

3

Why Poststructuralism is a Live Wire for the Left

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Introduction

Our title has two meanings. It references both our main argument – that left movements (directed at racial, gendered, ecological, and class inequities) can benefit from more contact with poststructural insights – and the lively debate over poststructuralism’s value as radical theory that has divided the academic left for the past decade. This debate – or the ‘theory wars’ – necessarily conditions the terms of our intervention; it also continues conditioning the positions of a number of the more doubtful academics and activists who are our target audience (see Duggan 1998).

The ‘theory wars’ were fought, put generally, between leftists worried about poststructural theory’s implications for progressive politics, and leftists worried about the future of a progressive politics uninformed by poststructuralism’s best insights.⁴ While good intentioned, the debate was often framed in unconstructive terms:

social science versus the humanities, accessible populist scholarship versus jargonistic elitist obscurantism, or naive empiricism versus sophisticated cultural analysis. But the most distorted framings appeared as Politics versus Theory from one point of view and anti-intellectual posturing versus engaged cultural critique from another (Duggan 1998, 10).

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⁴ Our focus is limited to how these debates played out in North America.

It is of note that Duggan's account is written in the past tense. The debate lives on, but is less pitched. Our claim is that the conditions impelling the debate (a floundering North American left – discussed below) have changed. What we find particularly noteworthy is that recent left resurgence (particularly the 'anti-globalization' movement), has occurred *despite* factious academic debate over radical theory; it has gained little from the respective positions of embattled academics. Left resurgence has lessened the tendency for radical academics to look within their ranks for the conservatism stifling movement, while questioning the role of the ranks themselves. Can developments in radical academic theory claim much responsibility for recent resurgences? The argument we develop below is no. This is cause for pause for both sides of the 'theory wars'. Our sense then, is that this period of relative calm on the academic left is occasion for a collegial rethinking of theory's role in social movement.

While we are avowed supporters of most poststructural thinking, this essay is not another volley in the 'theory wars'. We are not interested in making a case for why poststructuralism should displace other theoretical orientations on the left. Indeed, as good poststructuralists, we are doubtful a unified poststructuralism that can be accepted or rejected exists in the first place. Instead this essay is an interrogation of academic theory production in general, and the effects it has, doesn't have, and can have on left movements.

Our sense is that currents within poststructural thought can help soften the predicament academic theory and theorists currently find themselves in – largely unread and irrelevant to the left activists, journalists, and intellectuals they should be in closer dialogue with. Thus, while our primary focus is on how a number of poststructural insights can help activists in their day-to-day struggles, our prior claim is that poststructural insights can enliven the left by helping academics practice theory differently.

We begin our essay by unpacking a poststructural (Foucauldian and Deleuzean) approach to theory – one emphasizing engagement and relevance. To contextualize our argument, we then outline and historicize the positions of poststructuralism's critics – positions that still hold sway on the left and make acceptance of poststructural insights difficult. Our primary interlocutor in this regard is Barbara Epstein's (1995) 'Why Poststructuralism is a Dead End for Progressive Thought'. Our historicization of Epstein's position, and the general debate, suggests that the antagonistic more than agonistic tenor can be attributed to shared despair over the left's failings through the 1990s – failings that are now less pronounced. It is within this context of left resurgence that we situate our argument. We conclude our essay by demonstrating how poststructural insights into theory and practice can further intensify left struggles.

Theory as tool-kit

Poststructuralist theory is often accused of being inaccessible and irrelevant to on-the-ground struggles. These accusations are not without grounding, and will be discussed below. There are, however, currents within the poststructural 'tradition' emphasizing engagement and relevance. We are thinking primarily of works by Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze.

For Foucault and Deleuze, theories should be conceptualized as tool-kits. The tool-kit metaphor suggests that elements of theories are useful some of the time, and sometimes

not. It also suggests that bodies of theory, like ‘poststructuralism’, are not essentially bound. If the tool-kit, what holds the tools, can be thought of as a tool itself, then it too will not always be useful. Tools may need to be disassembled and reassembled in new and contingent tool-kits depending on what the times call for. For Foucault:

the notion of theory as a tool-kit means (i) The theory to be constructed is not a system but an instrument, a logic of the specificity of power relations and the struggles around them; (ii) That this investigation can only be carried out step by step on the basis of reflection (which will necessarily be historical in some of its aspects) on given situations (1977, 145).

For Foucault and Deleuze, the important point is that all theory exist for a purpose, the purpose of intensifying struggle; it is ‘an activity conducted alongside those who struggle for power’ (Foucault and Deleuze 1977, 208). ‘It must be useful’, writes Deleuze, ‘It must function. And not for itself. If no one uses it, beginning with the theoretician himself (who then ceases to be a theoretician), then the theory is worthless or the moment is inappropriate’ (208).

What we find particularly interesting about Foucault and Deleuze’s account of theory, is its deep resonance with activist knowledge production. For political theorist Karena Shaw, characteristics of activist knowledge are its:

very current, mobile, contingent and creative qualities. In order for activist campaigns to be successful, they must be built on some understanding of issues at stake that is persuasive to their intended audiences, which of course can be very diverse. This requires that activists have access to up to date research and are able to adapt that research to relevant audiences and contexts...In order to plan effective campaigns, activists require a complex mapping of the political terrain they face, beginning from where they perceive themselves to be in relation to the issue or problem they seek to address, and moving on to an analysis of how this terrain can be shaped or manipulated (2004).

Theory-as-tool-kit and activist knowledge production are both guided by an appreciation, implicit or not, of the resolutely contingent nature of the political terrain –what Wendy Brown (2001, 27) terms ‘that complex domain of unintended consequences that follow the unpredictable collisions of human, historical, and natural forces...’. This is not to say the spaces of politics theorists and activists interrogate are absurd or incoherent. On the contrary, for Foucault (1977, 114), they are ‘intelligible and should be susceptible of analysis down to the smallest detail – but this in accordance with the intelligibility of struggles, of strategies, and tactics. Neither the Dialectic, as logic of contradictions, nor semiotics, as the structure of communication, can account for the intrinsic intelligibility of conflicts’.

The activist working on a living-wage campaign, for example, cannot expect the contradictions of capitalism to always play out in her favor, the local working class and poorer populations to be inherently supportive of the ordinance, the local elite and corporate media to be unified in their opposition, or the righteousness of the coalition members to guarantee anything in the struggle – more just causes have failed. The living-wage activist must be resolutely specific and strategic in her thinking and practice. The same, for Foucault and Deleuze, should apply to theorists.

Radical academics can remove themselves from the immediacy of struggle to complete their work – not a bad thing. But to work from too much distance, one misses, for political theorist William Chaloupka (2003, 73), the ‘specificity, contingency, conditions, and aims of political intervention’. Simply put, the theorist loses touch with the political spaces they should be interrogating, and the constituencies they should be conversing with. It is of note that Black Panther texts were one of Foucault’s sources for his understanding of the political terrain, and his emphasis on strategic thinking: ‘when he read the texts of the Black Panthers in 1968 he discovered that they develop a strategic analysis of society freed of the Marxist theory of society’ (Defert cited in Chaloupka, 2003, 74).

Drawing on her experiences with struggles to protect old growth rainforest on Vancouver Island, Karena Shaw (2004) suggests that the ‘strategic knowledge of activists [can be] a model for what it might mean to think politically today, or how the practice of the intellectual might need to change under contemporary circumstances’. Chaloupka (2003, 74) elaborates this point: ‘If Foucault is right, as I believe he is, the relegation of social theory to the role of values articulation and moralist complaint could and should be altered. The role of the intellectual must incorporate strategies as well as normative concerns’. But if Foucault and Deleuze, along with a younger generation of thinkers like Shaw and Chaloupka, have rethought the practice of the theorist in-line with activist knowledge production, then beyond more engaged intellectuals, what can poststructuralism offer activists?

The tool-kit approach clarifies the ways poststructural insights can and do relate to left movements. Put simply, there are times when poststructural insights are useful to movements, and times when they are not – a point applying to other theoretical persuasions as well. Left movements have different theoretical needs at different times, and thus require different theoretical tools. Poststructural theorizing can provide some, not all, of these tools. Thus instead of arguing for poststructuralism’s value in general, our aim is to outline three particular problems left activists and movements consistently face, and which poststructural insights/agitations are particularly good at softening. This list is not exhaustive. Movements have many more problems, some larger and smaller, that poststructural insights may be helpful for. These are simply the problems we have encountered most in our academic and activist work – they are necessarily partial:

1. The tendency for activists and movements to replicate the very exclusions they are working to allay. This tendency is not only an affront to the principles that compel left activists, but is also politically dangerous; it always threatens to frustrate already contingent solidarities.
2. The tension between moral and strategic vision – how the righteousness that motivates movement, and attracts others to its cause, can work to stymie the hard-nosed political strategizing generally required for movement success.
3. The tendency for activists and movements to essentialize their ‘enemy’ – to afford their targets more strength and coherence than they actually possess. This tendency can stoke disempowerment and unsound strategy.

Poststructuralism does not hold the deed on the articulation of, or insights into these three problems. But these are problems, as outlined here, that have been historically

raised by poststructuralists as critiques of other leftists ‘drinking from the springs of the Enlightenment’ – critiques that within the context of the theory wars were not always tactfully launched, or well received (Raulet cited in Foucault, 1998, 455).

Poststructuralist insights into what can be perceived as poststructural problems, will be met with understandable reservation. Thus before outlining poststructuralism’s contribution to activist practice, we’d like to better account for why this body of theory has been so contentious for the academic, and larger left. Our contention is that understanding the contours and roots of the debate is an important precondition to working through the current ‘crisis in the realm of theories of social change’ (Epstein 1995, 87).

Dead ends and live wires

As noted, we’ve chosen social movement scholar Barbara Epstein as our exemplary critic of poststructuralism. Not only is her *Socialist Review* article – ‘Why Poststructuralism is a Dead End for Progressive Thought’ – one of the few interventions, from either side of the debate, to explicitly reference the needs and concerns of left movements, it is also one of the most sustained and circulated critiques of poststructural thought available.

Epstein’s basic argument is that theorizing with an emphasis on the discursive is irrelevant to progressive politics, and must be ‘rejected as part of the project of developing something better’ (1995, 116). The basic tenets of poststructural theory – anti-essentialism, the celebration of difference, ‘the rejection of metanarratives, the insistence that everything must be understood as socially constructed, the rejection of any claims of truth or value’ – make it, for Epstein, a dangerous intellectual framework upon which to build analysis and movement aimed at the present’s many injustices (1995, 84). ‘Movements that need to make positive assertions about how society could be better organized and that need to incorporate difference within a collective unity for social change’ will only be enervated by a body of theory ambivalent about clear assertions of right/wrong and suspicious of bids for unity (1995, 85). Being students of poststructural ambivalence, we couldn’t agree and disagree more!

While we think some of Epstein’s claims are stretched,⁵ based on faulty premises⁶ and wonder whether there really is a coherent ‘poststructuralism’ out there to be rejected in the first place,⁷ she raises the right questions.

⁵ For Epstein ‘we will never have a comprehension of reality that is absolutely true in the sense of being unmediated by categories of perception, but that does not mean that perception is entirely shaped by these categories and has nothing to do with the reality that is being perceived’ (1995, 95). This criticism suggests, that for poststructuralists, perception is completely unmoored from the objective world. If anyone, poststructuralist or not, has ever made this claim, we’d agree it was hubris. When Derrida proclaimed ‘Il n’ya pas d’hors-texte,’ he meant that our experience is always mediated (not completely determined) by interpretative devices. The implications of Derrida’s aphorism are much closer to Epstein’s claim that ‘we will never have a comprehension of reality that is absolutely true in the sense of being unmediated by categories of perception,’ than her criticism.

⁶ ‘Throughout the humanities and in areas of the social sciences, the word theory, unmodified by any adjective, is likely to mean poststructuralist theory’ (1995, 83). We can understand how teaching at UC Santa Cruz might create this impression, but think Epstein is affording poststructural theorizing more sway than it enjoys in the North American academy. Poststructural

Epstein is right to note that poststructural theorizing, while making a certain claim to radicalism, rarely addresses activist struggles directly:

On the one hand, by describing themselves as radical, writers in this genre associate themselves with radical social movements. But within this genre the concept of radicalism does not refer to the social goals of these movements, or for that matter any particular critique of the existing social order or any concept of what would be better. Instead it is taken to refer to the degree to which a concept or piece of writing breaks with accepted paradigms – its ability to unsettle or shock its audience (1995, 93).

Keeping with the polemical quality of her article, this claim is overdrawn, but it does speak to the fact that radicals doing poststructural theory have not been successful at communicating the radical potential of their work to left movements. The lack of communication between left activists and left theorists (or poststructuralists in Epstein's terms) has opened poststructural theory to criticisms of pretend radicalism or plain pretentiousness. For Michael Albert (2003, unpaginated), editor of *Z Magazine Online*, and a key voice on the North American Left:

Perhaps 'irreducible materiality' and 'pure systematicity' are exactly the concepts needed to 'theorize' Madonna. But if so, it still ought to be possible for literary theorists to describe, popularize, and generally make understandable what their results are so the rest of us can know there is something real going on behind all the obscure terminology?

To avoid dismissals like Epstein's and Albert's, more work could be done to bring poststructuralist theory to bear on left movements and their struggles.

What makes this project difficult, however, is that as Epstein articulates, a number of key poststructural insights *are* irritating to the immediate interests and values of left movements. Our project is not to root these insights out, or to steer a path around them. We think that where poststructural theory 'fails' left movements, where it agitates progressive values most, can be sites of real productivity. There is neither the time or space to prove the value of the agitative elements of poststructural theorizing frustrating thinkers like Epstein – anti-essentialism, the celebration of difference, the rejection of metanarratives, etc. Neither would this project be efficacious. There are times when some of these elements will be more useful for activists than others, times when none will prove effective, and times when some will actually hinder effective struggle. Our emphasis is on the former, Epstein's on the latter. We don't expect this disagreement to disappear, but

theory enjoys some popularity within the marginalized theoretical subdisciplines of the marginalized divisions of social sciences and humanities within US universities. It is unclear how much institutional power poststructural theorizing, or theorizing in general, currently has to help or hinder progressive politics.

⁷ While we think it possible to speak of 'poststructural theory' as such, there is enough differentiation within this category to make its invocation deceiving. 'Genealogy,' 'deconstruction,' and 'cultural studies,' – often corralled under the 'poststructuralism' big top --are all different intellectual practices with distinctive histories. Epstein's unifying narrative does a disservice to the distinct and often conflicting elements of 'poststructural theory.' Does Epstein want to forget Foucault, and *Forget Foucault* (Baudrillard, 1987)? Foucault and Baudrillard have distinct takes on power and resistance. Are both unsalvageable?

think that calls for outright rejection – which obviously leave little room for exchange – had an intelligibility in the mid-nineties they now lack.

Truth is the first casualty of war

Epstein's essay was published in the wake of two major failures on the American left. The first was a failed opposition to the 1991 Gulf War. For Epstein (1992, 116), this failure was symptomatic of the general decline and disarray of the American left:

The Gulf War came at a moment when the Left, or progressive forces, were extremely weak in the U.S. The fact that it is no longer clear what this sector should be called is an indication of the depth of its crisis. It was also a symptom of the crisis of the Left as a whole that it was possible for sectarian organizations, discredited in the eyes of most left activists, to dominate the structures that gave direction to the movement on a national level.

Weak national structures enabled control by a sectarian few who further enervated national organizing capacity. Organizing against the war was thus largely left to local and regional groups. Where organizing did flourish – particularly California's Bay Area (East Bay, Berkeley, San Francisco, Santa Cruz) – the movement was propelled by groups organized around identity. For Epstein (1992, 128) 'the politics of identity worked better for some people than for others: it drew upon communities defined by their oppression or marginalization in terms of sexual orientation or race. It was not nearly as helpful in fostering the development of other kinds of communities. ... For those who did not fit into any of the identity-based groups, or who did not understand their opposition to the war in those terms, there was often no place to go'. Epstein (1992, 132) continues: 'The danger of identity politics is that it can become reduced to a politics of the self, which in the extreme can mean an interest-group politics in which there is little basis for groups working together and little connection to a progressive vision of overarching social change'.

Both the weakness of national left organizations and the turn to identity politics were, for Epstein, symptoms of a larger failure on the left to articulate a project able to unify diverse constituencies. Universities, historic providers of strategic vision, were not helping. Commenting on student organizing efforts on her own campus, Epstein (1992, 132) notes that:

Santa Cruz is a relatively progressive campus; it is also a center for the poststructuralist/postmodernist intellectual currents that promote particularity and renounce conceptions of universal value. These two influences intersect to encourage a conception of radicalism centered on the defense of particular, marginalized, or oppressed identities.

These currents of thought whose influence were spreading across US campus' in the early nineties, were for Epstein, impediments to developing a 'progressive vision of overarching social change', and more particularly, for effectively mobilizing against the war.

The second, but related leftist failure preconditioning Epstein's intervention, was the Clinton administration. The Democratic party's social policies were gentler than the New Right's, but their fiscal policies were largely indistinguishable, leading satirist Michael Moore to ask in 1996: 'Democrat? Republican? Can You Tell the Difference?'

(1996, 32). The nineties were a decade of Democratic rule, and the further entrenchment of Reaganomics (tax cuts, debt servicing, privatization, slashing of social programs).

With the putative left pursuing the right's economic policies in the White House, and no clear alternatives brewing in civil society (evidenced by the failure of the anti-war movement), the mid-nineties was a time of despair and disarray for progressives. This was also the time when poststructural theory was becoming more entrenched in US universities. The left continued failing while poststructuralism continued making modest gains. It is in this context that poststructural theory, and its claims to radicalism, became a target. How radical and effective can poststructural theory be if the left continues to decline while it ascends? More accurately, what is 'radical' poststructural theory doing for the scattered left, and is its increasing popularity endangering an effective rebuilding of a radical bloc?

The answers, for literary critic Terry Eagleton, are 'nothing' and 'yes'. In his article 'Where Do Postmodernists Come From?' (1995) Eagleton argues that poststructuralism is largely the product of leftists who have failed to avow and deal with their failed aspirations. Paraphrasing Eagleton, Epstein writes in a 1997 update of her *Socialist Review* piece:

left intellectuals in the U.S. have adopted postmodernism out of a sense of having been badly defeated, a belief that the left as a political tendency has little future. Culturalism, he argues, involves an extreme subjectivism, a view of the intellect as all-powerful, a mindset that might be described as taking the May '68 slogan 'all power to the imagination' literally, combined with a deep pessimism, a sense that it isn't worth the effort to learn about the world, to analyze social systems, for instance, because they can't be changed anyway (1997,141).

For academics on the other side of the debate, the connection between the left's failure and poststructuralism's relative ascension within the US academy, was spurious. If anything, poststructuralism was seen as a potential antidote for the left's failings. 'Marxism', for political theorist Wendy Brown, 'proved unable to address critical issues of need, desire, and identity formation in late modernity, and Marxist projects [in the East and West] failed by almost all economic, political, and eudaemonistic measures. In short, in the second half of the twentieth century, liberalism and capitalism have been quietly consolidating their gains less because they were intrinsically successful than because their alternatives collapsed' (2001, 19). Brown's recent work *Politics Out of History* (2001) is an attempt to redirect and rebuild leftist thinking along more poststructural lines. Her sense of the 'theory wars' is that leftist dismissals of 'anti-foundationalism' mark a:

nostalgic desire for something imagined to be lost: for a unified social movement instead of the fractious nature of identity politics and new social movements; for historical materialism instead of discourse analysis; for a clearer account of accountability and human agency instead of the complexities and indecipherabilities of the postmodern subject; and a desire to have real working class heroes instead of the deeply ambiguous and flawed heroes we have now (paraphrased in Wray 1998, unpaginated).

Leftists on both sides of the 'theory wars' agreed that the left was failing, and read each other's positions as symptoms of this larger failure. The unmentioned loss of viable

alternatives to liberalism and capitalism through the nineties made accusation the primary mode of argumentation for both sides of the divide. Brown's comments were made at a conference whose handbill accused the likes of Katha Pollit, Barbara Ehrenreich, and Epstein of Left Conservatism: 'A specter is haunting U.S. intellectual life: the specter of Left Conservatism ... that is, an attack by 'real' leftists on those portrayed as theory-mongering, hyper-professional, obscurantist pseudo-leftists'(Center For Cultural Studies 1998). This accusation simply reverses the implicit claim in polemics like Epstein's – 'left conservatives' (instead of poststructuralists) are not true radicals. This knee-jerk response can be partly explained by a deeply felt vulnerability. Epstein's and other polemics were launched at already fragile spheres of US universities – the theoretical subdisciplines of the humanities and social sciences.

If the American left's general failure is not enough to bring epistemologically divergent leftists together, the state of the social sciences and humanities, especially its theoretical subdisciplines, in the New (now flailing) Economy, should. Writing in the aftermath of the 'Left Conservatism' conference, then graduate student Matt Wray notes that missing from the debate is 'a fuller analysis of the ways these intellectual fault lines within the Left are contributing to the ascendancy of the Right and the continued rise of market forces in university life. ... There is a missing institutional context here which is, in large part, going to determine the outcome of these debates over the next decade and into the next millennium' (1998, unpaginated). If academic theory (poststructuralist or not) is going to be of any import to the left in the years to come, more attention needs to be paid to the fraught place of its production in the new economy.

What is more important to note for our immediate purposes, however, is that the 'theory wars' did not, in any significant way, continue into the next millennium. Why? 'Seattle 99' is the easy answer. Writing after the tear gas had cleared, Epstein noted that 'since the end of the war in Vietnam the division between progressive groups and labor, and for that matter among progressive groups, have weakened the left and allowed the right to dominate public discourse. The mobilization in Seattle holds out the hope, for the first time in decades, of a broad and potentially powerful coalition for a more egalitarian social order' (Epstein 2002, 55). With the recent upsurge in North American left activism, most clearly marked by Seattle, but also evident in subsequent anti-globalization mobilizations and massive anti-war demonstrations, as well as the growing movement against the prison-industrial complex, there is less need for radical academics to look within their ranks for the conservatism stifling movement.

But how can we best account for this resurgence? More to the point, what role has radical theory played in the resurgence of left activism, particularly those of the anti-globalization movement? Given the claim that the ascendancy of poststructuralism is correlated to the left's failings, can the recent ascendancy of left activism be correlated to poststructural innovations? Does the resurgence on the left itself discredit Epstein et al's condemnation of poststructuralism?

Poststructuralists for post-capitalism

Seattle 99 and subsequent anti-globalization demos were decentralized (affinity groups, blocs...) and diverse (green-labour-feminist-anti-racist-anarchist-socialist-nationalist...) in organization and execution, giving them a particularly postmodern feel. The anti-bureaucratic and anti-hierarchical principles of large

components of the movement (especially the direct-action elements) have a strong resonance with the thinking of figures like Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari. Indeed, Foucault's (1983, xiv) preface to Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* reads like a hand-bill that might be circulated at a Reclaim the Streets dance party, or anarchist conference:

How does one keep from being fascist, even (especially) when one believes oneself to be a revolutionary militant? How do we rid our speech and our acts, our hearts and our pleasures, of fascism? ... This art of living counter to all forms of fascism, whether already present or impending, carries with it a certain number of essential principles:

- Free political action from all unitary and totalizing paranoia
- Develop action, thought, and desires by proliferation, juxtaposition, and disjunction, and not by subdivision and pyramidal hierarchization... .
- Prefer what is positive and multiple, difference over uniformity, flows over unities, mobile arrangements over systems. Believe that what is productive is not sedentary but nomadic.
- Do not think that one has to be sad in order to be militant, even though the thing one is fighting is abominable. It is the connection of desire to reality ... that possesses revolutionary force.

While anti-globalization activists have undoubtedly read poststructural theorizing,⁸ it would be wrong to claim that Foucault and Deleuze, or other thinkers in the poststructural vein, have offered the primary (or secondary ...) theoretical support for the movement.

If one had to name the primary theoretical framework informing anti-globalizers, one's best bet would be anarchism (Graeber 2003), but an anarchism that is decidedly unacademic. Epstein (2001, 1), in a recent article on 'Anarchism and the Anti-Globalization Movement', notes that 'the intellectual/philosophical perspective that holds sway in these circles might be better described as an anarchist sensibility than as anarchism per se. Unlike the Marxist radicals of the sixties, who devoured the writings of Lenin and Mao, today's anarchist activists are unlikely to pore over the works of Bakunin'.

Primary theoretical support for anti-globalizers is provided by an array of thinkers not necessarily affiliated with universities or taught in academic settings, including Hakim

⁸ Some recent examples: D.J. Spooky, a hip-hop artist and anti-corporate media activist, recently noted after a performance at UC Santa Cruz (April, 2003) that he was more of 'Deleuze and Guattari than Marxist kinda guy.' Spooky's performance, *A Situation*, was a showing of Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* accompanied by a remixed hip-hop soundtrack. Also, Eddie Yuen, in the introduction to *The Battle of Seattle*, suggests that 'this book, like the movement it describes, is perhaps best read as a network or rhizome rather than as a linear train of information.' This note suggests a reading and appreciation of Deleuze and Guattari's work on rhizome theory in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1988). Finally, Hakim Bey's *The Temporary Autonomous Zone* (1991), which has offered central intellectual support to autonomist movements in North America (Starr and Adams, 2003, 36), draws heavily on the likes of Deleuze and Guattari, Bataille, Foucault, and Lyotard.

Bey, Bob Black, Noam Chomsky, Naomi Klein, Subcomandante Marcos, Arundhati Roy, Vandana Shiva, Starhawk, John Zerzan. The anti-globalization movement is also marked by a plethora of D.I.Y. theorizing. The Internet has provided the conditions for wider circulation of more decentralized activist-generated theory (Bevington and Dixon 2003).

While poststructural theorizing is just as poised to contribute to the sensibility and strategy of anti-globalization activists, as is the reconstructed Marxism informing Epstein's analysis, progressive thought in general (in its academic forms) has not been especially relevant to the new movement. This is to say that this new and invigorating movement has developed despite the factious disagreements among radical academics. If anti-globalization activists are not generally frequenting texts by Wendy Brown or Judith Butler, neither have they been reading much Terry Eagleton, or David Harvey.⁹ Academic progressive thought's general irrelevance to the anti-globalization movement, the most vital force on the left in recent years, is cause for pause for both sides of the 'theory wars'.

The journal *Critical Inquiry* recently hosted a public symposium on the future of theory that is worth mentioning in this regard. The symposium included such luminaries as Homi Bhabha, Henry Louis Gates Jr., Stanley Fish, and Fredric Jameson. Perhaps it was a slow news day, but the event was significant enough for *New York Times* coverage. In her article 'The Latest Theory Is that Theory Doesn't Matter' (April 19, 2003), Emily Eakin reports on a general consensus amongst a diverse group of leading theorists that theory no longer matters: '... the only panelist to venture a defense of theory ... was Mr. Bhabha. 'There are a number of people around the table here and a number of people in the audience, in fact most of you here are evidence that intellectual work has its place and its uses'' (Eakin 2003, 9). But as Eakin continues, 'no one spoke up to endorse this claim. In fact, for a conference officially devoted to theory, theory itself got little airtime. For more than an hour, the panelists bemoaned the war in Iraq, the Bush administration, the ascendancy of the right-wing press and the impotence of the left' (9). While Eakin apparently overstated the anti-theory consensus, we still find this development worth noting.¹⁰ It suggests that divisiveness amongst divergent theorists has been replaced with a more collective concern for theory's relevance. While we think it bizarre that this concern manifest itself as anti-theory, we agree that the relevance question needs to become more central to academic theory production.

We have already outlined an approach to theory we find helpful in this regard. What we've yet to do, is demonstrate how poststructural insights can function in activist tool-kits. We conclude our essay by returning to the three problems outlined above, and demonstrating the ameliorative effect of poststructural tools.

Poststructural power tools

Problem 1: *The tendency for activists and movements to replicate the very exclusions they are working to allay. This tendency is not only an affront to*

⁹ One exception to this rule, on the poststructural end, is the school of thought forming around 'postanarchism.' Thinkers in this vein include former Black Panther/BLA prisoner Ashanti Alston who is developing a postmodernist anarchist analysis of the Black Panther Party (Brecht Forum, 2003). See www.spooncollective.org for a clearing house of postanarchist thought.

¹⁰ Reported by a friend in attendance.

the principles that compel left activists, but is also politically dangerous; it always threatens to frustrate already contingent solidarities.

Michel Foucault's theorization of power is particularly useful for understanding why oppressions are replicated in activist circles. Foucault's basic point is that power, as it is commonly known: 'a group of institutions and mechanisms that ensure the subservience of the citizens of a given state, a mode of subjugation, a general system of domination exerted by one group over another' (Foucault 1990, 92), is inadequate for explaining how oppressions are maintained. Rather, oppressions are sustained through 'techniques of power present at every level of the social body and utilized by very diverse institutions' (92). Power is not only 'out there' or waiting to be imposed or captured, but is a complex network and relation that extends into the most intimate of relationships. Foucault (1980, 187) elaborates:

Between every point of a social body, between a man and a woman, between the members of family, between a master and his pupil, between every one who knows and every one who does not, there exist relations of power which are not purely and simply a projection of the sovereign's great power over the individual.

This insight removes the possibility of existing outside the workings of power. Activist circles or organizations, even if they are self-consciously created as anti-oppressive spaces, still: (1) exist within societies shot through with micro (parents and children) and macro (Corporation and employees) relations of power; (2) are composed of individuals who have inevitably been conditioned by these relations of power; and (3) are instances of resistance that suggest the continued presence of power. This last point requires more explanation.

'Where there is power', writes Foucault, 'there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power' (1990, 95). Resistance to power occurs in activist circles because power (for the above two reasons) is always present. The crucial point, however, is that this resistance is never the purging of power, the creation of a pure and power-free environment. Instead, resistance is always a harnessing of power itself, an act of power. Oppression may no longer be present, but power always is. And so is the potential for its misuse.

Deleuze helps us explain this potential. For Deleuze 'the thrust of Marxism was to define the problem [oppression] essentially in terms of interests (power is held by a ruling class defined by its interests). The question immediately arises: how is it that people whose interests are not being served can strictly support the existing power structure by demanding a piece of the action?' (Foucault and Deleuze 1977, 214). Deleuze is asking why a policeman, for instance, who is still an exploited worker, might be more eager to actively comply with the state and its repression than revolt. 'Perhaps, this is because in terms of investments, whether economic or unconscious, interest is not the final answer; there are investments of desire that function in a more profound and diffuse manner than our interests dictate. ... There are investments of desire that mold and distribute power, that make it the property of the policeman as much as of the prime minister' (Foucault and Deleuze 1977, 215). Deleuze's basic point is that desire for power, (the thrill of being empowered, of being deferred to, of having power over, however minor that power might be) can often trump the material interests of the individual, organization, or class: 'The

nature of these investments of desire in a social group explains why political parties or unions, which might have or should have revolutionary investments in the name of class interests, are so often reform oriented or absolutely reactionary on the level of desire' (Foucault and Deleuze 1977, 215). The power that complying with the social order provides is a constant temptation for constituencies who can access it.

On the level of the individual, Deleuze's policeman example can be extended to a male anti-poverty activist who is sexist. The activist's sexism will not bring him any immediate material gains (it is doubtful he is counting on his sexism to reinforce a patriarchal system that probably does benefit him materially), and may even endanger the success of his activism or organization, but still persists. For Deleuze, the activist has an investment in oppression, in the thrill of power afforded him by a system of patriarchal social relations. The potential desire for this thrill (and the mostly immaterial benefits it generates), even in the hearts and minds of oppressed or activist groups themselves, makes power's misuse a constant concern.

The positive spin on this desire – a spin we are invested in – is that of course oppressed and disempowered people want power, to be recognized, to feel important. The problem is that under current conditions, most people cannot imagine what being truly empowered, truly free resembles. On the left there remains a lack of emphasis on enacting productive outlets for our yearnings for power, for revolutionary empowerment. The present lack of revolutionary political space creates the conditions for power's misuse, for the short-term gain of oppression that itself compromises the possibility of real revolutionary gain.

By 'revolutionary political space' we mean what Hakim Bey (1991, 101) terms 'Temporary Autonomous Zones' (TAZ) – fugitive liberations 'of land, of time, of imagination' from commodification, exploitation, domination, and formal political control (squats, reclaimed streets etc). By 'real revolutionary gain' we refer to the more sustained liberations that can follow from the multiplication of revolutionary experience. We resist reducing fugitive liberations, or the TAZ, to mere training grounds for the distant revolutionary moment – the whole point is that freedom ('an intensification, a surplus, an excess, a potlatch, life spending itself in living rather than merely surviving') is available right now' (Bey 1991, 112). But we can't help desiring more sustained becomings of autonomous political space. Bey gives us our out: 'Must we wait until the entire world is freed from political control before even one of us can claim to know freedom? Logic and emotion unite to condemn such a supposition. *Reason demands that one cannot struggle for what one does not know...*' (Bey 1991, 98; our emphasis). Knowing freedom ephemerally is a precondition to nurturing its more sustained becomings.

But while spaces of fugitive freedom can potentially forestall the desire for oppressive power (clarified below), the TAZ is not a power-free environment; it is an act of power. Foucault's (1983, xiv) question remains: 'How does one keep from being fascist, even (especially) when one believes oneself to be a revolutionary militant?'

Two obvious activist answers/strategies flow from the above insights. The first are teach-ins on privilege and the misuse of power, directed specifically at activists themselves. An anti-sexism workshop recently run for anti-war activists in the Bay Area is a good example: 'This workshop', according to the brochure, 'is designed for gender privileged men and is being organized by a group of men committed to challenging

patriarchy and promoting feminist politics within the anti-war movement in general and the Direct Action to Stop the War organizing in particular' (Kivel, Lewis, Callender and Crass 2003).

But this strategy is not enough on its own. Our sense is that left movements must work to simultaneously confront internally reproduced subordinations and the inconceivability of revolutionary empowerment. We wager that power's misuse is a problem in activist circles, and amongst the disempowered more generally, because control and autonomy are desired and sought, but the means for truly living them are few. Without productive outlets for our yearnings for power, desire turns implosively inward – the dangers of settling for the short-term gains of oppression multiply.

Fighting alongside fellow workers for a new or improved contract can be, for example, an empowering experience. But while a contract can positively alter the conditions of the employee/employer hierarchy, it never fundamentally challenges it. Indeed the contract, the pinnacle of an organizing effort, enshrines the fundamental inequity of the employee/employer relationship. We worry about the deep psychological impact of fighting tooth and nail for an affirmation, hopefully on better terms, of one's fundamental subordination.

We sense that minus glimpses of a world without their subordination, workers and labour activists become more prone to playing the boss internally (abusing one's place on a union hierarchy, being homophobic, racist, sexist...), which in turn weakens worker solidarity and makes more sustained bids for worlds beyond the employee/employer hierarchy increasingly dreamy. Workers will keep fighting for better contracts, as they should, but creating spaces and times of fugitive but intense freedom – without bosses, without contracts – should become a priority for labour activists.

Speaking generally, the left needs to take practices of freedom – 'successful raids on consensus reality, breakthroughs into more intense and abundant life' – more seriously as strategy (Bey 1991, 115). From reclaimed streets to employee-run enterprises, we need more spaces of at least temporary empowerment, spaces that concretely (even for an hour) envision a world where our potentials can flourish – spaces that materialize a liberatory future-present. The wager is that these glimpses of freedom, *inter alia*, can forestall the desire for oppressive power and the sundered solidarities that follow.

Problem 2: *The tension between moral and strategic vision – how the righteousness that motivates movement, and attracts others to its cause, can work to stymie the hard-nosed political strategizing generally required for movement success.*

A theoretical framework for social change also needs an ethics, a moral basis for the critique of existing society and a moral framework for projecting a vision of a better society (Epstein 1995).

As Epstein articulates, an ethical basis is integral to theories and movements for social change. Strategically, ethical vision is necessary to attract constituencies whose interests do not obviously resonate with movement aims (middle-class college students for instance), clarifying movement goals, and inspiring their pursuit. But ethical vision cannot simply be reduced to 'strategic ethicism'; its residence beyond the merely strategic (read cynical or self-interested) is central to its attractiveness. The danger, however, is that

reliance on principle or righteousness as a ground for politics can lead more to complacency than to effective activism. The danger of a putatively pure and righteous politics is, for Wendy Brown (2001, 27), its 'naiveté about the dynamics of power and fluidity of context in which actions motivated by the finest of intentions produce effects of incalculable tragedy and suffering ... a politics of abstract principle risks missing its aim and indeed producing the opposite of the wished-for result'. William Chaloupka (2003, 69) elaborates this point: 'Every movement based on civil disobedience (or other forms of ethical protest) must confront the gap between the moralism of protest's justifications and the strategies such protest usually must deploy when it interacts with the political world, which is contingent and multileveled'. Our basic claim in this section is that Foucault provides a particularly enabling account of how these two sometimes contradictory impulses can better co-exist.

Foucault's thinking on this matter is made clear in a debate with Noam Chomsky in 1974. 'The idea of justice in itself', insists Foucault, 'is an idea which in effect has been invented and put to work in different types of societies as an instrument of a certain political and economic power or as a weapon against that power...one can't, however regrettable it may be, put these notions forward to justify a fight which should ...overthrow the very fundamentals of our society' (cited in Rabinow 1984, 6). At first glance, Foucault's argument is antagonistic towards one of the left's most crucial guiding principles. But Foucault continues: 'Rather than thinking of the social struggle in terms of 'justice', one has to emphasize justice in terms of the social struggle' (Foucault and Chomsky 1974). Foucault is not suggesting that justice never be invoked in struggle. Instead, he is arguing against grounding resistance in an abstract principle of justice (justice in itself) that putatively exists prior to struggle. For Foucault, we do not struggle for justice, instead we invoke justice for the struggle – struggle preconditions justice rather than the other way around.¹¹

Foucault's basic insight is that deferrals to abstract principle (Justice in itself, the Good, the True...) are always power-ridden. This is not to say they are cynical, but to suggest that abstract principle is always immanent; it is always produced on this earth, and under particular historical circumstances. Principle never comes equipped with guarantees; its meaning and authority must constantly be secured by those who invoke it. The political implication of this insight, appropriate to this discussion, is that radical analysis and action should not be about alignment with ethical essence (what is forever Right), but must instead seek to develop ethical vision fitting of the struggle or situation. If ethical vision is always made instead of found, then its invocation is always a political and strategic as much as ethical affair. This realization should not belittle the vision invoked in struggle, but it should always remind of its contingent quality, that it alone guarantees nothing.

Ethical vision is meaningful and powerful because activists make it so, not because of higher origins. For example, writing about efforts to protect old-growth rainforest in

¹¹ We agree with the spirit of Foucault's critique and its political implications (a call to re-focus on how to win, rather than why we should), but want to suggest that Foucault's argument is itself preconditioned by an investment in the left and its struggles that is not self-explanatory. Foucault's work suggests that more analytic work on the relationship between struggle and its rationales is required. There is a common ground that enabled the debate between Foucault and Chomsky, and the American theory wars of the 90s, that requires more analysis.

Clayoquot Sound, William Chaloupka (2003, 86) notes how activists framed their battle as the defense of a sacred and ancient forest, one they routinely compared to a cathedral. But like a cathedral, the ancient forest was 'built'. 'As concern about logging in the U.S. Pacific Northwest increased', writes Chaloupka (2003, 86) 'scientists and activists defined old growth as a political issue, eventually discovering not only that the scientific arguments were convincing, but also that the term ancient forests appealed to a broad potential constituency'. Clayoquot may very well be sacred, but this is the determination of activists, not the forest itself. 'Knowing this', writes Chaloupka (2003, 86) 'should not diminish the importance of the forest, nor should it undermine green commitment to forest preservation. But, politically, activists might better understand their struggle if they appreciate that the process develops the terms of moral contestation, and is not simply driven by those terms. This should not be a matter of embarrassment or reluctance; it is at the core of what politics now does'.

If Foucault's insight into the immanence of ethical vision is taken seriously – so the wager goes – the danger of principles overcoming politics can be allayed. The hope is that this insight (that principles themselves are always political) can engender greater acceptance and appreciation of the strategic vision that is already at the core of activist work. 'The passage out of a morally superior but politically marginal position', writes Chaloupka (2003, 86), 'requires more adroit thinking about strategic relations to power than many protest movements have ordinarily produced'.

Problem 3: *The tendency for activists and movements to essentialize their 'enemy' – to afford their targets more strength and coherence than they actually possess. This tendency can stoke disempowerment and unsound strategy.*

Geographer J.K. Gibson-Graham (1996, x) – in her feminist, poststructuralist, and queer theory reading of political economy – perfectly captures the dangers associated with this tendency:

When theorists [or activists] depict patriarchy, or racism, or compulsory heterosexuality, or capitalist hegemony they are not only delineating a formation they hope to see destabilized or replaced. They are also generating a representation of the social world and endowing it with performative force. To the extent that this representation becomes influential it may contribute to the hegemony of a 'hegemonic formation' and it will undoubtedly influence people's ideas about the possibilities of difference and change, including the potential for successful political interventions.

Gibson-Graham's basic point is that how we represent the world contributes to that world's constitution. By representing institutions (e.g. World Trade Organization) and social formations (e.g. Global Capitalism) as all-powerful, activists are always in danger of quelling resistance.

Why activists and theorists might be compelled to afford 'Global Capitalism' more coherence and sway than it actually possesses is a difficult question. The simple answer is that fear and foreboding are powerful motivators. To put it glibly: If a social formation is fragile and not so powerful after all, then why get worked up? The converse, of course, is that if we think the formation too powerful, the resistances generated will ultimately seem

futile. For Gibson-Graham (1996, 126), most leftist representations of globalization and capitalist hegemony have the unintentional effect of constituting non-capitalist spaces as inevitable victims, as ‘sites of potential invasion/envelopment/accumulation, sites that may be recalcitrant but are incapable of retaliation...’. As in the case of ethical vision, what motivates struggle can just as easily stymie it.

This is a tension not easily wished or thought away. But the suggestion thinkers like Gibson-Graham provide, is for activists and theorists to recognize the strategic value of emphasizing the fissures and contradictions that are constitutive of every social formation. ‘Could we see the [Multinational Corporation] in a different light’ asks Gibson-Graham, ‘perhaps as a sometimes fragile entity, spread out and potentially vulnerable?’ (1996, 127). She continues:

If we create a hegemonic globalization script with the MNC, the financial sector, the market and commodification all set up in relations of mutual reinforcement, and we then proclaim this formation as a ‘reality’, we invite particular outcomes. Certain cues and responses will be seen as ‘normal’ while others will be seen as quixotic and unrealistic. By querying globalization and queering the body of capitalism we may open up the space for many different scripts and invite many different actors to participate in the realization of different outcomes (Gibson-Graham 1996, 145).

The wager here is that emphasizing contingency in our always incomplete representations of always incomplete formations or institutions can effect more hopeful and proliferative praxis. The multiple formations we are fighting (racism, compulsory heterosexuality, patriarchy, capitalist hegemony...), and their points of articulation, are powerful and abominable, but they are also replete with cracks and contradictions ripe for activist capitalization.

Not only is capitalism and its supportive institutions – Gibson-Graham’s emphasis – always open to activist intervention, but spaces of non-capitalist economic relationship already exist everywhere on earth – a reality often missed by over-emphasizing capitalism’s reach and formidability. During a recent lecture at UC Santa Cruz, Fredric Jameson provocatively suggested that it is now easier to imagine the world ending in nuclear holocaust, than to imagine the end of capitalism. This point is polyvalent, but one of its effects is to dull the prospect of building non-capitalist worlds. Gibson-Graham’s argument is that people world-wide are already concretely imagining and enacting non-capitalist worlds daily. Community gardens, employee-run community enterprises, pirate radio stations, free stores, online informational clearinghouses, volunteering, bartering, gift giving, and so on.¹² Whether consciously or not, people are always already participating in non-capitalist living and exchange. If capitalism is everywhere, so is non-capitalism.

¹² See the Community Economies Project, of which Gibson-Graham is part, for more examples: www.communityeconomies.org (last accessed 08 March 2004). ‘The project developed’ the website reads ‘as a way of documenting the multiple ways in which people are making economies of difference and in the process building new forms of community’.

Gibson-Graham's basic point is that when our targets are afforded more strength, reach, and coherence than they actually possess, we run the risk of downplaying the potential for resistance, and the actually existing resistances already in play. Our world exudes imagined and enacted possibility. Hopelessness can be as naïve as hope.

Concluding comment

This essay is inspired by the vision of academic theory as 'an activity conducted alongside those who struggle for power' (Foucault 1977, 208). Poststructural theory has often been criticized for its remove, irrelevance, and even danger to progressive movements. While these criticisms are not without grounding, we have worked to indicate how particular tools from the poststructuralist tool-kit are relevant and helpful to activists. Our hope is that these, and other insights, can be better circulated in the future. Our ultimate hope is for more camaraderie amongst left theorists, but most importantly, between theorists and activists.

Acknowledgements

Many thank yous to the following folk for their generous conversation, comments, and criticism: Trevor Barnes, Tamara Belknap, Richard Buckner, James Clifford, Chris Dixon, Kevin Gould, David Hoy, Jan Hutta, Anu Koshal, R.J. Maccani, Geoff Mann, Bob Meister, Pamela Moss, Justin Paulson, Rebecca Schein, Vanita Seth, Alexis Shotwell, Juanita Sundberg, and Anthony Villarreal. Thanks also to Duncan Fuller and Rob Kitchin for their exuberant patience.

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