

I should say at the outset that my experience with *Critical Inquiry* stems from the years I served as a coeditor until I left the University of Chicago, not as a teacher and reader of literary texts, as such, but as a fellow traveler (or camp follower, depending upon your politics) of literary culture who taught the history of an Asian society and was thus obligatorily armed with the conceits of area studies and the perspective of the softer social sciences like anthropology. Anybody trained in regions outside of Euro-America, then and even today, was socialized into approaches that saw the study of Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America as an extension of fieldwork, where we would spend time extracting raw data that would be processed and refined by Euro-American theory. While my presence on the editorial board at *Critical Inquiry* represented, perhaps, both a move outside of Euro-American literary culture and a new engagement with the wider world that cultural studies was beginning to encounter and incorporate into teaching research, my own involvement more often than not drove me further into the new world of literature and theory. Because the bulk of the submissions that all of us were required to read and talk about at our monthly meetings still came from literary studies, I felt I was being supplied a lasting and valuable education by just trying to keep up. And I was always out of breath. This experience, I should say, was consistent with the broader intellectual agendas associated with the University of Chicago and its obsessive desire to promote genuine interdisciplinarity among its faculty and student body, constituting a valued inflection of that great tradition that, as I now teach at another university, I've recognized exists nowhere else. Where it has been hesitantly and timidly implemented, the practice has been put under constant siege by departments and disciplines that operating as if they are inhabiting a zero-sum world, are still fearful of losing their tenuous hold on a patch of turf. At the university at which I currently teach this panic was reinforced by the *Social Text* scandal, which is now regularly invoked like a totemic *churinga* wielded by administrators and their loyal retainers in the faculty to remind the rest of us of the dangers of transgressing boundaries and the necessity of upholding standards apparently set by the community of scientists we must all follow in everything from tenure cases to envisaging innovative interdisciplinary programs. When you begin to think about it *Critical Inquiry* may well be one of the few forums left that still allow us to imagine alternatives to the graying and increasingly managerialized and instrumentalized world of universities and colleges, progressively being emptied of any respect for the intellectual life and its social necessity.

But before I dissolve into a spasm of nostalgia or excessive sentimentalizing of the University of Chicago, it is important to say that *Critical Inquiry* faces a perilous future precisely because it still constitutes one of the few reliable guideposts enabling us to navigate through this ruined and unfamiliar landscape marking the immense transformation of educational institutions into administered knowledge factories that have already eviscerated the humanities, making them into service centers. We in the humanities are caught in the vice of two noncommunicating cultures in the university, Masao Miyoshi has recently reminded us, between an academic capitalism that insists on linking research, usually R and D, to the recruitment of funds from outside sources, eviscerating those disciplines not in a position to attract financing for the kind of research they do, and a growing critique by humanist scholars that is totally oblivious of the “entrepreneurial university.” Even more troubling is the eagerness and enthusiasm of university administrators (whose existence is the best argument yet against cloning) who demand that departments find their own funds—every boat on its own bottom, as it is called. This policy directive accompanies the appearance of a swelling chorus in the humanities shrilly chanting its rediscovery of a love of literature, demanding its immediate restoration, and inspiring all those

recent programs devoted to "world literature" that seek only to reaffirm the hegemony of the West by annexing the rest to its modular template. But all of this merely reinforces a worrisome impulse already driving large numbers of faculty and the media to identify the sign of theory with political radicalism itself.

We have no doubt reached the juncture where theory and its offspring cultural studies are under siege and, in some advanced places, in full rout. What is important about the place we currently occupy is that it inflects a larger historical conjuncture we are moving through marked by economic failure, political repression (nobody wants to use the *f* word, but fascism in its second coming more accurately describes our moment), and the imminent prospect of a senseless imperial war that, by the time this statement is discussed, may have already started. One of the many uses (and thus abuses) of 9/11 has been that it has permitted a wholesale rejection of theory, which was already underway before the big push, and widespread denunciation of cultural studies and multiculturalism as symptoms of loosening standards and the corrosive curse of unchecked relativism. But these charges are simply steroid-induced manifestations of earlier claims that sought to persuade the public that universities had fallen into the dirty hands of 1960s radicals. (Has anybody ever known of an administrator who was actually a Marxist or whose politics was anything more than ill-disguised self-interest?) The shining symbol of this cultural and intellectual implosion was the fate of Hardt and Negri's book *Empire* (brilliantly reviewed by Timothy Brennan in a recent issue of *Critical Inquiry* [Timothy Brennan, "The Empire's New Clothes," *Critical Inquiry* 29 (Winter 2003): 337–67]), which seemed to conjoin theory and cultural studies into a barely digestible civet. *Empire* was on everyone's intellectual menu—more bought than read (for a moment you couldn't buy the book in New York City, but that may have been because there are no credible book stores here)—but whose significance and salience collapsed as fast as the twin towers. (The speed of this failure has been equaled only by how swiftly new fashions disappear, their incapacity to last the duration of time it takes to write a dissertation.) What this book signified and probably prefigured, with the added shove from 9/11, was the collapse of theory, as such, as an academic vocation and its promise to figure and thus interpret the world anew. Before Hardt and Negri, Rey Chow had proposed that theory had already been disclaimed by a virulent rear guard who had once been its most prominent proponents. They feared its kinship with Marxism and the encounter with the world outside Euro-America and the spectacle of real difference, and the consequences of this retreat from theory invaded the ranks of cultural studies and ultimately all those hyphenated programs committed to multiculturalism and identitarianism, which increasingly were seen as secondary infections demanding instant containment. Even before 9/11, the effects of this immunizing campaign were already manifest, exceeding its direct endorsements, and even surpassed the functionalist conviction that teaching theory was simply an enhancement of professionalization.

What I'm suggesting is that the apparent collapse of theory and the distrust of cultural studies was already prefigured by endorsements that sought to place it within the system and make it a part of normal professionalization that had, and would have, no relationship to the world outside of the academy. In this regard, theory was transmuted into a functional prerequisite of professionalization. The functionalism that had once dominated the social sciences had metastasized and spread into the humanities, notably in the field of literary studies. Hence the folding of *Empire* had as much to do with the historical conjuncture as the "eventfulness" of 9/11. The contemporary conjuncture had already produced a recognition demanding the formation of a new discourse on modernity, one that might limn Foucault's general sense of an ontology of the present and thus enable us to envisage a genuine history of the present (Marx's

current situation). Such a history of the present would necessitate historicizing the unity of modernity as a “complex set of temporalizations,” the coequality of unequal moments, coexisting immanently yet “differentiating” global geopolitical space. With *Empire*, and a good deal of theoretical practice today, theories are simply jumbled like numbered balls bouncing in a circulating chamber before they are spit out in random but winning combinations in the great game of Lotto, while history of the present and past, here and there, is reduced to mere rumor. Brennan has shown how *Empire* has become an exemplar for the widespread practice where theories are made to express winning combinations even as they manage to cancel each other out, while history is emptied of its temporal force for the easy identification of spatial fixes. My point is that the apparent retreat of theory occurred long ago when its supposed practice was grafted on to the professional expansion of literary studies and the creation of a new imperium within the boundaries of the academy, the systems the early Bourdieu and his American followers apotheosized, proliferating new subject matters, moving into area studies, seizing new terrains, poaching on other disciplines, trope theft—in a word, *Empire*. By the same measure that the expansion worked to domesticate and housebreak theory, it also snapped its tenuous but necessary relationship to political and social practices that exceeded the gated communities of academia and, by “academicizing” culture, severed symbolic meaning from the political and social worlds to which it must always stand in a tense and asymmetrical relationship. What resulted was the production of significations independent of the historical mediations of other forms of social activity and the social subjects who live them. Theory, thus, as it has played out in cultural studies and served to further professional proficiency in interpreting the world within the borders of the academy, has been removed from any possibility of changing it.

Some critics have correctly argued that cultural studies departed from poststructural theory the moment when the concerns for otherness could no longer be contained safely within the European tradition. Much of this concern for otherness as a subject for teaching and research was already enacted by the practice of area studies. While both cultural and area studies occupied the same ground, the latter veered off in the direction of the social sciences and committed its energies to providing information on strategic sites for the national security state, while the former privileged textuality and envisaged a vocation devoted to cultural and ethnic differences. And while both sought to connect with a putative outside—cold war America and the post-Vietnam and post-civil rights movement pursuit of identity—they remained very much locked within the academic community, not necessarily through a disavowal of theory, as such, but rather through its effective separation of politics and culture. In the end, both headed for the valorization of difference in the post-cold war era, reinforcing the affirmation of what Jacques Ranciere has called a “consensus democracy,” the wish to place and count each identity, where even the victims of modernity (refugees, diasporic groups, migrants, and exiles) are finally assimilated to their proper place and all are included and accounted for, to secure not a democratic politics but simply a postdemocracy. Chow has rightly observed how area studies has come to safely endow their own retrograde positions with the glorious multicultural aura of defending non-Western traditions, a fiction not worth “delving into,” Frantz Fanon once advised. With cultural studies, we must recognize that a politics of identity is not the same as political identity, whose formation depends less on difference than on some recognition of equivalencies. The pursuit of cultural difference has become a candidate for a universal, regulative idea like global law or human rights, the study of which today has become the model for an area studies lite that is managing to replace the older practice. But its political form never exceeds the so-

called consensus system, where community is seen as an organized body affirming difference(s) on the basis of an acknowledged contingency identical to itself, with nothing left over.

What *Critical Inquiry* might do in this current conjuncture, now promising to stretch out into an indefinite future, is to provide a forum for the recovery of theory's true vocation as a condition for beginning the difficult labor of envisaging a discourse on modernity that speaks to the world outside the academy, one centered principally in understanding the history of our present as the unity of uneven temporalizations differentiating global geopolitical space rather than merely affirming or cheering on a globalizing project that sees the globe only as the true space of the commodity relation. Paradoxically, both cultural and area studies had once been in a position to supply the kind of proper historicization of the present I am calling for. By this I mean returning cultural studies and area studies, whose representation in the pages of *Critical Inquiry* have remained recessive, to the place where they are once again in a position to give shape to a proper ontology of the present (the phrasing is from Peter Osborne), acting in concert to rejoin culture to a politics that will succeed in exceeding the system and its endless fetishization of cultural capital serving the cause of professionalization. Such an ontology must be sensitive to or accountable for the durational present, rather than a merely punctual one, and the role played by contemporary political struggles. But any effort to begin this enormous task of imagining how we might fuse an understanding of the historical present to acting on it requires at the same time that we confront and engage the corporatization of the university and the desire of its officers to reduce the humanities to an instrument of socialization—a new civics—and marginalize our historic intellectual mission.

—Harry Harootunian  
New York University