At Issue

By Theory Possessed

My father offered few words on the state of the world, but the few he volunteered were usually shrewd. I remember, in particular, what he used to say about college tuitions—"The more you pay, the less you seem to go."

Alas, my father didn't know the half of it. It was not merely that steeper tuitions bought less time. They also bought less content. A grossly oversimplified history may help explain.

Beginning in the mid-1960s or thereabouts, a revolution occurred in the liberal arts curricula of many of America's elite universities. This revolution consisted of a gradual but ineluctable movement away from substance toward theory, away from the empirical data of a field of studies (whether facts of history or works of literature or philosophy) toward ideological readings of the data. The theory of choice during these tumultuous years was a variety of neo-Marxism, usually served up with a dose of psychoanalytic theory, à la Herbert Marcuse. It was bracing stuff, and made a young sophomore feel pretty damn smart about the world. It was also one of the things that made so many members of the baby boom generation close to insufferable.

Some conservatives look back on this academic vogue as part of a vast left-wing, or even communist, conspiracy, but it wasn't that at all, unless the communists were even clumsier than we now know them to have been. No, this early flowering of the theory craze was far too incoherent and dreamy to serve any purposefully subversive political end. What it really represented was an attempt to forge a humanist countercultural religion on the ruins—or what were perceived to be the ruins—of American liberalism.

To be sure, the 1960s were too quick to declare the death of America's liberal creed. It had not really died. It was—and remains—in ill health, having cut itself off from the religious traditions that once tempered its worst traits—its selfish individualism and its spiritual aridity. But if liberalism was not dead, it looked as though it was, and the perception of its demise, compounded by acute social crises at home and an unpopular war abroad, was enough to propel many of the brightest on a search for new meaning, a search that in the academy found its outlet in vaguely Marxist theorizing.

During the 1970s and '80s, the theoretical menu expanded and diversified, accommodating a number of special-interest or grievance-group agendas (e.g., feminism, environmentalism) as well as a flurry of Continental intellectual fashions, including structuralism, poststructuralism, and deconstruction. But a vaguely Marxist dissatisfaction with America—racist, sexist, fascist "Amerika"—remained the unifying theme, the dressing for theory's crazy salad, which was now truly the staple of a liberal arts education.

And a very lean cuisine it was. It was practically unseemly to mar its pristine unclutter with ugly little facts. So, for example, a student in history might still be introduced to the broad historical narratives in the obligatory survey courses. He or she might read of a battle here, a treaty there, the causes and consequences of the Thirty Years War or the Taiping Rebellion. But such matters were handled as expeditiously as possible in order to leave plenty of room for theory. Here one learned not only to question, decode, or deconstruct the various narratives or discourses framing the highly problematic factual base, but inevitably to accept as axiomatic that most facts and narratives themselves belonged to a suspect "master narrative" that served only to prop up the hegemony of white Western males.

Theory itself was not the villain. There is something of value in even the most manda-

rin of theories, something that pushes the mind to consider facts in a different light. More to the point, there is no escaping theory. We theorize to make sense and to create order. Because it is essential to knowledge—if not, as some extremists claim, coincident with it—theory certainly has its place at the advanced stages of study. But we have a problem when theorizing moves downward and takes over wider and wider swaths of the curriculum. When this happens, when we come too quickly to theory, a crucial stage in learning is missed.

The effort to master a body of knowledge is, above all, a humbling experience. Among other things, it teaches us how much more there always is to learn. It expands our frame of reference, even while forcing us to see how much more it could be expanded. It gives us, if we go about it diligently, an awareness of how rich even the smallest fact may be, of how infinitely susceptible it is to analysis and to comparison with other facts. Learning this, we acquire a proper sense of modesty before buzzing, swirling reality.

A mind that has drunk too early and too deeply of theory fails to acquire such humility. Having missed the sheer drudgery of gathering, assimilating, and even memorizing the data, it goes forth into the world precariously understocked. Such a mind will attempt to make do with too little information, will come too quickly and confidently to conclusions, and take too much on faith—faith in the authority of theorists, all too often. The possessor of such a mind tends to become knowing rather than knowledgeable, sophisticated rather than wise, cynical instead of cautious. Nothing is more dangerous than the overly confident theorist. As proof, consider some of the more diabolical figures of our century.

In fairness, the academy, or at least a significant part of it, has already recognized the error of its ways. Substance is making a comeback, even in the nation's better universities. Narrative history, thanks to such historians as Simon Schama, enjoys newfound respect. Students are returning to primary sources, works of literature or art, and depending less on the metareadings offered by critical theorists. Literary *history* is even regaining respectability, although it had to creep back under the banner of the highly theorized *new* historicism. The return to substance has not yet been decisive, and perhaps it never will be, but the theory-mongers no longer appear to be in the ascendancy.

That's the good news. The bad news is that such encouraging developments in the academy will not be felt in the wider culture for some time. Intellectual history is always the story of lag and trickle-down. On the wider field of culture, we see the playing out of what a generation has imbibed at the wells of learning, and the sight is not uplifting.

Consider, to begin with, what happened at the lower levels of education. It wasn't simply that Mr. Gradgrind was fired; even more humane lovers of facts were given their walking papers. Their replacements—steeped in the worst theories of all, education theories—inflicted concepts and reasoning skills on their clueless charges. What the young ones were supposed to reason about remained something of a mystery. One day, an alert University of Virginia professor, E. D. Hirsch, wondered whether American pupils were acquiring even a minimal level of cultural literacy. His findings were, to put it mildly, discouraging. Hirsch and like-minded teachers launched a remedial program, but it is only beginning to have an effect. What our kids are still not learning in their first 12 years of school should be cause for continuing concern.

Journalism is another legatee of the theoretical craze—no surprise, since the elite news organizations are increasingly staffed and run by graduates of the elite schools. What the theoretical bent has wrought in this field is an approach to news heavily weighted toward editorializing and subjective analysis (along with personality-focused feature writing, which itself allows for endless pop-psychological theorizing). Hardscrabble digging and reporting still take place, but journalists armed with graduate degrees are not content merely saying what happened. They want to offer their reading of the news. Even on the front

pages of the nation's top newspapers, we now get stories barely distinguishable from editorials or features, those most theory-prone of journalistic forms. Facts are seldom allowed to speak for themselves but are parceled out as they fit the reporter's "reading" of events. Readers, meanwhile, are left scratching their heads—at least those readers who have not already given up on the news.

In the entertainment world, the heavy hand of theory makes itself felt in the crudest of ways. Hollywood loves the "high concept," which is nine parts casting and production values and one part story. The story, however, is really only an idea of a story, a theoretical notion, which is why most movies end up being ersatz dramas. They are episodes strung on the thread of an idea, without real characters, real conflict, or real point. In this respect at least, movies have become almost indistinguishable from most television fare, which has long been the ideal entertainment for a theoretical age that thinks in categories, types, and generalities. The rough edges of reality seldom intrude upon our seamless entertainment continuum.

Looking around, indeed, one finds large portions of the culture enmeshed in theories and theory-mongering. What sociologist Daniel Bell dubbed the New Class, that sizable army of bureaucrats, lawyers, journalists, advertising executives, and other influential "symbol-manipulators," is a class that lives largely by producing and consuming theories. Most of our social trends for the last 30 years appear to have emanated from the weightless regions of cloud-cuckoo-land. We have gone from "greening" ourselves to being our own best friend, from connecting with our inner child to locating our specific brand of victimization. Theories have engendered counter-theories, and new theoretical incantations have replaced the old. Trotskyites have become neoconservatives, and many who once heralded the dictatorship of the proletariat now worship the magic of the marketplace. Theorism, we can only hope, is entering the terminal stages of self-strangulation. With luck, it too shall pass.

But we are still a long way from being free of it. The theoretical mania rears its head in the higher circles of government and, as one would expect, among the media mavens who move there. We hear disturbing talk about the need to formulate new paradigms, new models, and new theories in response not only to our own social dilemmas but to a world in which history, theoretically, has ended. Perhaps the wiser course would be to forestall such formulations, to begin, rather, by admitting to a degree of ignorance and uncertainty. This need not lead to inaction; it may even lead to more decisiveness and firmness, based upon a well-grounded, textured appreciation of the needs and histories of specific challenges and crises, national and international.

A little more caution, a little more empirical testing, and—who knows?—we may even discover that theories, if indispensable, are truly the last thing we need.

—*J.T.*