

POSTCULTURAL THEORY

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Postcultural Theory

Critical Theory after the Marxist Paradigm

EVE TAVOR BANNET

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MACMILLAN

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In Memory of
Wylie Sypher
Dorothea Krook
Zerubavel Gilead.

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Contents

<i>Preface</i>	ix
1 Critical Theory and the Marxist Paradigm	1
Society as a Whole	5
The Collective and the Individual	9
The Literary Text	14
History: Utopian and Scientific	18
The Critic and the Party	26
2 Limits of the Marxist Paradigm	29
Febvre, Foucault, Greenblatt	35
The Quest for Likeness	44
3 The Other Body of Man in Derrida, Levinas, Lacoue-Labarthe, Nancy and Borch-Jakobsen	50
Man the Producer and the Poet	54
Man's Spectral Double	59
Psychology and Psyche-ology	68
(En)gendering the Law	73
Double-Speak and Undecidability	80
4 The Logic of Both/And	88
Both/And in some Anglo-American Feminisms	90
Both/And in Irigaray	95
Theorizing Both/And	100
5 Factitive Fictions and Possible Worlds	113
Accessible Worlds	117
Compossible Worlds	132
Simulated Worlds	140
World-Making	151

6	The Critic as Translator	158
	On Babel and Ivory Towers	158
	Some Questions of Translation	164
	The Other in Translation	172
	Intertranslation	180
	The Times of Translation	189
	<i>Notes</i>	195
	<i>Bibliography</i>	209
	<i>Index</i>	223

Preface

During the late '70s and 1980s – while much of the academy was absorbing and institutionalizing that unstable mixture of poststructuralism, deconstruction, political critique and materialist historicism which is variously known as Cultural Materialism, the New Historicism and Cultural Studies – some people were working up other theories. These other theories take us beyond the boundaries of current Cultural Theory, even as they tackle some of the most intractable questions it has been found to raise. This book is about some of the less familiar theories of the '80s, and about the ways in which they challenge current thinking and open other, affirmative and constructive, possibilities for thought and research in the '90s.

The relative neglect or marginalization in the '80s of French (De)construction, of a far-reaching Feminist Logic common to Anglo-American and French Feminisms, of Possible Worlds Theory and of the radical redefinition of the Critic as Translator, can be attributed to a number of factors. In some cases, recent work is still incompletely translated or not yet translated at all. In some cases, much of the writing has been done in fields which theorists in the humanities are not yet in the habit of following with any degree of attention. In some cases, institutional and ideological factors have clearly been at work. The most avant-garde theorists can sometimes be as unwilling to rethink the premises and approaches in which they are heavily invested as those who *a priori* reject the theoretical project itself. In other cases, one can only suppose that theorists, literary and cultural critics, and historians have been looking the other way, in the mistaken belief that there was nothing there which could have any bearing on what they were doing.

The other theories of the '80s do, however, deserve our attention. Compendious, suggestive, and diverse from one another, they give us different ways of speaking the singularity, agency or spirituality of subjects and the diversity of texts despite, or sometimes within, social subjectivation, education, and immersion in the common languages of collective con-texts. They also give us access to other, more complex and less deterministic, concepts of materiality; to other, non-linear, concepts of historicity; and to a logic which obviates the traditional formal logic, the binary oppositions and the

subsuming, exclusionary dialectic which have dominated Western thinking since the Enlightenment.

The other theories of the '80s make breaches in the epistemological impasse which arose from the collapse of traditional distinctions between subject and object, and from the fictionalization of languages and theories which could no longer be said to correspond to any 'objective reality'. They give us other concepts of knowledge and truth or, indicating how fictions can speak the real, they show us how we may approach fictional worlds – past and future – in promising new ways. They also charge us in the academy with other missions and other tongues.

I have been interested in opening possibilities, and have tried to avoid premature closure. Issues recur throughout the book, but there are relatively few repetitions. And apart from the paragraphs you have just read, which are to marketing what invocations once were to poeise, no attempt has been made to reduce the diverse possibilities in different chapters to each other or to subsume them under any single overarching meta-theory. Most of the theories I discuss are still in process. This book participates in the process, and it would be as artificial to fix it by pretending to any last word, as it was to label the more unfamiliar theories discussed in this book 'the other theories of the '80s'. As will become apparent, the temporalities involved are much more complex than that.

I have, on the whole, written *with* the theorists I discuss, both as one writes *with* a pencil, and as one walks *with* the help of an other. One or two exceptions apart, where it seemed necessary to clear a space so that something other could begin to be heard, I have avoided critique, preferring to pass over what I found unhelpful and to build on what seemed to me interesting, important or promising.

No-one writes without, to one extent or another, refashioning the matter they are writing about. As will become evident, my part in the theories I evoke varies considerably from chapter to chapter. In some chapters, it consists largely in the manner of exposition or in the construction of what Milton would have called the Argument. In some chapters, it has fallen to my part to foreground and theorize what others have done without taking note of the pattern in their doings. As Nietzsche pointed out, 'deeds require time even after they are done, before they can be seen and heard . . . though they have done it themselves.' And in some chapters, my part consists of weaving the work of others into

theoretical discourses which are not to be found, as such, in any one.

There has also been interesting new work in the '80s which I have not attempted to touch on. This has not been prompted by any desire to exclude any theory or any group, but is due to a perhaps outdated sense of propriety and to a strong sense of my own limitations.

I use the old sexist terms 'man' and 'he' when it seems to me that the theorists I am discussing have either subsumed women under 'Man' or not given them any particular thought. I do this because it seems to me that no useful purpose is served by pretending that there was any real question of women in their work, and that speaking of s/he or humankind oneself in such cases either preempts discussion of whether/how their work also applies to women, or makes it sound as though that question no longer needs to be raised.

I am using the term 'postcultural' in the title of this book to indicate that I am discussing theories which take us beyond the boundaries and limitations of the current paradigm of Cultural Studies, not to suggest that Cultural Studies are, or should be, abandoned. Questions of Cultural Theory recur in different ways throughout this book, and for my part, I think that Cultural Theory can and should be allied to the 'other theories' I discuss. But these other Postcultural theories also prevent Cultural Theory from closing into the premature totalization to which it continues to be prone despite the introduction of plurality and difference. They substantially change the profile, the premises and the roles of Cultural theory, and prevent the culture of a particular time and place from continuing to figure as the all-encompassing, all-determining horizon of our thinking and being. In some respects, the relation of Postcultural theories to Cultural theory therefore resembles that of Poststructuralism to Structuralism.

I have done my own translations when working closely with texts, including in the relatively few cases where translations have already been made, partly because translations inevitably transmit the translator's understanding of the source text and differ accordingly, and partly because the play of meaning in many of the source texts I am using is not readily translatable into any single English version.

I would like to thank Greg Jay, Peter Jaszi, David Miller, Phil Rollinson, Sue Rosser, Andrew Wernick, and Martha Woodmansee for giving me opportunities to present some of the material in this

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A version of Chapter 3 appeared in the 1992 issue of *Genders*; sections of Chapters 3 and 4 have been used in an essay in the 1993 issue of *Diacritics*.

As always, I am inexpressibly grateful to my husband, Jacob, for being a special place and making place, and to my vital young sons, Jonathan and Alan, for sharing me with 'that book again'.