

The task we are charged with, “to set an agenda for critical inquiry . . . in the [twenty-first] century,” is one I want to resist. It is not only that I would not want to speculate on the future of criticism and theory the way market analysts project the futures of commodities (which is hardly reliable, anyway). It is not simply that I am nearsightedly unable to envision the future beyond, perhaps, the next few years. The mainspring of my resistance is the belief that the time for theory is always now. What I mean is, the time of theory, as articulated thought, is always the present, though its roots be found in the past, reaching across the contingent, material, social, sexual, racial, intellectual history of the theorizing subject, and regardless of its uses and abuses in the indetermined future. In this sense, theory is timeless, like poetry, or like the unconscious. Indeed, Freud’s metapsychological speculation illustrates this timelessness of theory, as does the work of others we may call, with Foucault, “initiators of discursive practices”—himself included. To say it another way, thinking, however abstract, originates in an embodied subjectivity, at once overdetermined and permeable to contingent events. To the extent that it is invested in figuring out the now—that is to say, the enigma of the world—the thinking of theory is political.

The state of the world, of course, is constantly changing, and so is theory. For close to ten years now, I’ve been feeling myself turn away from the militantly critical theories I have contributed to articulate—feminist theory, gender theory, queer theory. At first it was a vague feeling of dissatisfaction, as with something gone adrift in its passage through discursive space, as a bunch of knotted twigs and leaves carried downstream by a weak current may get caught briefly in a tree stump or a rock only half submerged, to then resume its drifting toward another rock or stump and then another, until the twigs and leaves, loosened, float lightly on the surface. What seemed pivotal moments in the flow of critical discourse after the 1960s—the debates on nature versus culture, theory versus praxis, essentialism versus social constructionism, and related “binaries”—were only temporary stops, quickly overtaken in turn by a new concern and another debate. Eventually I could no longer tell what held the twigs and leaves together in the first place.

In these times, I am a survivor of the end of history—the history of the twentieth century in the West with its enabling fictions, the October revolution and all the ones that followed; its movements of resistance, independence, liberation; its myths of freedom, community building, and multiculturalism; its dream of a free cyberspace turning into the nightmare of globalization. The movement theories since the late 1960s, based in social practices engaged in contestations of power, marking the coming-to-voice of subjugated knowledges (women’s studies, Afro-American studies, ethnic studies, postcolonial studies, feminist theory, queer theory, critical race theory), and their later configuration in what Stuart Hall, after Laclau, calls “a theory of articulation,” have been sustained by a hope that today appears hopelessly enmeshed in neoliberalism. Modern Western forms—theorized practices—of armed struggle against the liberal-democratic state, such as those of the “lead years” in Italy in the 1970s and onward, seem to me incommensurable with the forms of so-called terrorism that struck the Twin Towers in New York and other monuments of Western power. Yet they coexist. The enigma of the world now, for me, consists in something that I can only think of as the paradox of a negativity that is also, at the same time, a positivity: a stubborn, silent resistance to discursification, articulation, rationalization, or negotiation that coexists with the technologies of instant communication through global media; a destructive violence that erupts spontaneously like volcanic lava throughout the geopolitical space, in individuals as often as in collectivities, in the most well-to-do, civil, managed, social environments as in the most impoverished, oppressive, controlled

ones, and coexists with millions of heterogenous aggregates of people walking for peace on a sunny Sunday. The enigma of the now is such because our theories, discourses, and knowledges are incompatible with its forms and means of expression.

It is not by chance, I suggest, that the hypothesis of a death drive (*Todestrieb*) was suggested to Freud around 1919 by the massive geopolitical trauma that hit Europe as the aftermath of the Great War. He postulated it to account for the symptoms of repetition compulsion he observed in patients suffering from war neuroses and described it as something beyond representation, something that pertains to the primary process alone and has no psychic representatives or, we might say, no translation. Coexisting with it in each organism, in continuous conflict, are the life drives that seek to preserve living substance and shape it into ever larger physical and social units, with all the costs and benefits attendant upon civilization. It has been argued that the late Freud's hypothesis of a primal (self-)destructive drive reconfigures the dynamic landscape of the psyche and ascribes to the death drive the "radical tendency to unbind"(Laplanche), that is, the disgregating, uncivilizing force that Freud had first associated with the sexual drive.

The theory of drives has been possibly the most contested area in the whole of psychoanalytic theory, and the main point of contestation is the location of the drive: Is it endogenous, inherent in the biological organism, or a product of language and culture? Is it located in the physical body or produced as discursive effect in psychic formation? It could be argued that to pose such either-or's is to miss the point, for the concept psyche is precisely what undoes the categorical distinction between body and mind. But, for my part, I intend to stay with the constitutive ambivalence in Freud's thinking and follow for a while the execrated "biologizing" drift of his metapsychology. Like the early decades of the twentieth century, our times are marked by massive geopolitical trauma as well as shifts in technological, epistemic, and sexual practices. The United Nations may well be going the way of the League of Nations. The visual inscription of the death drive in, say, Cronenberg's films has an uncanny double in the highly wrought figures of Djuna Barnes's literary writing. The general issue of gas masks to military and civilian personnel readying for Gulf War II, digitally mediated on our computer and television screens, brings back memory traces of surrealist art photography and smudgy newspaper photos of World War I, the best-known instance of intentional biological warfare, if we leave science fiction aside. This is not to say that history repeats itself, but rather that states of emergency have the capacity to collapse history and suspend the logic of linear temporality. "Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well" (Benjamin).

My provocation to *Critical Inquiry* is to suggest that now may be a time for the human sciences to reopen the questions of subjectivity, materiality, discursivity, knowledge, to reflect on the *post* of posthumanity; a time to break the piggy bank of saved conceptual schemata and reinstall uncertainty in all theoretical applications, starting with the primacy of the cultural and its many "turns": linguistic, discursive, performative, therapeutic, ethical, you name it. Does this make me a survivor or a traitor of the age of (post)structuralism, in which my thinking of theory has been formed and nourished? Perhaps there can be no survival without the gnawing, dull pain of betrayal. Perhaps only betrayal leads to the apprehension of otherness and another cognition of the now. But do not ask me how or what, not yet.

—Teresa de Lauretis
University of California, Santa Cruz