

Kirk Wetters: The Short Spring of German Theory (I): POSITIVISMUSSTREIT VS. POETIK UND HERMENEUTIK

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Transatlantic Theory Canons

In present-day Germany, research on postwar academia, up through the 1960s and beyond, requires no special justification. But from the North American side, the point of this scholarly activity—including the many new editions and a flood of archive-based publications—is much less obvious. For the most well-established figures of the period, the primary international canonizations were already part of the first waves of the reception, the theoretical tectonics established themselves accordingly, and the theories were established *as theories*—which are in many quarters presumed to be just as reliable today as they were decades ago. One might say that the international and North American reception of European theory has manifested an overall tendency toward sedimentation, while the dynamic of scholarly research *about* theory, including the archival unearthing of new sources, tends to complicate and undermine the established corpus of “primary texts.” For example, not only does the quantity of new German publications on (and by) figures like Hans Blumenberg or Siegfried Kracauer widen the rift and amplify the asynchrony between North American and German academic cultures, it also heightens awareness for the fact that these somewhat “second tier” figures were extremely important all along.

Poetik und Hermeneutik

Especially problematic from the North American perspective is the research group *Poetik und Hermeneutik*, which in German scholarship has been a subject of increasing attention in the past two decades. Among other aspects, the group arguably provides the crucial context for understanding the development of Blumenberg’s work in the 1960s and beyond. Its publications—seventeen volumes of “findings” (*Arbeitsergebnisse*) spanning more than thirty years—were never translated into English, though many individual contributions were republished or anthologized, and many went on to become classics within their disciplines. Though undoubtedly influential, especially as an organizational model, the group’s publications and intellectual network had limited international reach.[1] Even in Germany, as Carlos Spoerhase has argued, “P&H” was more an object of “fascination” within the intra- and extra-academic public spheres (e.g., as a highly touted example of interdisciplinarity) rather than a producer of demonstrably influential new paradigms or theories.[2]

Reception Theory and Jauss

The most significant “product” that did emerge from P&H was the Constance School of reception theory. However, this school also never made it to North America, certainly not as an actual school, even if the approach itself was (as it is sometimes said) represented by homegrown equivalents, for example by the “anxiety of influence” and “reader response theory,” up to Franco Moretti’s literary evolutionism and, most prominently, Bruno Latour’s Actor-Network-Theory (which was the inspiration for Rita Felski’s 2015 *The Limits of Critique*).[3] In any case, one might argue that reception aesthetics has been a dominant critical mode for many decades. But which version does one choose? And: does an effective critical practice even require such a choice? In retrospect and in the context of P&H (as has been unfolded in Julia Amslinger’s 2017 book, *Eine neue Form von Akademie*),[4] Jauss’s German success story appears to have been primarily a result of successful branding, while the fundamental questions concerning the dynamic relation of production and reception were common to all of the group’s participants and, indeed, to countless theoretical and hermeneutic traditions of the 20th century.[5]

The Positivism Dispute

Another fascinating and perhaps even more mysterious object of the 1960s is the so-called *Positivismusstreit* (“positivism dispute”). In German-speaking academia, everyone has at least heard the name, whereas, in the international context, it is considered part of the history of the Frankfurt School. To a great extent, this afterlife as a vaguely recognized context resulted from the memorable title of the 1969 Luchterhand volume, *Der Positivismusstreit in der deutschen Soziologie*. The problem with the title is that it is almost entirely misleading, retrospectively naming an event that never happened, in which none of the participants involved in the dispute were actually “positivists,” and which was not even primarily a debate *about* positivism in any clearly defined sense. The title of the original 1961 discussion between Adorno and Popper, “The Logic of the Social Sciences,” was retained in various publications up to the Luchterhand edition. Although it is much drier and more academic, this title is more accurate in its broad framing of epistemological-methodological questions. And in this regard it did not raise false expectations. The dispute was not confined to sociology, but is better described as a general conversation about the boundaries between empirical science and philosophy, in which members of the Frankfurt School asserted that the tradition of social and philosophical critique must be retained as the framework of all scientific research in the natural, social, and human sciences. The book, however, despite its famous title, remained semi-canonical at best and is only very infrequently read in any disciplinary context.

The Common Enemy (*Feindbild Positivismus*)

There is much that still has to be better understood even in the most famous intellectual constellations of the period. Also, the existing scholarship, though fundamental, has for the most part defined its objects (“Positivismusstreit,” “P&H,” many individual authors) in a way which, especially in the North American and international context, appears overly narrow. It is a misnomer, for example, to think that the Frankfurt School possessed a monopoly on anti-positivism. By the 1950s, in the wake of Heidegger and Husserl,

positivism did not unambiguously refer to any specific philosophical, theoretical, or methodological schools. In general parlance, it referred to a vast syndrome of modernity. [6] Within and between the famous names and titles, there is a vast network of connectivity that remains to be uncovered, not only in correspondences and archival sources, but also in published texts. By weaving together larger and smaller strands, it is possible to ask somewhat broader and more speculative questions: What is the implicit stance of *Metaphorologie* and *Begriffsgeschichte* with regard to the question of positivism? What was “literary positivism”—the kind that Jauss and Szondi, Heidegger and Adorno polemized against? To what extent did Gadamer’s 1960 *Wahrheit und Methode* provide an implicit background and framework for all the subsequent debates about positivism (not a huge leap, considering its recognized importance for Habermas)? How did the *Positivismusstreit* relate to other attempts (such as P&H) to establish new institutional forms of (inter)disciplinarity, academic culture, and institutionality? I would argue that these various strands are held together by their (still unfinished) renegotiation of the troubled boundaries between the humanities, natural sciences, social sciences, and philosophy.

Permanent Crisis of University and Society

The tripartite disciplinary architecture of the university—humanities, natural sciences, social sciences—is still very much alive, as are its problems. These days, the question of the disciplinary place of philosophy, for example, which was absolutely paramount in the 1960s, is mostly taken for granted as a part of the institutional status quo. Despite the notorious latencies (Haverkamp), [7] repressions, silences, and the highly subtextual “cryptographic” writing style (Ette) of the period —aspects which require fine-grained and attentive analysis—it may be the case that certain fundamental questions concerning academic institutionality and the social function of the university were more askable then than they are now. Along similar lines, the important recent book by Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon argues that the present crisis can only be understood through its historicization within the “permanent crisis” of the relation of the human and social sciences. [8] A look at the intellectual culture of the West German 1960s certainly confirms the point while also offering a reminder that the oxymoron “permanent crisis” (like the state of exception that becomes the rule) is the privileged *topos* of the “verkehrte Welt” of revolutionary modernity—which is open to both progressive and regressive interpretations. In other words: the critical awareness of the permanence of the crisis should not deceive us into thinking that there is no crisis.

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[1] See especially Petra Boden and Rüdiger Zill: *Poetik und Hermeneutik im Rückblick. Interviews mit Beteiligten*. Paderborn 2017; Renate Lachmann: "Poetics and Hermeneutics (*Poetik und Hermeneutik*)."
Theoretical Schools and Circles in the Twentieth-Century Humanities: Literary Theory, History, Philosophy. Eds. Marina Grishakova and Silvi Salupere. New York and London 2015, pp. 216–234; Anselm Haverkamp: "Nothing Fails like Success: Poetics and Hermeneutics – A Postwar Initiative by Hans Blumenberg." *MLN* 130:5 (2015), pp. 1221–1241.

[2] Carlos Spoerhase. "Rezeption und Resonanz. Zur Faszinationsgeschichte der Forschungsgruppe 'Poetik und Hermeneutik.'" *Internationales Archiv für Sozialgeschichte der deutschen Literatur* 35:1 (2010), pp. 122–142.

[3] Robert C. Holub: "Ergebnisse einer Grenzüberschreitung: Zur Rezeption der Rezeptionstheorie in den Vereinigten Staaten." *Zur Rezeption der Rezeptionstheorie*. Eds. Dorothee Kimmich and Bernd Stiegler. Berlin 2003, pp. 127–141. See also Ottmar Ette: *Der Fall Jauss: Wege des Verstehens in eine Zukunft der Philologie*. Berlin 2016; and Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht: *The Powers of Philology: Dynamics of Textual Scholarship*. Urbana, IL 2003.

[4] Julia Amslinger: *Eine neue Form von Akademie: 'Poetik und Hermeneutik' – die Anfänge*. Paderborn 2017.

[5] On consensus and divergence within the group, see Walter Erhart. "'Wahrscheinlich haben wir beide Recht': Diskussion und Dissens unter 'Laboratoriumsbedingungen': Beobachtungen zu 'Poetik und Hermeneutik' 1963–1966." *Internationales Archiv für Sozialgeschichte der deutschen Literatur* 35:1 (2010), pp. 77–102.

[6] See especially the book of the Heideggerian Walter Bröcker: *Dialektik, Positivismus, Mythologie*. Frankfurt am Main 1958, reviewed by Jürgen Habermas: "Der befremdliche Mythos: Reduktion oder Evokation?" *Philosophische Rundschau* 6:3/4 (1958), p. 215.

[7] Anselm Haverkamp: *Latenzzeit: Wissen im Nachkrieg*. Berlin 2003.

[8] Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon: *Permanent Crisis: The Humanities in a Disenchanted Age*. Chicago and London 2021. See also, in close historical and theoretical proximity to Koselleck's *Critique and Crisis*, Nicolaus Sombart: *Krise und Planung: Studien zur Entwicklungsgeschichte des menschlichen Selbstverständnisses in der globalen Ära*. Vienna, Frankfurt and Zurich 1965; and another much more famous crisis theory of the 1960s, Thomas S. Kuhn: *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago 1962.

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