking Power*. I owe my discovery of this book to an article by Jean-Jacques Lecercle on the literary canon, “Leçon du canon”, *Revue Française d’Etudes Américaines* 110 (2006), 10-22.

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minority” is likely to induce, at best, mild discomfort, while the idea of collective Black lesbian feminist authorship will smack of quaintness to some, exacerbated particularism to others¹⁴. Influential analyses, like David Harvey’s, linking economic factors (the rise, since the early 70s, of a post-Fordist regime of flexible accumulation) to political and cultural developments (the increase, over the same period, of a “fragmented politics of divergent special and regional interest groups” (Harvey 302)) point to capitalism’s overdetermination of emancipatory projects, and have led critics to temper unqualified adhesion with the sobriety of historical perspective.

It is sobering indeed to observe that one can move so quickly from a context in which the invocation of identity on the part of the disenfranchised served (and was read) as “a political point of departure, [...] a motivation for action” (Alcoff 431), to one in which it has become possible to think identity as a salient example of a deathly capitalist fetish (Holloway). No doubt the emancipatory energies of identity will be reclaimed and reharnessed in future conjunctures, even as its mortifying effects are reaffirmed and repudiated. It has been my aim in these pages to argue that such antagonisms, recuperations and recoveries attest to the spectral life and time(s) of the conflicted legacy we call “theory”.

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¹⁴ Feminist philosopher Linda Martín-Alcoff has taken up the widely-dcredited cause of identity politics, championing a notion of identity which retains core aspects of dynamism and variability yet promotes a broad sense of “situatedness” enabling the exercise of political decision-making and judgement. Key articles are available on her web page at <http://www.alcoff.com/artic.html>. She has also co-edited books on the topic, perhaps most notably the collection entitled *Identity Politics Reconsidered*, Palgrave MacMillan, 2006.

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