

CONCLUSION: THEORY PRESENTS

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When is the time of theory? Always already, out of joint, to come, after dinner, is it happening?¹ Theory has a past, never less so than when it is dead: periods of emergence, dominance, and residue; conditions of possibility and impossibility; institutional heydays and lost generations. Theory has a future, all the more so when it indicts future thinking, decries synthesis, and exalts dissolutionism: speculative flexing points beyond the already “best that has been thought and said.” Theory has a present, the coordinates which it mediates, the constraints that enable it, the place from which it looks.

Theory time would seem multiple; theory makes time for abstraction and recoil, velocity and lassitude; theory syndicates. Fittingly then, this special issue “Theories of the Nineteenth Century” explicitly wagers that the nineteenth century is a privileged past for theory, while it simultaneously tacitly gambles that now is a pivotal present. But the torque generated between these two orbits importantly bends the future: the mutually constituting relation between theory and the nineteenth century has reached, in the twenty-first century, a certain end. Those world-historical determinants of nineteenth century life that originally and continually ignited theory’s spectrality and mooring, critical dissection and utopian projection, come soon to their limit: capitalism, liberalism, empire, white supremacy, patriarchy, democracy cannot continue their formidable reigns in the same indefinite arc now that climate crisis confronts us with global war and human extinction. How are these ends to be theorized, especially if they stop the time of theory? Who are the theorists empowered to write and be recognized as such, constituting the community or institution of theory, when planetary perils are also pathetically paralleled by the razing of the university? These foreshortened horizons disturb theory’s integral spectrality, complicating its multiform temporality. Hence its presents intensify.

With theory’s future in question for different reasons than all its old deaths foretold, a compression of the past and the present eventuates. Such compression motivates the V21 Collective’s call for “strategic presentism”²

as an under-explored alternative to orthodox historicisms, tracking newly perceptible extensions of conceptual frameworks and social infrastructures that weld the twenty-first century to the nineteenth. Epidemic rickets and scurvy. Expulsionary enclosures. Bald racism. Explosive technology. Decadent spectacle. Financialized inequality. Virulent patriarchy. Environmental catastrophe. Who wore it better, the Victorians, or us? Alongside these many social links linger also the intellectual affinities of then and now, both ideology and critique. The past churning with those numerous terrors offered in its present passionate, systematic, outrageous mediations, and synthetic, projective elaborations of alternatives. Utopia. Socialism. Realism. New Amazonia. Communism. Theory itself.

When he broke with philosophy to inaugurate theory, the sideways Victorian Karl Marx started by interrogating philosophy's inability to see that to which it was present. Surveying the state of philosophical idealism amid the emergent German nation, Marx audits the omissions: "It has not occurred to any one of these philosophers to inquire into the connection of German philosophy with German reality."³ Theory materializes from philosophy presented to itself, its relational connections avowed, its social position charted. Reflections on these environments and situations allow theory to encompass the social fact that "the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e., the class which is the ruling *material* force of society is at the same time its ruling *intellectual* force."⁴ Radicalizing the Kantian procedure of examining the conditions for thought by taking present social situatedness as the ultimate condition, theory looks around at the present of thought, shows the investments and limits of ruling ideas, and at the same time it shows that better ideas (and their attendant better rules) are attainable.

Affirming these better ideas at one of his great normative moments of fulfilling the dialectical impulse of critique, Marx describes full luxury contemporaneity: "In communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic."⁵ The diurnal simultaneity here sublates specialization, division, qualification, particularization, actualizing instead "the general production" and extensive space of "society" essential to creative, constructive existence. Such refusal of division notably rejects the lineations of administered, valorized temporality, favoring the spatial axis of relational sociability. Freedom flourishes in the spatial room of reordered time.

Marx's practice of theory in his time was conspicuously present and consequently spatial: probing the contextual, environmental situation of ideas. The etymology of "theory" underscores its spatial remit: viewing, contemplation, spectation, a scrutinous intensity channeling inward in reflexivity (seeing itself seeing) and ramifying outward in generality (seeing syntheses in specificities, grasping the forest through the trees). In theory's present, in its presence, this space hosts even those who are temporally disunited from it. The essays gathered in this special issue follow this spatial queue, dyschronizing the times of theory, mapping a spatial praxis: a scrutinous intensity that channels inward in reflexivity (seeing itself seeing) and ramifies outward in generality (seeing syntheses in specificities, grasping the forest through the trees). Moving in both of these directions fluidly, these pieces exercise critical thinking with nineteenth-century texts and contexts less in the manner of the mores of a field and discipline known for particularization and more in the provisional tradition of speculative generalization whose proponents from Friedrich Engels to Sigmund Freud, Simone de Beauvoir to Gilles Deleuze, Edward Said to Caroline Levine, have experienced the nineteenth century as continual impetus and inspiration, origin point and perpetual spring.

If Victorian studies have too often seemed to shake out on the history side of schematic divides between history and theory or history and form (to take only the antipodes suggested by the pedestrian contrasts between Victorianism and Romanticism or Modernism respectively), the ambiguous genitive in "Theories of the Nineteenth Century" directs us outside the trappings of professional criticism and inside the object's own generation of theories, the theories that germinate in the nineteenth century and the theories that percolate via taking the nineteenth century as question, interlocutor, premise. The pluralization "theories" accentuates these multiple temporalities and diffuse locales of the singular endeavor of "theory," even as it more simply indexes the abundance propagating from the exchange between the history of ideas and the present of abstraction. It is a mark of the richness of theories of the nineteenth century and the inventiveness of the essays here that some of the most ready topics—queer theory, the Anthropocene, secularity, liberalism, Marxism—so little feature in these pages, which rather brim with readier others: decolonization, race, feminism, psychoanalysis, sexual difference, affect, aesthetics, hermeneutics, formalism, and presentism.

Across these pieces, a common unsettling of the time of theory effectively centers the present. When does theory happen? In these arguments, the spatial logics that often figure generalization, abstraction, and speculation entail as well temporal logics of distantiation, retrospection,

anachronism. Psomiades makes theory happen in the time of the journey of reading her essay, that most nineteenth of forms, enfolding an accretive, looping, critical assay at historically disparate ideas. This time of approach and swerve, of carrying forward and doubling back, opens new futures of the already past, vaulting the poles of anachronism and obsolescence. Courtemanche genealogizes different efflorescences of presentism and historicism, reminding us that theory will always have had the history of its present. Brilmyer and Trentin resound literary formalism and art historical criticism, construct and affect, England and Germany, to show what unorthodox ideas take shape in transgressing periodized, nationalized, and disciplined field strictures. Mukherjee palpates the combinatory logic of dreams as manifesting the colonized time that continues to discoordinate the territories of late capitalism. Tucker problematizes so many historical reconstructions of conceptual constructedness, showing how the very idea of a social construction of meaning must itself be historicized, and taking discourses of race as the ultimate limit case for such an endeavor. To recognize the historical situatedness of nineteenth century ideas that abide in the present, she underscores, requires confronting the departures from eighteenth-century philosophy that gave rise to theory as such—departures including the semanticization of former functionalisms. Likewise, Taylor's exposure of blindspots in the project of postcolonial theory powerfully illustrates theory's restlessness: it cannot arrest its own velocity of scrutiny, or it will reify and regularize. When we think we know, rotely, how imperial time works, we will have already sanctified in our knowing that very topos of mastery which fuels empire. Agathocleous makes the present of degenerate empires and nihilist populisms the occasion for theory, a temporal ether whose historicity will have become fathomed. The fog of "disaffection" encompasses not only the untethering of affect from self-evidently appropriate objects but also the imperceptible continuity of its present instantiations with past regimes; while geographical, historical, and political contexts change, the coordination of affect and empire remains.

Far from another theory eulogy, these pieces marshal past theorizing for present theorizing. The strength of the knots these essays tie—the fiber and inspiration they take from the problematics of imperial ideology and institutional crisis, feminist inheritances and psychic transmissions, aesthetic contemplation and intellectual regeneration—point to the vivifying function of theory for the present and of the present for theory. The time of theory is now.

Indeed, each of the essays takes the nineteenth century as the spur to producing concepts in the twenty-first, offering interventions in the

present. Withdrawal and inattention as imperial techniques shed light on contemporary problematics of surplus population, ruined infrastructure, and political expulsion, from Bagdad to Flint, Greece to Syria. Historicization of skin semanticization reframes racial capitalism, the better to conceptualize combatting brutalities of otherization and nativism in the global fascist insurgency. Excavation of imperially regulated affect completely renovates the woefully insufficient understandings of refusal politics, from nonvoting to nihilism, daring the disaffected to realize their critical power. Association of fugue logics and revelric figures with colonial temporality points to the imperial unconscious and to the interpretative acts that might construct new orders. Evocation of the affective activation of aesthetic form marvelously redesigns the purchase of past art in the present: inessential form awaits current animation; the study of past creations ignites present generations; truly comparative intellectual work accommodates resonant subjects. Illustration of the tension between historicization and theorization powerfully demonstrates the distinctions of speculative invention and their necessity when the seeming closure of the past has preordained the certain closure of the future. Play with genealogical schema crafts the history of a field's methodological conceits as the broader history of political-economic and cultural transformation, inviting critics in our current crisis to more deliberately recognize their contemporary coordinates.

If the present is the time of theory, even theory of the nineteenth century, this suggests a certain spatialization of *chronos*, an orienting in temporal ambits, of the sort connoted by presentism. According to regular scholastic ethics, presentism marks failed theory, insufficient scrutiny of one's position, deviating too far from fine-drawn specificities, pandering to "relatable," and even spuriously intellectualizing the interdisciplinarity and thematicity of "the new neoliberal education." After all, humanists have frequently promoted their knowledge protocols as respecting the boundaries of the past, cherishing singularities, and lounging with paradox, so as luminously to thwart "the will to capture . . . of instrumental rationality."⁶ Animated by particularization, critics champion our anti-foundationalism as dereifying, granulating, dismantling, and "unbuilding," along the way readily endorsing various undialectical historicist sievings of regimes and regions, periods and nations, separating subject from object, one culture from another, the Victorians from us.

Messing up these pieties, presentism hails different knowledge protocols. Presentism counters separability with amplitude, rejoins particularity with generality, prizes connection beyond discretion, pursuing what Eve Sedgwick calls "touching" through such diverse historiographic

attitudes as queered circularity, *longues durées*, degenerate recursion, relinquished teleology, and structuralist synchronicity.⁷ In a fantastic circuit, presentism also often functioned as the mode of historicity proper to the Victorians. Think of Matthew Arnold, Thomas Carlyle, William Morris, and John Ruskin, activating ancient Greece, medieval England, gothic Europe for the explicit purpose of condemning conditions of labor and quality of life in their presents. Or Charles Dickens, George Eliot, George Gissing, William Thackeray, and Anthony Trollope, setting fictions in the contemporary present, employing the present tense in describing urban terrains or social institutions, affective experiences and existential questions, manufacturing connections between their on-page worlds and their off-page worlds, using literary form to conceptualize what is common, to theorize sociality. As the frequently geographic, architectural, urban, and projective vectors of these critical presences suggest, presentism replots the temporal axes of historicism, linearity, and origination along the spatial axes of environment, structure, and the commons. Space is integral to the logics and grammars of presentism; spatial thinking charts the topographic qualities of utopia, the relational virtues of structuralist analysis, the constructive character of imaginative art and cognitive maps.

Presentism stands a theory from the nineteenth century repeatable by theories of the nineteenth century. To close, then: some provocations for presentist theory, taking as their prompt the menacingly present dual crises of the ruin of the university and the raging ecocide. We scarce few with the remaining luxury to theorize with the nineteenth century must trade our careful qualifications and habitual particularizations for a different kind of care: the audacity of theory, the touching juxtapositions and tentative connections of putting things together, building. Presentism's extensions and syntheses must shape the arguments we make to ourselves, to our students, to administrators, and broader publics. We must fabricate new curricula of resonance and scope and comparison, united by concept and form, and leave behind ossified nationalist, periodized divisions. We must question the putative objectivity of honoring alterity or accumulating data, and pursue the critical objectivity of surveying the place from which we know, avowing the social character of ideas. Just as Marx crafted critique as knowing the knower's situation, Rancière insists that "knowledge is not a collection of fragments, but a position,"⁸ and Said defines secular criticism as "a worldly, self-situating, sensitive response"⁹ to "place." To theorize with Victorians we have to theorize presently; to understand our present we grasp not only a when but a where, a position. We theorize from here. We must cast off our particularist dissolutionism

and taboos on future thinking, our disdain for instrumentalism and our resistance to theory. Humanist skills conduce not only to burning it down but to building things up: imagined worlds, compelling value judgments, resonant norms, big ideas.

Framing these suggestions as imperatives isn't only for concluding flair nor only for knowing that consuming publics, higher ed technocrats, and state legislators little esteem the methods of sublimations, particularizations, and qualifications entailed in what Bruce Robbins calls "pastism."¹⁰ It is rather because the ruling ideas of our time tragically double themselves: the demolition of the university merely miniaturizes the destruction of capitalogenic climate change. Scientists, policy experts, public intellectuals, and adolescent organizers now vociferously agree that denialist inaction stems not from unconvincing evidence or unavailable technology but from entrenched power interests and unfomented political will; the only effective spur to action is precisely the intellectual endeavors our pastist methodologies have most repudiated and inhibited: making connections, casting projections, creating syntheses, modeling utopia now. We humanists without unions, universities, institutions, or states; we humans without reprieve from unevenly distributed unnatural death; we, now, desperately need universals, spatializations, concepts. Theory presents generalizations and juxtapositions, practicing a spatial imaginary and structural inclination to compose new deals. Although theory is not praxis, absent this presentism, near future catastrophes will surely be worse. As Thea Rionfrancos argues, even in the face of inevitability, "resignation cloaked in realism is the best way to ensure the least transformative outcome."¹¹ Wild imaginings, passionate abstractions, risky syntheses—these are the necessary gifts of theory now.

Although theory has repeatedly seated the force of its interposition as the opening up of the future—think Benjamin's messianism, Derrida's *l'avenir*, Womack's Afrofuturism, even Edelman's queer negativity—our closed present needs a different frame. The reflections on theory's temporal dissortments in these pages stage instead its acute situation in the present: the future no longer beckons. Critical speculative liberation cannot site itself in the indefinite unfolding to come. Irrefutable and inclement, the foreclosed horizon looms: empire, liberalism, crisis, those old social formations, those familiar structures of feeling, will not perdure. What will present itself instead?

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NOTES

1. See, for example, “always already” in Louis Althusser, “On Ideology,” in *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* (New York: Verso, 2014), 171–207; “out of joint” and “to come” in Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx* (New York: Routledge, 1994) and *Politics of Friendship* (New York: Verso, 2006); “Is it happening” from Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992); and, “after dinner” in Karl Marx, (1845) *The German Ideology, including Theses on Feuerbach* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1998), 53.
2. See “Manifesto of the V21 Collective,” <http://v21collective.org/manifesto-of-the-v21-collective-ten-theses/>; V21 Forum on Strategic Presentism in *Victorian Studies* 59, vol. 1 (Autumn 2016): 87–126; and V21 special issue of *b2o* vol. 1, no. 1 (October 2016), <http://www.boundary2.org/b2o-v21-special-issue/>.
3. Marx, *The German Ideology*, 36.
4. Marx, 67.
5. Marx, 53.
6. Nathan K. Hensley, “Unquiet Slumbers,” *Victorian Studies* 59, no. 1 (2016): 113–16.
7. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Introduction,” in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 1–25.
8. Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 9.
9. Edward Said, “Introduction: Secular Criticism,” in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 1–30.
10. Bruce Robbins, “Presentism, Pastism, Professionalism,” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 27, no. 2 (1999): 457–463.
11. Thea Riofrancos, “Plan, Mood, Battlefield—Reflections on the Green New Deal,” *Viewpoint Magazine*, May 16, 2019, <https://www.viewpointmag.com/2019/05/16/plan-mood-battlefield-reflections-on-the-green-new-deal/>.