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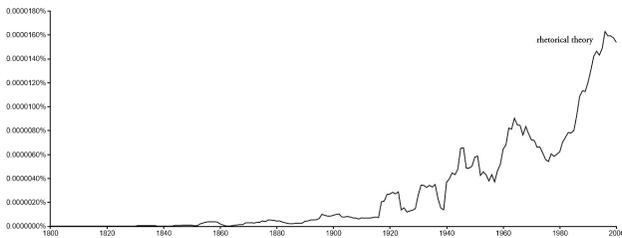
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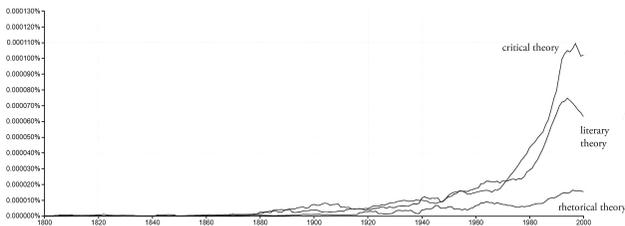


# Why Theory Now? An Introduction

*Daniel M. Gross*



**Figure 1:** “rhetorical theory” since 1800. Data source: Google Trends (<https://www.google.com/trends>)



**Figure 2:** “rhetorical theory”, “literary theory”, and “critical theory”, since 1800. Data source: Google Trends (<https://www.google.com/trends>)

The old news is that Theory with a capital “T” happened from approximately 1965–85 and then dissipated in scandal. Or to the contrary, Theory is an ancient and global activity we find wherever we have evidence of systematic reflection, upon language especially. Alive and well. But neither of

these stories can be adequate given a graph like those above, and given our facts on the ground. For Theory is still, or is again robust, with *Philosophy & Rhetoric* as a premier venue, at the same time that it persists in literary studies and under the quasi-philosophical heading “critical theory.” Meanwhile, if Brian Leiter offers any indication in his Avital Ronell-scandal quip about theory—what they call “bad philosophy in literature departments”<sup>1</sup>—then the very question “Why theory now?” would be challenged by professional philosophy in the Anglo-American tradition, if not ignored altogether. How and to what extent has Theory consumed territory that was once occupied by philosophy per se? Is “Continental philosophy” now practically synonymous with Theory, and if so, how does that work from the two very different philosophical perspectives? From a global perspective, is professional philosophy small and getting smaller, while “theory”—until recently associated with Europeans and others who indeed consider themselves “philosophers”—large and getting larger? In what ways are theories like postcolonial, queer, and critical race related historically to philosophy? That is to say the question of philosophy/theory raised by the Frankfurt School and recently reiterated by Andrew Cole in *The Birth of Theory* speaks to people in rhetoric and to many others across the humanities and social sciences. In this forum I join Martin Jay, Nancy Struever, D’Angelo Bridges, Steven Mailloux, Peter Simonson, and Catherine Chaput as we address this question “Why theory now?” paying special attention to the relevant histories we need to untangle “theory” on the recent scene.

One might imagine how a single question posed to seven scholars in a forum invites debate, with the answers pitched against one another. Since we can only buy one answer, it would seem the others can’t be right—we are faced with an argumentative scheme of the mutually exclusive. And no doubt there are moments both within and among these essays that don’t allow for easy agreement. My essay is set up polemically, so the reader is faced with a choice between a prevailing take on rhetorical theory that invokes classical antiquity, and my own contrary place and date: Ann Arbor, 1900. Bridges recalls for this *P&R* readership how in 1985 the literary critic Barbara Christian made us choose between Theory then consolidating in the elite practices and institutions where traditional forms of power—including most prominently white, male, and colonial—came at the expense of theory that has long been practiced elsewhere (formatively in Douglass’s explicitly rhetorical *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Bridges will argue). And then there are familiar divides within the essays themselves, and into their presumed readership. At the end of this forum, for example, Catherine Chaput forces

a question that has been percolating throughout: Isn't theory as we mean it now originally and essentially critical, running from Marx through Adorno et al., so that any other uptake like the new materialism must explain itself under pressure, or appear suspiciously uncritical and hence a quiet advocate for the powers that be?

Ultimately, however, the argumentative scheme of the forum as a whole is not mutually exclusive as it might appear in a more systematic philosophical imaginary, but is rather genealogical. And we each try to be critical, while avoiding master narratives in their reductive forms—whether Marxist, colonial/decolonial, or epic as in the battle between rhetoric and philosophy—so that the essays surprise. The biggest problem with master narratives as a form of scholarship is that they can become predictable and render the scholarly work practically unnecessary: once the master narrative begins you know pretty much where it will end.

Instead “Why theory now?” is purposefully polyvalent, and the answers given depend upon the scholarly uptake, which is itself an embedded practice. As the question is picked up distinctly by an intellectual historian Martin Jay, we are returned to the nineteenth-century critique of psychologism that would simultaneously produce philosophy in its most universal aspirations, along with its critique that would come by way of “theory.” Then understood through this formative moment, current conversations around post-critique, and Berkeley-style pragmatic philosophy, appear productively different. Nancy Struever, a very different type of intellectual historian, comes at the question characteristically askew by way of “not theory” and Collingwood/Noë. From the get-go according to Struever, theory has been hampered in its abstraction that is then, inevitably, subsumed into various dumb ideologies. Instead, by way of Collingwood's work on art, we see the possibilities of particular modes of inquiry that are practical all the way down. This is theory in another key, or perhaps not theory at all (just modes of inquiry). Then my piece, inspired in part by Struever's work on history and theory over the decades, hammers at an equivocation whereby we apply the term *rhetorical theory* indiscriminately to any systematic reflection upon language use or some other type of communication. Instead my goal is to gather inductively what we currently tend to mean when we use the term *rhetorical theory*, and then locate when exactly it took on its current scope that can include all sorts of things beyond such reflexive activity mentioned above. For the sake of argument, the answer I come up with is Gertrude Buck (Ann Arbor, 1900), and the Strueverite phrase I land on is “reality figured by way of its alternatives,” metaphor most

prominently. D'Angelo Bridges, alternatively, foregrounds the "critical" in (critical) theory as a decolonial fact that isn't just a legacy of Hegel and Marx, but fundamentally a legacy of racialized slavery in the United States and its imperative for thought: hence Douglass and the dating 1855. Thus answering "Why theory now?" for Bridges is an account of a decolonial and antiracist imperative that works only when its history becomes legible. And in this reading it turns out that our theory is now and has always been more American than usually recognized, which would help explain much of the critical edge it has now in the book publications of Duke, Minnesota, Fordham, Routledge, now Ohio State, and so on. Then also on the genealogical front we have the piece by Steven Mailloux, which I understand this way: There is no premodern theory, in our more recent, critical sense of the term. Theory emerges out of secular modernity and its others, initiated most famously by Hegel and then worked out in various detail by mid-century German and French thinkers including Fessard, who is especially noteworthy because he makes this confrontation with modernity explicit postwar (hence the dating 1945 if we need one) and in ways indebted to but not politically aligned with Schmitt's political theology. For us beyond the historical argument, this means we would be wise to consider regularly how some version of our contemporary (critical) theory, including rhetorical, negotiates this challenge of secular modernity. Or in a formula: no secular modernity, no theory.

Finally and differently we have the piece on rhetorical theory by Peter Simonson, which considers itself most prominently a "sociology of knowledge." His work is thus historical in the sociological mode, insofar as it persistently asks the questions who is doing rhetorical theory and where exactly, and who is not doing rhetorical theory and why exactly. That said, sociology of knowledge is not indigenously to Simonson's field and those fields that name this journal—philosophy and rhetoric—so Simonson must experiment methodologically. In the end, a reductive sociological formula (e.g., knowledge = power, where power is understood, against Foucault, as unidirectional) cannot prevail. (That might give us, for example, a predictable narrative where rhetorical theory is the product of white privilege and hence can be read only as a tool of oppression.) Instead, the rhetorician that he is, Simonson offers a more circuitous story, which ultimately foregrounds the trope "irony" and the historical turn that has pitched theory, and rhetorical theory in particular, against the powers that be.

So instead of systematic on the order of logical argumentation, what lies before you is in itself deeply rhetorical. We work from the places we are

why theory now?

as only we can, while narrating for others what that work entails. In this case, we can only hope that you find that work worthwhile.



**NOTE**

1. Leiter Reports: A Philosophy Blog, <https://leiterreports.typepad.com/blog/2018/06/blaming-the-victim-is-apparently-ok-when-the-accused-is-a-feminist-literary-theorist.html>.