theories and methodologies

The Function of Theory at the Present Time

ANDREW COLE

Das Bekannte überhaupt ist darum, weil es bekannt ist, nicht erkannt.
—Martin Luther King, Jr.[1]

LET ME START BY DEFINING "THEORY," BECAUSE THE DEFINITION ITSELF ILLUSTRATES WHY WE CAN NAME HEGEL AS ITS INVENTOR, RATHER than Marx or Nietzsche, both of whom pick up where Hegel left off. As I suggest in *The Birth of Theory*, Hegel founds theory in his break from Kant, which I regard as the signal moment when philosophy transforms into theory as we now know it. What makes Hegel different from Kant, in other words, is what makes his habits of thought—his dialectic, above all—lasting and familiar and such a part of what goes into critical theorizing today, even within schools of thought that celebrate their anti-Hegelianism or are indifferent to Hegel. In Hegel we find the following three features that I am content to call "theory."

First, theory is distinct from philosophy, because it challenges the grounds on which you can presume to describe the world, as the first section of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* makes clear in its portrayal of a subject (or "consciousness") who is in tatters after failing to account coherently for objects in the world. Hegel is bold here. He starts the *Phenomenology of Spirit* by undoing philosophy as practiced in his day. He gives you no transcendental ego, no handy schematic for possible experience, no subject who cognizes the world effortlessly but has awkward moral problems, no geometrical proofs, and no dislike of contradiction. And with no transcendental ego on the scene, Hegel leaves room for something far more compelling: the Other, in all of its epistemological and ethical significance. (The Other is also Hegel's invention.)

It's for these reasons that I think theory is best defined, in the first instance, as philosophy against itself. Theory, like philosophy, requires rigor of thought, but it tries not to confuse consistency for systematicity. It's not for everyone, as Hegel's long reception history has made clear. But what's challenging about Hegel is what's difficult about getting a grip on thinking itself (even today, philosophers of

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mind find it nearly impossible to define "consciousness"). In this respect you could say that the shift from Kant to Hegel is the shift from experience to thought—thinking no longer being spontaneous experience but active reflection, a perspective on experience. In Kant, in other words, we do the work of reading a difficult philosophy about what constitutes experience. But in Hegel we read experience itself and face the difficulties of thinking with the kind of confidence you might expect from philosophy. Granted, Kant makes room for an alternative: not cognition but "thinking," which involves not constitutive concepts—those sorting mechanisms hidden deep within our noumenal selves that render the manifold legible to our understanding—but rather regulative concepts, which we consciously contrive to help us divine ideas about what we can't experience directly, the supersensibilia (see *Critique of Judgement*). Hegel, however, collapses this distinction between constitutive and regulative concepts and dispenses with the supersensibilia or noumena that necessitates such conceptual distinctions in the first place. And without constitutive concepts, there's no Kant: the whole core of his "Copernican" first *Critique* drops out. The result is radical. It not only nullifies critical philosophy but also leads to another important aspect of theory as it emerges in Hegel's work.

The second feature of theory holds that we are linguistic beings and that experience is so structured like a language that it qualifies as a language. Kant would never say this. At most, he speaks of the empty but temporal unfolding of the "inner sense" (*Critique of Pure Reason* 255 [b291]) or the succession of perception following on the order of events. But Hegel says that "it is in language that we are conceptually productive" (qtd. in *Birth* ii), which means that we not only think in language but also conceptualize in language. For Hegel, concepts are not just logical operators but figures—figures that then double back and do conceptual work (*Birth* 156–61). In other words, in Kant, concepts huddle together while supping at the table of categories, always minding their manners and doing what they're tasked to do: process the manifold. But in Hegel concepts leave the table and in so doing depart from fixity, from order, from transcendence. It's as if all concepts in Hegel are regulative concepts, which for Kant (in his third *Critique*) are indeed the stuff of language, poetry, art, imagination, allusion, analogy, and other forms of thought by which we labor to make sense of what's initially other to us. In this sense, theory is concerned with the materiality of thought, the materialization of thinking—which brings us to yet another feature of theory.

The third aspect that can be said to define theory is that theory historicizes thought, studying its materialization across disparate forms of human expression—music, literature, art, architecture, religion, philosophy—either in a diachronic or synchronic analysis—or, aspirationally, both at once. It's enough for a scholar to focus on one of these disciplines or only one mode of historical analysis, but Hegel's ambition was to think these all at once or pursue a project of writing that would take him from form to form, time to time, place to place. This is the hardest kind of critical writing to do, and Hegel didn't always succeed, at times offering what we can all agree are culturally blinkered positions. But the method is there, as is the hope for it, once more scotching Kant's conceptual scheme. Here, again, Hegel works over Kant's constitutive concepts. To be sure, if Hegel was going to deal in fixed concepts, he would, in true dialectical fashion, put them in the wrong place—not in the self but in history, whereby the concept of a period or some other totalizing conception of a historical moment (like an episteme) is always in tension with the individual examples emerging from within its frame, examples that have a share in conceptualizing a period precisely because they conceptualize by other

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means: through figuration. Examples—be they poems, paintings, sculptures—are never adequate to their moment. Rather, they are behind or ahead. They contradict their age and one another. Or to turn this formulation around: every present moment is a tangle of emergent and residual forms.

Those are the three main points in what I argue is Hegel's invention of theory in opposition to Kant's philosophy, and I support my case by offering multiple histories of dialectical thinking from Plato, Plotinus, and Aristotle to Hegel (more on this below); from Hegel to Marx (whose theory of commodity fetishism restages Hegelian eucharistic fetishism); from Hegel to Nietzsche (whose dialectical tendencies for once deserve acknowledgment); from Hegel to the nineteenth-century English and American critics experimenting with Hegelianism contra Victorian formalism (T. H. Green, Bernard Bosanquet, William Courthope, Leslie Stephen, Vida Dutton Scudder); from Hegel to Bakhtin (whose Hegelianism is always a question); from Hegel to Jameson (always honest about his Hegelianism); and from Hegel to Deleuze, in whose work you'd expect to find Hegel as an epithet, but who instead supplies perhaps the best example of a patently Hegelian "conceptual figuration," whereby figures do the work of concepts and vice versa. When the gap between Hegel and Deleuze closes, a space for utopian thinking opens up, in which dialectics is energized by phenomenologies past and present.

It's fine, of course, even de rigueur, to call yourself a theorist but not a Hegelian. But if any of the three points listed above seem important for the task of theorizing, even if you use different emphases and terms, then you have Hegel to thank. That is fundamentally my argument about theory, no more and no less. If none of your theoretical program is included here, it doesn't mean it's not important. My aim, at any rate, in *The Birth of Theory* is to explain why dialectics merits the name "theory" in its most general and particular sense—theory as a certain relation to philosophy, theory as a point of view on concepts and on the process of theorizing, and theory as reflection on history. All of this begins quite clearly in Hegel, and I am unapologetic for saying so in the light of lingering worries about "origins" (*Birth* 22–23).

But if dialectics is theory, then where did Hegel get his dialectics? Here we enter into a history of thinking from Plato to the present that strangely hasn't been undertaken in the disciplines of theory. The reason for this lacuna is not the range of that history but rather the prevailing assumptions about the nonvalidity of premodern, or specifically medieval, thought today. Theorists can't underestimate the Middle Ages any longer. As I argue in chapters 1 and 2, Hegel didn't invent his dialectic. Rather, he took it from the Middle Ages. In (again) seeking to depart from Kant's critical philosophy, Hegel deliberately adopts the distinctly medieval dialectic of identity/difference as the signal instance of dialectical thinking itself. But what makes identity/difference a medieval dialectic? The answer comes in the realization that while these two logical categories, identity and difference, are familiar to theorists today (thanks to Hegel), so familiar as to seem to have no history, they weren't properly dialectical in the philosophy of Plato or Aristotle. They had a beginning, rather, in postclassical philosophy, in Plotinus in particular, who radically modified the ancient discipline of dialectic by prioritizing the thinking of differences in identity and identities in difference. By setting the categories of identity and difference at the center of dialectic, Plotinus fashioned a powerful dialectical mode of contemplation that was influential throughout the Middle Ages, with Nicholas of Cusa representing perhaps the last and best-known example. Hegel, I show, drew from this medieval tradition of dialectical thinking by following the form, placing identity and difference at the center of his own dialectic.

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In so doing, he rejected the classical, or antique, legacy of dialectic, as well as the early modern aspersions against medieval dialectic.

Thesis, Antithesis, Synthesis: Kant or Hegel?

The Birth of Theory seeks to revive and resituate the Hegelian dialectic as the founding of theory. My intentions were never to say that this founding isn't contentious (see my comments on Hegel versus Kant, above, or the effort to expunge Hegel from theory, which I discuss in the book). In his compelling essay here, Warren Montag rightly addresses the inherent polemic in claims about the invention of theory. In particular, he points to those moments when Hegel seems to downplay the significance of his predecessors, be they scholastic philosophers practicing "formal dialectic" or Spinoza, right where Hegel resembles them most. But a crucial reminder is needed here: Hegel is impatient with any scholasticism (medieval or Spinozist) that is not dialectical, that is not practicing the dialectic of identity/difference. The irony's hard to miss: what especially bothers Hegel is that there's a discipline called dialectic that can sometimes be rigidly undialectical. But he knows just as well that there were different kinds of dialectic in the medieval period from which to choose, and his intention is to recuperate dialectical thinking first exampled by Plotinus and iterated time and again across the Middle Ages. It's true that nowhere in his lectures on the history of philosophy will Hegel say that so-and-so beat me to the punch and is the better dialectician. How could he? But then again Hegel isn't exactly insulting Plotinus by calling his thinking a "higher idealism" (Cole, *Birth* 9, 34–35). In any event, my history of medieval dialectical philosophy is as selective as Hegel's.

It's worth pursuing, however, another irony—the way Hegel is reduced and formalized today. C. D. Blanton, in his powerful essay on the way analogy exceeds both concept and figure to propose a thought only history itself can complete, cautions us that "[t]he outworn terms *thesis*, *antithesis*, and *synthesis* will need to be abandoned." For Blanton, this oft-cited triadic formula comes nowhere close to explaining Hegel's mode of (analogical) reflection. Likewise, for Fredric Jameson, this triadic structure is just plain "stupid" (57). Others have discussed this formula (Mueller; Kaufmann 167–70). It needs to be emphasized that the main problem with this triadic construction is that it is Kant's, not Hegel's. We need to be clear about this issue if we are to understand, again, Hegel's departure from Kant into theory.

The Kantianism of the formula (thesis, antithesis, synthesis) is easily discovered by reading Kant's three critiques. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant discusses the "antinomy of pure reason" and sets out to analyze two radically opposed "transcendental ideas." For example, there is the "thesis" that "the world has a beginning in time, and is also limited as regards space," and there is the "antithesis" that "the world has no beginning, and no limits in space" (396 [a426/b454]). He meticulously details three other theses and antitheses in a similar fashion, and modern editions print the thesis and the antithesis in parallel columns. Each time Kant shows the opposition to be a false one, from the point of view of a new ground or synthesis that (already) understands that there's a distinction between noumena and phenomena, intuition and sense—for example, "All beginning is in time and all limits of the extended are in space. But space and time belong only to the world of sense. Accordingly, while appearances *in the world* are conditionally limited, *the world itself* is neither conditionally nor unconditionally limited" (458 [a522/b550]). Of course, we learned this many chapters earlier in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Insofar, then, as the "thesis" and the "antithesis" get something partially right—beginnings are in time, limits are in space, and so on—you can

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say that Kant works over both the thesis and the antithesis toward his own result, his own synthesis consistent with his critical philosophy (see *Birth* 58–59, 191n211).

Hegel, in the *Science of Logic* and the *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences*, exposes Kant for doing exactly that, rigging the oppositions so that they conform in advance to the critical philosophy (*Birth* 60). Hegel does have a point. Indeed, it's funny how in Kant's philosophy two cosmological falsehoods, one a "thesis," the other its "antithesis," add up to a certain truth called the transcendental aesthetic. But that's how Kant wants it, as he puts it plainly in the *Critique of Practical Reason*:

> Thus the antinomy of pure reason, which becomes manifest in pure reason's dialectic, is in fact the most beneficial straying into which human reason could ever have fallen, because it ultimately impels us to seek the key to get out of this labyrinth—the key which, when found, also uncovers what one did not seek and yet requires, namely an outlook into a higher, unchangeable order of things.

And that's it. That's all the synthesis you get—"a higher [eine höhere], unchangeable order of things" (138; *Kritik* 107). In this particular case, Kant achieves the "*synthesis*" (144; 113) and "resolution" of virtue and happiness (139; 109), "two elements of the highest good which are entirely different in kind" (144; 114)—and shows that they are transcendentally deduced as a unified concept. (Take note of the term "resolution" 'Auflösung,' which Hegel and Marx will make properly dialectical.)[2] Kant uses this method once more in the *Critique of Judgement*, in which both the "antinomy of taste" (165; 338) and the "antinomy of judgement" (213; 384) are posed as a "Thesis" (166, 214–15; 338, 387–88) and "Antithesis" (166, 214–15; 338, 387–88) with a "Solution" 'Auflösung' (166, 216; 339, 388). Fichte, building on Kant, follows the form in his *Foundations of Natural Right* (94–97, 206, 226–27; for related discussions, see 66–67, 115–16, 124). And I detect a smidgen of this thinking in Schelling, who works out a challenging response to Kant, but with some occasional recidivist Kantianism.[3]

But we can stop here and let Hegel have a say. For in his lectures on the history of philosophy, he associates this triadic form with Kant, at least giving him credit for coming close to dialectics:

> Kant has therefore set forth as a universal scheme the rhythm of knowledge, of scientific movement; and has exhibited on all sides thesis, antithesis and synthesis, modes of the mind by means of which it is mind, as thus consciously distinguishing itself. . . . The defect of Kant's philosophy consists in falling asunder of the moment of the absolute form. (*Lectures* 477, 478; see also 439, 450–51).

Hegel identifies the defect in this mode of thought—as does Kant in fact, whose purpose in using these terms (thesis, antithesis, synthesis) is to move beyond what he calls the "merely dialectical" or the "dialectic play of cosmological ideas" (*Critique of Pure Reason* 448 [a506/b534], 422 [a462/b490]). It's important to remember, however, that Hegel and Kant differ in their perspective on the dialectic and dialectical thinking: Hegel preserves the dialectic by rejecting these terms, while Kant rejects the dialectic by reducing it to them. So even if you see triads in Hegel—where are there not triads, really?—it's best that we abandon thesis, antithesis, synthesis. As soon as we rid ourselves of this triadic structure, we discover Hegel to be closer to Marx than to Kant. Indeed, we begin to gain a clearing, sweeping to the side Marx's own (misdirected) critique of the supposedly Hegelian thesis, antithesis, synthesis in such works as the *Poverty of Philosophy*, and finding instead places where Hegel anticipates Marx in his concern for material history within a dialectical frame.

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History, Hegel, and Marx

Marx once stated that "[m]y dialectical method is, in its foundations, not only different from the Hegelian, but exactly opposite to it. . . . With [Hegel], it is standing on its head. It must be inverted, in order to discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell" (*Capital* 102, 103). The thinking has always been: see what Hegel does and do the opposite! This imperative isn't always easy to enact, however, because you first have to know what Hegel does, which requires reading lots of his work, and if you get that far, then you have to produce results and do the opposite, which just may be so rigorously oppositional as to be outright appropriation itself—what some might call a "negative dialectics." Marx, for all his notorious fuming, was perhaps more levelheaded than Adorno, author of the aforementioned negative dialectics, on this point. Simply, Marx avers: "I . . . openly avowed myself the pupil of that mighty thinker. The mystification which dialectic suffers in Hegel's hands by no means prevents him from being the first to present its general form of working in a comprehensive and conscious manner" (*Capital* 102–03). Marx calls Hegel the "zuerst" 'first' (*Das Kapital* 27; my trans.). If the birth of theory in Hegel is good enough for Marx, who took the dialectic as his theory of everything, it's good enough for me.

Yet if we are to understand what makes Hegelian dialectical theory critical on its own terms, then we need to unthink Marx's (and Engels's) famous statement "It has not occurred to any one of these philosophers to inquire into the connection of German philosophy with German reality, the relation of their criticism to their own material surroundings." At least, we need to rethink its target. For if any philosopher "inquired into the connection of German philosophy with German reality, the relation of their criticism to their own material surroundings," it was Hegel. And his "master-slave" or, more accurately, "lord-bondsman" dialectic is the example right under our noses. As I show in chapter 3 of *The Birth of Theory*, this most famous dialectical scenario in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* represents Hegel's explicit critique of precapitalist modes of production evidenced in the German states while Hegel was alive—the forms of *Grundherrschaft* historians consistently characterize as feudalism. In his critique, Hegel reveals himself to be presciently proto-Marxist and exposes, prospectively, how patently absurd it is to blame Hegel for condoning capitalism or to declaim that "Hegel's stand-point is that of modern political economy," as Marx says (qtd. in *Birth* 118). There was no capitalism around for Hegel to critique. The truth of the matter is born from an analogy: what feudalism is to Hegel capitalism is to Marx.

The analogy itself aims to do two things: to show that Hegel is presciently Marxist in his critique of his "own material surroundings," thereby explaining why Marx would find Hegel's dialectic to be theoretically necessary to begin with; and to restore modes of production to the analysis not only of history or literature but of theory and philosophy, grounding these latter in the contexts of their emergence. Our entry point into the thought of modes of production is the fact that every historical present is decidedly uneven. Hegel teaches us about historical unevenness as a theoretical and indeed dialectical matter well before Marx, insofar as he describes the local material realities of agrarian life and servile obligations persisting in the German states since the Middle Ages—all the while remaining aware that those very states are loping their way toward modernity and capital, of which the more "developed" versions (like England) Hegel had only read about. In a terrific essay, Jord/ana Rosenberg captures the idea perfectly in saying that "Hegelian thought—shaped by the collision of emergent and residual political-economic formations—encodes a critical friction point:

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the dialectic is at heart a mediation of historical difference"—which makes it ever more urgent that in cultural analysis today we achieve a "dimensionalizing of our attention," recognizing "the uneven and dialectical movement between the surface and the shadows cast," between aesthetics and history.[4]

Because I focus on modes of production in the reading of Hegel in chapter 3—in particular, feudalism persisting within the modernity of emergent capitalism—I don't discuss what's happening very far from the German states in Haiti. The topic of "Hegel and Haiti" has many devotees and claims. One argument, in particular, is that Hegel, in writing the lord-bondsman dialectic, was talking about the Haitian Revolution. In *The Birth of Theory* I explain in detail why I don't follow this reading; here I can simply say that I part ways with this interpretation right where its author, Susan Buck-Morss, admits that Hegel is silent about Haiti (17, 19–20). For this reason, I maintain that readers of his lord-bondsman dialectic must first pass through German feudalism before getting to the colonial and postcolonial implications or symptoms of this dialectical scenario. I say this as a way of acknowledging the real differences between on the one hand the German states and on the other Haiti—differences that remind us how terribly dissimilar work as a chattel slave was from work as a German serf, how fundamentally different slavery was from feudalism as a mode of production. Let's just say that white peasants in the German states didn't face the terror the indigenous peoples of Haiti suffered when the Spanish and French arrived on their shores and forced them to harvest crops and mine metals until they collapsed from abuse, exhaustion, thirst, starvation, or disease (James; Girard). Nor were European peasants subjected to the horrors West and Central Africans experienced as they were cruelly packed into the hulls of cargo ships to toil as slaves in Haiti. It feels elementary to spell this out, but it's nonetheless necessary when scholars engage with these issues only to neglect varying modes of production and exploitation across territories, preferring instead to regard feudalism as a fiction and slavery a convenient abstraction applicable to anything anywhere.[5] What matters, in any case, is that Hegel knows the distinction between the feudal and slave modes of production, as does Marx, who affirms this interpretation of Hegel in his own discussion of *Grundherrschaft* as feudalism (*Birth* 82–85).

Did feudalism and chattel slavery reside within the nascent globalizing frame? Did Kant drink coffee? The second question answers the first. Yes, and there's no reason why we have to choose between these modes of production when thinking macrohistorically, as long as we are specific about what makes both so different. In this effort, it's especially important to understand that consumption as the auratic telos of "trade"—the sweets you eat, the tobacco you smoke—has a pesky habit of mystifying differences in modes of production and unevenness in history (and thus in human lives), with the result that the vast distances between regions are closed into one airtight global space. The movement of commodities like sugar, tobacco, coffee, and cotton from colonies to nation-states; the transformation of European aesthetics to suit the colonial imperial imagination in all its overreach; the emergence of entire legal systems to try to eradicate feudalism (unsuccessfully); the parliamentary decisions to withdraw from the slave trade (unsuccessfully)—these all will disclose the total frame of their own possibility as long as we adopt a version of difference that remains deeply critical and enables us to think the abstract identities through which globalization itself obliquely appears.

This question of difference is worth lingering over a bit longer, because it helps clarify why modes of production should remain central to any critical analysis, as well as to a

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reading of the histories I present in *The Birth of Theory*. For example, two readers of my book suggest that German historiography, philosophy, and theory from Hegel forward amount to a medievalism that dangerously appeals to historians like Otto Brunner (a "rehabilitated" Nazi, as Newman writes here) and to anti-Semites, who construe the Christian and specifically Lutheran triumph on the European stage as a triumph of the will—"spirit's indomitable march through Germany toward absolute universality," according to Parker in his essay. Both critics, that is, believe that the twinned topics of Hegel and the history of German feudalism are inherently amenable to *Volkgeschichte* and Nazism. I do not agree and would say that the concept of modes of production would help these readers recognize important breaks across the very histories they think are seamless.

Max Horkheimer once said that "[w]hoever wants to explain anti-Semitism must speak of National Socialism" (77). He also remarked that "whoever is not willing to talk about capitalism should also keep quiet about fascism" (78). Replace "capitalism" with "modes of production," and you have my point about what must also enter into any consideration of German history. The twentieth-century "German problem," in other words, is not medievalism (as Newman and Parker would have it) but Nazi capitalism fostered by corporate interests that doubled as open anti-Semitism (Turner; Hayes). Focus on modes of production even for a second, and you can see that this murderous and belligerent form of state-managed capitalism in Germany was a decisive break from feudalism as a mode of production, and that this certain break from feudalism witnessed the concomitant break from medievalism and a turn toward modernism—the "aestheticization of machine technology" and "Taylorized work-processes and efficiency" (Rabinbach 68).[6] In short, "Nazism could no longer rely on the simple legitimacy of *völkisch* ideology and agrarian utopia" and sought to "exorcise the traditional patterns of culture which conflicted with modern modes of production" (Rabinbach 67, 68). To unify these economic and cultural matters under the banner of "medievalism" is to risk doing exactly what Hannah Arendt asks us to avoid in her challenging *Origins of Totalitarianism*: don't let the so-called German Spirit pass itself off as a seamless and self-consistent cultural logic extending across the centuries.

Presentism

It is always a problem when well-intentioned critique unwittingly reproduces its object. Ever since Marx worried whether his critique of capital sounded like run-of-the-mill political economy—and early reviewers of *Capital* thought he was offering precisely that—theorists have worried whether critique now simply fuels the machine or serves as the necessary ventilation of systemic pressures in the way air brakes on a tractor trailer operate by preventing the vehicle from stopping. The thinking today is that the older *Ideologiekritik* and theories of "difference" can't stop this machine from moving, much less identify its vulnerabilities. This is a now very common view within major critical traditions, especially those situated within Marxism. But I would frame that point of view as the problem of presentism in theory more generally. Presentism besets any theory that focuses only on modernity, to say nothing of "today" or "the present." Presentism happens when any theory conforms its critical insights to the very theory late capitalism offers of itself. More specifically, presentism results when critics adopt decidedly even and *indifferent* models of the present, like networks, rhizomes, flat ontologies, vital materialisms, and object ontologies (to name but a few). These are all ontologies of the present.[7] As such, they are the identities of our age—that is, the new philosophies of indifference tasked to elbow out the old philosophies of difference.

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Networks, I admit, have a certain counterhegemonic, democratizing appeal. They are vast, interconnected in infinite ways, multinodal, decentralized, nonhierarchical and feature agency distributed to every actant, mediation for every action, translation for every relation, and so on. They are so resilient as to be eternal. Yet they are still systems in which a permanent interruption or systemic die-off ends everything in a flash, if not a boom. And then what? Rhizomes, if you know anything about plants, grow by dying, the "node" being as much about death and disconnection as it is "life" or connectivity. Rhizomes also perish when the conditions around them aren't supportive. Multiplicities—rhizomes by another name—exist only on the "plane of consistency" (after Deleuze and Guattari), which means that they are even and smooth through and through. I'm not confident that these formulations help us think our uneven and troubled present. Rather, they seem to stylize it.

The way out of presentism is a dialectical model of difference that invites theorists to do different historical work—to adopt a broader vision of history not limited to modernity. Indeed, what I've tried to supply in *The Birth of Theory* is a rationale for critical theory to return to a dialectical model of difference—the sort of difference that asks us to look beyond the identity of modernity, not only beyond modernity to the end of capitalism but also beyond modernity to the moments before it. Difference gives you a perspective on the past as a series of uneven present moments up to our own time. These moments don't need to fold or collapse, because then difference itself loses its perspectival advantage and becomes presentism again. This temporal exercise in thinking difference against identity is just that. It is an effort to practice thinking outside our age, looking outside our modernity long enough to remember that if there were other modes of being before us, there will be others after us. The same goes for all the other modes, including (most importantly) modes of production. The material past persists in our present moment in ways we aren't accustomed to recognizing anymore—precisely the sort of disavowal or misrecognition that capital requires, which is why I think ideology is still a useful term for designating the inability to conceptualize difference and unevenness. As I aimed to suggest in my book, which is the subject of this forum in *PMLA*, there may be some use in thinking from the outside again, starting first in theory and taking it from there.

Notes

1. These are Hegel's words from the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which King wrote on the front flyleaf of his copy of Jung's *Psychologie und Erziehung*. They translate as, "Quite generally, the known, just because it is known, is not understood" (18; trans. modified). From what I can tell, King read Jung's entire book in German, cracking the red-orange spine in the process. He bracketed many passages and translated select words in his delicate and legible cursive, always in pencil, sometimes red. Some translations really stand out, as when he renders "*Gerechtigkeitliebe*" (15) as "love of justice." I am grateful for the opportunity to consult this volume (and others) from the Morehouse College Martin Luther King Jr. Collection at the Robert W. Woodruff Library of the Atlanta University Center.

2. See my "Dialektična filozofija."

3. Schelling's "three potencies" seem to mirror or at best shadow these three steps (180–81).

4. Rosenberg's treatment in this issue of *PMLA* of Samuel Delany's *Through the Valley of the Nest of Spiders*, as well as Blanton's work in *Epic Negation* on the modernist epic, are clinics in this respect.

5. For example, Davis ignores the fact that feudalism is a mode of production copiously documented by historians of all stripes and instead thinks that it's a fiction, the "*becoming-feudal*," that early modern humanists created to rationalize colonialism (26; see also 23, 30, and her essay here). This is a serious misunderstanding of both the Middle Ages and economic history into modernity, and thus a bad foundation for theory. Of course, Deleuze and Guattari popularized the "*becoming*-[fill in the blank]" motif that Davis borrows, but they knew well enough to consider modes of production in their discussion of feudalism; see, for example, *Anti-Oedipus* 220, where they follow Maurice Dobb; *Thousand Plateau*s 451–61, where they discuss the transition from feudalism to capitalism.

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6. Horkheimer, however, understood that "[f]ascism sets in place the results of the collapse of capitalism" (93).

7. For related discussions, see Bosteels 41–72; Rosenberg, "Molecularization."

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