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# THESES ON THEORY AND HISTORY

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**PROLOGUE:  
DEDICATED  
TO CLIO,  
MUSE  
OF  
HISTORY**

Sing Clio, daughter of Zeus, Theory's rage  
at the violations of your charge.  
You, who told Hesiod,  
"we know how to speak false things that seem true,  
but we know when we will, to utter true things."

Now is the time to utter true things, for  
Theory has been dishonored in your house,  
displaced by empires of empiricism,  
fetishism of archives, dictates of discipline,  
enforcement of orthodoxy, and impotent story-telling.

Without Theory, History is naught but tales,  
told by victors and moralists, signifying  
nothing beyond themselves.

Without Theory, the operations of power  
and sources of injustice remain mystified,  
impenetrable to us mortals.

Our observations, when limited to description,  
ill-equip us for the critical thought we so  
desperately need, even to analyze those repositories  
of memory that are your charge.

O Clio, we enlist your ear.  
Listen, please, to our voices of rage.  
With these theses on Theory and History we invite you  
to sanctify our mission and to commend us  
to the gods.



## ON THE LIMITS OF DISCIPLINARY HISTORY

- I.1** *Academic history has never managed to transcend its eighteenth century origins as an empiricist enterprise.* By this we mean not David Hume's earlier skeptical approach but the scientific method intrinsically inked to positivism, which Horkheimer called "modern empiricism" that was later adopted across the human sciences. Academic history remains dedicated to this method of gathering facts in order to produce interpretations by referring them to supposedly given contexts and organizing them into chronological narratives.
- I.2** *Actually existing academic history promotes a disciplinary essentialism founded upon a methodological fetishism.* Treating reified appearances (i.e. immediately observable, preferably archival, evidence) as embodying the real and containing the truth of social relations, it evaluates scholarship based on whether this empiricist method has been capably employed. The field tends to produce scholars rather than thinkers, and regards scholars in technocratic terms. Historians typically write for other professional historians, paying special attention to the disciplinary norms and gatekeepers upon which career advancement depends. This guild mentality fosters an ethos of specialized "experts," workmen who instrumentally employ their "expertise" as proof of membership and performance of status.
- I.3** *The current obsession with "methodology" is premised on this "workman like" approach; the odos or path to historical knowledge is assumed to be singular and those who stray from it are considered lost.* This methodological emphasis narrows the disciplinary path of history, blinding researchers and readers to other

possible routes to the past. In contrast, training in theory lays bare the logic, pitfalls, and advantages behind the choice of any one path.

- I.4** *Lying behind this fetishism of method is an unquestioned allegiance to “ontological realism.”* Central to this epistemology is a commitment to empirical data that serves as a false floor to hold up the assertion that past events are objectively available for discovery, description, and interpretation. Here the tautology is exposed: empiricist methodology enables the rule of this realism while this realism guarantees the success of empiricist methodology.
- I.5** *History, as a field, encourages a system of discipline or punish.* Those whose positions appear to be cutting-edge but hedge their bets and organize their thought around common convention are rewarded, while those who strike out for new territories are condemned. By “new territories” we mean alternative epistemological inquiries, orientations, or starting points, not new themes or topics. The disciplined are rewarded by the guild while the innovators are punished. Nowhere is this disciplining process more apparent than in the review and publication process of the American Historical Association’s flagship journal. The disciplining occurs via the practice of multiple anonymous reviewers policing their disciplinary turf and then congratulating themselves and their authors for their scientific objectivity and resultant meritocracy. The stultifying effect of the process leads to articles that may be broad in terms of geographic and even thematic reach but are stunningly homogenous in terms of their theoretical and methodological approach. Employing large numbers of reviewers creates a veneer of democratic meritocracy while affording even more power to editors than able to select among the many opinions as to what should be allowed to pass. This inevitably leads authors to smooth out their arguments and pull back their claims in an effort to appease the widest possible audience and produce the minimum amount of offense. Only that which is already familiar typically finds its way into the pages of the journal. This and other disciplinary journals typically work to reproduce what counts as professional commonsense, reaffirm guild solidarity, and reproduce boundaries between insiders and outsiders.


- I.6** The editor of the AHR has recently announced a plan to “decolonize” the journal—to correct “decades of exclusionary practice, during which women, people of color, immigrants, and colonized and indigenous people were effectively silenced as producers of scholarship and subjects of historical study.” It promises to do so by diversifying the board of editors, the authors of books reviewed, and the choice of reviewers. It also pledges to solicit articles from a more diverse group of scholars. These are welcome and overdue reforms. But he also notes that “procedures for evaluating article submissions” will not be revised because the existing “process of blind peer review” is already “highly democratic.” By focusing primarily on the provinces and colonies of the reviews section, the editors thus concede that the primary articles will remain firmly under imperial rule. The editor does not acknowledge that decolonizing the journal must also include rethinking the scholarly norms and forms of knowledge that have enabled the kind of exclusions in which the AHR has long participated. By focusing exclusively on sociologically diverse authors and geographically diverse topics, empiricist methodology and realist epistemology will remain in place as the unquestioned disciplinary ground. Once again, existing hegemony is maintained by a nominal pledge to diversity which aims to co-opt rather than transform. *The field and the journal can only really be decolonized by radically reimagining the use and applicability of theory for history.*
- I.7** *Given that historians analyze (the dynamic and changing character of) social formations, relations, experiences, and meanings they cannot do without a solid grasp of critical theory* (whether it be semiotic, psychoanalytic, Marxist, hermeneutic, phenomenological, structuralist, poststructuralist, feminist, postcolonial, queer etc.) as well as an understanding of the history of historical knowledge and the theory of history (theories underpinning historical analysis). Only then can we transcend the false opposition between history and theory by producing theoretically grounded history and historically grounded theory. Few history departments have any faculty dedicated to the theory of history or critical theory and instead rely on occasional courses from members with an interest in the field or those few figures outside of their departments to whom they send their students. This demotes “theory” as peripheral to the “real” work of history but also disciplines the

students to think of theory as a supplementary exercise that is not integral to historical thinking and writing.

- I.8** *History's normal (and normalizing) approach to doctoral training reveals (and reinforces) its anti-theoretical and unreflexive orientation.* Core components usually entail historiography courses and research seminars. The former typically focus on assembling a corpus of significant works in a specific subfield which students read for information (learning the master narratives), time-place-topic mastery (which will be tested in comprehensive exams), and technique (the more or less successful deployment of normative historical methodologies, which can be used or modified in students' own research). Doctoral research seminars typically charge incoming students with writing publishable essays based on primary source materials, as if "doing history" is a self-evident technical undertaking and students need simply to develop the methodological habit of gathering factual evidence to be contextualized and narrated. Although thematic and theoretical courses (of the gender—or fill in the blank—for historians model) are available, it is rare for history doctoral students to be required to study the history of "history" as a form of knowledge, the epistemology of the human sciences, or critical theory.
- I.9** *Disciplinary history usually brackets reflection on its own conditions of possibility: i.e., on what counts as evidence, how methods may prefigure how such evidence may make arguments legible and valid, how such validity implies assumptions about social order and historical transformation; on the relation between social forms and forms of knowledge, accepted ways of relating and acceptable ways of knowing, normative orders and normalizing concepts; on the socio-political fields that inevitably shape and thus over-determine historians' intellectual, professional, and institutional orientations, priorities, and hierarchies. These norms of training and publishing reinforce disciplinary history's tendency to artificially separate data from theory, facts from concepts, research from thinking. This leads "theory" to be reified as a set of ready-made frameworks that can be "applied" to data.*
- I.10** *Theoretical frameworks and concepts that do not comport with disciplinary history's realist epistemology and empiricist*

*methodology are usually consigned to—ghettoized within—"intellectual" history which often relates ideas to society in ways that confirm rather than displace the conventional assumptions of the discipline.* In and of itself, intellectual history is no more likely to raise reflexive questions about historical epistemology and historiographic norms than other professional subfields. Intellectual historians of heterodox thinking (e.g. poststructuralism, psychoanalysis, Marxism) describe the ideas, but rarely use those theories as starting points, methods, or frameworks for their own historical analysis.

- I.11** *History's anti-theoretical preoccupation with empirical facts and realist argument nevertheless entails a set of uninterrogated theoretical assumptions about time and place, intention and agency, proximity and causality, context and chronology. These work, however unwittingly, to reinforce the scholarly and political status quo.*



ON THE RESISTANCE  
TO THEORY

History's resistance to theory has taken many forms:

- II.1 *An invidious distinction between a feminized philosophy and a masculinized history.* So, philosophy is mocked as a frivolous dance with “Fancy French theory,” while history is praised for its solid hard work. Remember that image of the real historian slogging up the 100 steps of the archives in Lyon (as so many penitent pilgrims before her) to search for facts. Philosophy is denounced as speculative (f); history revered as objective (m). The “noble dream” of a pure science (m) has never left the discipline: once moldy rye was offered to explain French revolutionary fervor, today historical “science” takes the form of DNA tests on ancient bones or the application of neuroscience to *mentalités*.
- II.2 *The naturalizing of history* as something out there, waiting to be unearthed; the recovery of the dead as a sure way to know the living. History as the story that tells us; rather than the story we tell about ourselves.
- II.3 *Thematizing i.* Theory as one more turn (a wrong one) in the ever-turning kaleidoscope of historical investigation. The lure of theory is taken to be an aberrant stage in the intellectual history of the discipline, happily outgrown, replaced by a return to more solidly grounded observation.
- II.4 *Thematizing ii.* The objects of theoretical investigation are themselves thematized. So, for example, Foucault's radical epistemological investigations become just another empirical study of prisons or clinics or sexual practices. And “my” prison's differences from Foucault's become a demonstration of the error of his theoretical ways.

- II.5 *Recuperation*, a variation on thematizing. A gestural inclusion that seems to welcome theory (usually offered in the preface or introduction or footnotes to an empirical study), only to ignore its implications in the work that follows. So deconstruction becomes a synonym for interpretation in conventional intellectual histories, Marxism is reduced to economic determinism or the application of “class” to local community studies, and “gender” replicates the sex/gender distinction or the fixity of the m/f opposition in the same way everywhere it is said to occur.
- II.6 *The dismissal of theory i.* In this case structuralist or poststructuralist theory as dangerous relativism: by interrogating the relationship of language to reality, theory is said to compromise the necessary search for truths taken to be self-evident.
- II.7 *The dismissal of theory ii.* The charge that theory—any theory—involves the distorting imposition of fixed ideological categories on self-evident facts. Like the endorsement by some literary scholars of “surface reading,” this charge of distortion is contradicted by the unproblematic recourse of these scholars (historians and literary scholars alike) to so-called objective analytic categories: class, race, gender, and psychoanalytic diagnostics (Oedipus complex, family romance, etc etc).
- II.8 *Disregard for the vagaries of language* and an insistence instead on the literal (“common sense”) meaning of words.



## ON THEORY AND CRITICAL HISTORY

### III.1 *Critical history is theorized history.*

It does not treat “theory” as an isolated corpus of texts or body of knowledge. Nor does it treat theory as a separate, non-historical form, of knowledge. Rather, it regards theory as a worldly practice (and historical artifact). The point is not for historians to become theorists; theory for theory’s sake is as bankrupt as the idea that facts can “speak for themselves.” The point is for disciplinary history to overcome its guild mentality (disciplinary essentialism) and empiricist methodology (methodological fetishism)—to interrogate its “commonsense” assumptions about evidence and reality, subjectivity and agency, context and causality, chronology and temporality. This would require serious engagement with critical theories of self, society, and history.

**III.2** *Critical history does not apply theory to history or call for more theory to be integrated into historical works as if from the outside. Rather, it aims to produce theoretically informed history and historically grounded theory.* Critical history takes non-contiguous, non-proximate arrangements, processes, and forces seriously be they social, symbolic, or psychic structures; fields and relations; or “causes” that may be separated from “effects” by continents or centuries. Critical history reflects on its own conditions of social and historical possibility. It specifies the theoretical assumptions, orientations, and implications of its claims. It elaborates the worldly stakes of its intervention.

**III.3** *Critical history questions and historicizes the realist epistemology underlying both historical empiricism and philosophical rationalism.* It recognizes that inductive history is merely the flip-side of the deductive philosophy that professional history, from its inception, opposed. Each, however differently, separates being from

knowing, world from thought, truth from history. Neither question the underlying relation between social reality and the (socially produced, historically specific) frameworks, categories, methods, and epistemologies through which to understand that reality (whether inductively or deductively). Critical history points beyond the false opposition between empiricist induction and rationalist deduction, and historicist description and transhistorical abstraction.

**III.4** *Critical history recognizes all “facts” as always already mediated, categories as social, and concepts as historical; theory is worldly and concepts do worldly work.* So long as “facts” are equated with “truth,” historians employ a logical contradiction because both the inductive and deductive logic deployed imply a permanent unchanging concept of “truth” that is antithetical to the premises of even the most conservative notions of history: change over time. Training in theory and critical history allows historians to recognize such a contradiction. This then forces them to confront the way that what constitute the “facts” in an historical argument are bound up with the social conditions, the circumstances of the historian, and the range of acceptable questions asked of the past at any given moment in time.

**III.5** *Critical history recognizes that every reference to context (as index of meaning) is itself an argument about social relations and arrangements that cannot be presumed and should be elaborated.* Context is never solely given nor self-evident; context always begs as many questions as it may seem to resolve.

**III.6** *Critical historians are self-reflexive; they recognize that they are psychically, epistemologically, ethically, and politically implicated in their objects of study:*

- a. *psychically*, historians should acknowledge and try to work through, rather than simply act out, their unconscious investments in their material;
- b. *epistemologically*, there may be deep structural relations between the (socially produced) analytic concepts, frameworks, and methods used by historians and the social world being analyzed; every work of history implies or

promotes a particular understanding of social relations and historical transformation;

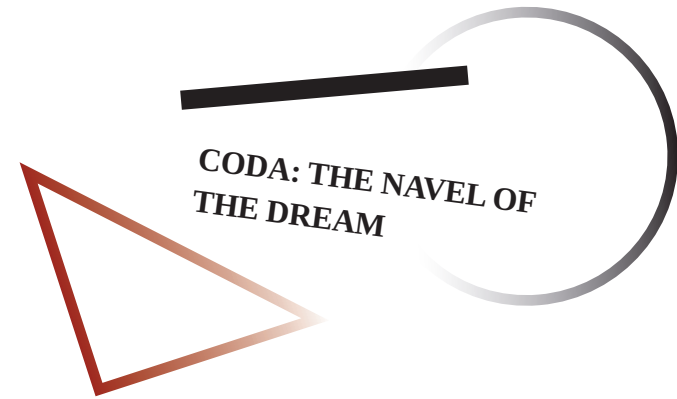
- c. *ethically*, historians bear a responsibility toward—are in some way answerable to—the actors and ideas, as well as their legacies and afterlives, being analyzed;
- d. *politically*, works of history are worldly acts that affirm or question commonsense understandings and existing arrangements, address social contradictions and engage with ongoing struggles implicitly or explicitly.

**III.7** *Critical history is a history of the present* that links past to present dynamically, recognizes both the persisting or repeating character of the past in the present and the non-necessary character of pasts present and presents past—whether through lines of genealogical descent, uncanny returns, haunting traces and spectral forces, or nonsynchronous contradictions within an untimely now.

**III.8** Critical history seeks not only to account for, and thereby denaturalize, actually existing arrangements. *It seeks to challenge the very logic of past and present, now and then, here and there, us and them* upon which both disciplinary history and the actual social order largely depend.

**III.9** *Critical history seeks to intervene in public debates and political struggles.* But rather than seek to collaborate with power as specialized experts, it questions the reduction of thinking to scholarship, scholars to specialization, and the very idea of the rule of experts.

**III.10** *Critical history aims to understand the existing world in order to question the givens of our present so as to create openings for other possible worlds.*



If we think of the historian as akin to the interpreter of dreams, we see that those who look to make literal sense of the dream by presenting it in a chronological, realist, and self-evident manner, are recognized and rewarded. But those whose inquiries lead to the obscure navel of the dream, the place where narratives and interpretation stop making conventional sense, are ignored or dismissed. The danger of a guild so highly disciplined is that the organization of meaning only allows for a narrow band of interpretation that is always aligned with what has come before, with what already “makes sense” (i.e. common sense). Structures of temporality, politics, or even identity that do not conform with convention are ruled out or never seen at all. *The historian equipped with a background in theory is attuned to the navel of the dream, to the places where history does and does not “make sense,” and this is the opening to interpretative and political innovation.*