

Kirk Wetters: The Short Spring of German Theory (II): WE HAVE ALWAYS BEEN POSTCRITICAL

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Theory, Critique, Critical Theory

In the retrospect of almost a decade, the year 2015 seems to offer at least two openings which can help us better understand and localize the “end of theory” narratives that began to take hold sometime around the end of the millennium. Rita Felski’s much-discussed and much-maligned 2015 book, *The Limits of Critique*, construed the long history of “critique” as largely continuous with the more recent (postwar) idea of “theory,” which allowed her to question the presupposed progressivity and utility of the dominant critical-theoretical discourses of late 20th-century North American academia. In the same year, Philipp Felsch’s *Der lange Sommer der Theorie* (which was recently published in English as *The Summer of Theory*) went so far as to assign specific dates, 1960–1990, and tended to define theory not as a purely academic product, but as a much wider cultural movement.[1] Between the two books, questions of the difference between theory and critique, their specific institutional locus within and beyond academia, became objects of acute concern.

Academic Asynchronies

Because this particular conjuncture simultaneously emerged on both sides of the Atlantic, in Germany and North America, its full dimensions may only be perceived retrospectively. Thus, it now appears that by 2015 the movement of historicization, as well as its results, had acquired their own irresistible momentum, already prior to the multiple post-2015 global crises, which produced even more urgent and ongoing reconsiderations. A future realignment is anticipated in the historical accounts that reveal deep divides between different national, institutional, and disciplinary traditions of theory and critique. New chances of synchronization can proceed from the recognition that theory was always out of sync with itself, governed by the complex asynchronies (*Eigenzeiten*) of reception, dissemination, and institutionalization, which make it always potentially “current” and *aktuell* at the same time as it always remains dated and historical.

Critique and Crisis (Felski and Koselleck)

Felski’s *The Limits of Critique* includes an obligatory nod to Koselleck’s 1959 *Critique and Crisis*. Felski, in a manner typical of a certain mode of Koselleck reception, offers a de-fanged version of his thesis, focusing on its conceptual history: “Critique and crisis are intertwined historically as well as etymologically.”[2] Such a “timeless” evocation of the theoretical source ignores Koselleck’s wider argument and its particular postwar/Cold War context, as well as the book’s strangely impassioned and almost strident tone. The central claim that Felski omits, here reduced to its sharpest point, is the argument that we have

always been postcritical, ever since the end of the Enlightenment. “Critique,” for Koselleck, was the original “wokeness”—a misguided and self-misunderstood movement on behalf of a supposedly apolitical idea of critical reason, which, as an unintended side effect, never stopped producing oppositional, politicized concepts of collective action, instrumental *Kampfbegriffe*, and ultimately bloody revolutions in which the future of humanity was at stake.[3] Thus Felski follows, apparently naively, in the wake of a claim that was often perceived as anti-Enlightenment, if not outright conservative.

The Postcritical University

However, Koselleck’s thesis remains important and, in its own time, remained without an immanent sequel. The historical irony of Felski’s affective affinity with Koselleck lies in the fact that she seems to share many of his goals, transposed onto the critical excesses of the U.S. humanities, graduate education, and English departments. Felski’s evidently cathartic assault on critical narcissism, hypocrisy, and academia’s industrial reproduction of clichés is not unjustified, but it leaves unanswered countless questions concerning the wider historical situation of theory, critique (and ultimately also postcritique) as legacies of the European Enlightenment, which were problematically institutionalized within the modern university (whose mandate is, one might argue, science and truth, with critique as a possible secondary effect). Regarding the location of critique, the degree to which Felski’s analyses are salient depends on the very different disciplinary inheritances and critical practices of the humanities and social sciences. Philosophy, English, American Studies, Sociology, Political Science, Classics—to name just a few random examples—would each have a different story to tell about their relation to Felski’s Koselleckian concept of “critique and crisis.”

French and German Pre-Histories

Felski takes it for granted that she primarily focuses on the institutionalized academic reading practices of (literary) hermeneutics, without offering a thesis on how this might relate to a longer and broader history developed by Koselleck (who focused primarily on the French Enlightenment). Whereas Koselleck identified critique as a revolutionary political force, Felski questions the role of critique in institutions of higher education. Felski follows Ricoeur in attributing the rise of “the hermeneutics of suspicion” to German thought (Marx-Nietzsche-Freud). Though this is not an incorrect ascription, it does reinforce misapprehensions insofar as it associates German-language scholarship and German literary studies (*Germanistik*, *deutsche Philologie*) primarily with left-leaning and leftist traditions. Certainly it can look that way in North America (where every German department teaches a Marx-Nietzsche-Freud class), but it is also not the case that *Germanistik* or the North American field of German Studies have consistently or predominantly pursued the modes of *Ideologiekritik* that Felski is keen to unmask. As a result, Felski’s book appeared to be more anti-Left than it probably intended to be, while also proposing a German story that doesn’t fully fit the facts.

German Theory

The situation of theory in the BRD is the central topic of Felsch's book, which also led some commentators to invoke Koselleck's famous 1959 thesis: to the effect that Koselleck may have overrated the degree to which critique (now as a pseudonym for theory) was the actual motor of a "historical megatrend" (Hartmut Böhme). Responding to his critics, Felsch elsewhere also names Koselleck in order to make the point that the exorbitant promise of critique as a real political force now appears more improbable than ever. But he also adds: "Vielleicht kann die Erinnerung an diese Ausgangssituation dabei helfen, die Lage der Theorie in der Gegenwart besser einzuschätzen."^[4] The reference to Koselleck complicates the "initial situation" (*Ausgangssituation*) of theory and critique, which simultaneously overlaps with the "megatrend" of the Enlightenment and the very possibility of historical progress at the same time as it locates the stalling or derailment of that trend, its turning against itself, not only in the twenty-first century, but also within the Enlightenment itself, and in the decades following the Second World War.

Theoretical Microclimate

In Felsch's account of the rise of theory, cutting-edge West German academia of the 1960s was represented by recuperative projects such as: Gadamer's *Wahrheit und Methode* (notably a positive touchstone for Felski); conceptual history (initially under Gadamerian supervision); the foundation of the research group *Poetik und Hermeneutik*; Hans Robert Jauss's reception aesthetics; Habermas's succession of Horkheimer in Frankfurt; Blumenberg, Habermas, Henrich, and Taubes as the editorial team behind Suhrkamp's "Theorie" series. Far from reflecting the dominance of critical theory or the critique of ideology, the German 1960s retrospectively appear as a troublingly peaceful, pseudo-idyllic decade of unsuspecting hermeneutics in which the relation of meaning and intention is supposed to be, if not completely stable, at least potentially stabilizable.

At any rate, this is often the surface impression of the years leading up to 1968. Rather than working with a concept of critique that seeks to overtly challenge the status quo by speaking truth to power, this period has a relatively quietist self-understanding (even in the Frankfurt of Adorno and Horkheimer). It understands itself as a time of critical-methodological refoundation, cross-disciplinary collaboration, and rebuilding academic and theoretical infrastructure in the wake of Nazism (a background which was at the same time intensely repressed and disavowed). As Felsch shows, the theory of the period was a nascently popular phenomenon, as in the case of the literary success of Adorno's *Minima Moralia*. However, its primary locus was academia and academic publishing. These initial German developments of the 1950s and 1960s were transformed by the overwhelming success of theory as a post-68 French import. Felsch shows that the wave of French theory, though important within academia, was also a first-order cultural event, which touched on countless aspects of everyday life and society.

The "long summer" metaphor thus does not suggest an "end of theory," but a change in its status and institutional setting after 1960—and again after 1990. It further implies that there was a "short spring" of West German theory, which preceded the French heat wave. If this wave has indeed ebbed (or been contained, purged of its excesses), then the most crucial implication of the seasonal metaphors is the need for a more serious reconnection

of present-day academia with the *status quo ante*. To put it unmetaphorically: With the rise of social media, the “positivism” of the digital humanities, and, perhaps most of all, in reaction to the overwhelming global success of theory as a mode of cultural-critical *public* discourse (and accompanying concerns about ideology, radicalization, and “conspiracy theories”), academia was forced to rethink its role as a producer and consumer of theory in relation to a rapidly changing medial and discursive landscape. This, in part, means the re-academicization of theory within academia, and not as a defeat or “end” or “death,” but in a way that is largely consistent with the way that theory has always been academically handled: not as a dogmatic or strictly methodological input to be “followed,” “adopted,” or “applied,” but as a genre with its own specific poetics and rhetorical moves, accessible to literary-critical, philological, philosophical, and historical reconstruction. The radical absolutism of the claim to “pure” or autonomous theory is thereby offset—but not eliminated—by scholarly industriousness (and the risk of “scholasticism”) which, for better or worse, very much resembles that of the German 1960s. At the same time, it allows for the re-entry of French theory and new theory hybrids into the slower moving paradigms of academic disciplinarity—and it makes it possible to identify many “current debates” precisely as *re-entries* in relation to older problems and different contexts.

Kirk Wetters is Professor of Germanic Languages & Literatures at Yale University. Sponsored by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, he is a visiting scholar at the ZfL and the Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach from April to August 2023.

[1] Philipp Felsch: *Der lange Sommer der Theorie: Geschichte einer Revolte 1960 bis 1990*. Munich 2015; *The Summer of Theory: History of a Rebellion, 1960–1990*. Translated by Tony Crawford. Cambridge & Medford MA 2022.

[2] Rita Felski: *The Limits of Critique*. Chicago and London 2015, p. 44.

[3] The key elements of this rather stylized reading are indirectly confirmed by Jürgen Habermas’s response, first in a sharply worded review (“Verrufener Fortschritt – Verkanntes Jahrhundert: Zur Kritik an der Geschichtsphilosophie.” *Merkur* 14.5 (1960), pp. 468–477) and then in his 1962 classic, *Der Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*—which essentially adopts and inverts Koselleck’s central thesis while defending the progressive core of the Enlightenment conception of critical reason.

[4] Eva Horn, Philipp Felsch, Diedrich Diederichsen, Hartmut Böhme, Karin Harrasser, Rembert Hüser, Arnd Wedemeyer: “Debatte.” *Zeitschrift für Kulturwissenschaften* 1 (2016), pp. 120–145: 130 (Böhme), 123 (Felsch).

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