

After Theory – Terry Eagleton Penguin 2003

For the first time since the 1960's, philosophy is becoming popular reading in the English speaking world. As it became clear that history was going to outlive Francis Fukuyama, both the loyalists to the reign of the market and the rebels sought to marshal the status and tools of philosophy to their causes. And of course the powerful have always sought to legitimate their position by cultivating the right tastes. With the crassness of eighties materialism under suspicion and the failure of the trite new-age platitudes of the nineties to solidify into anything substantial, philosophy has joined a penchant for holidays in Provence and light classical music as a marker of deserved status.

The biographies and guides to the canon that have been filling the philosophy sections of bookstores are increasingly being outsold by work like Alain De Botton's *Consolations of Philosophy*, which uses good humour and some novel interpretations of the canon to develop elegant arguments about the good life. De Botton might not have much politics, which means that he is conservative, but he is a good entertainer. The downside of the mini-boom in popular philosophy publishing is that people have thought it worth a shot to write and publish books like Colin McGinn's excruciatingly boring and stolidly written *The Making of a Philosopher*. The life of an ordinary academic philosopher is just not interesting. It's not for nothing that in his new book, *After Theory*, Terry Eagleton notes that 'a snap definition of intellectuals might be that they are the opposite of academics.'

But something very interesting is happening. In 2002 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's monumentally ambitious and in parts quite difficult *Empire*, hailed by the Slovenian Philosopher Slavoj Zizek as 'the new communist manifesto', was sold out in cities around the world. The book's hubris doesn't completely disguise the genuine philosophical value of its Spinozan and Italian Marxism inspired 'float like a butterfly sting like a bee' radicalism. For some time marginality had been turned into a fetish and many 'progressive' people had assumed that it was a virtue rather than a disabling consequence of defeat. *Empire* smashed the fetish of the marginal in philosophy with as much vigour as Rage Against the Machine smashed it in music. After years of being about as important and dangerous as philately, philosophy began to matter again in the way that Sartre, Camus and Fanon's work became part of the general intellect in their time. Navel gazing is passé. Writing to be understood and to changing the world is back on the agenda.

Eagleton's *After Theory* was hailed as philosophically serious and important on arrival and is destined to be far more popular than anything he has written before. It's not the first book to be titled *After Theory*, but it is the first book to take on the pretensions of 'high theory', especially as articulated through postmodernism and cultural studies, explain its claims, evaluate them and offer alternative ideas and projects in plain language and with lots of excellent humour. With three or four stand alone one-liners on most pages and ideas concretized with examples from popular culture (as well as Aristotle, the Book of Isaiah, Shakespeare and Marx) and ordinary life, it is a rollicking good read and a welcome corrective to the laborious Derridean obscurantism that some still mistake for wisdom.

Eagleton is happy to concede that high theory has entrenched some useful if not original insights such as the ideas that human beings are about desire and fantasy as much as reason, that ordinary life is an important focus of critical attention and that seriousness and pleasure are not necessarily separate. But he also argues that it has a disabling tendency towards the valorisation of the experiences of elites and the disregard for the experiences of ordinary people. He is deeply skeptical about, say, an Indian academic moving between Oxford and Harvard who celebrates cosmopolitanism and hybridity as the vanguard of post-coloniality while saying nothing about the children sewing Nike shoes in Delhi. He is equally skeptical about academics who reject the idea of progress without rejecting dental anesthetics. And he shows that post-modern arguments are very easily deployed by overtly reactionary agendas. He explores the attraction of postmodern arguments about liminality and diversity to reactionary Ulster academics. Reactionary Afrikaaner academics have made very similar use of postmodernism.

But the essence of Eagleton's critique goes deeper and is more interesting than his attacks on the pompous narcissism of Theory. He argues that postmodernism is a symptom of capitalism and not, as it claims, critical theory. Postmodernism celebrates the non-normative and sees redemption in diversity and transgression. Eagleton's point is that 'the non-normative has become the norm...the norm is now money'. 'Money', he notes, 'is utterly promiscuous' and infinitely adaptive without any opinions of its own. Body piercing and Kwanza and sado-masochism are all just niche markets. They pose no threat to capital. And while capitalism has invented or exacerbated social divisions and exclusions when alliances with local elites are to its advantage it is, in principle, 'an impeccably inclusive creed, it really doesn't care who it exploits...Most of the time it is eager to mix together as many diverse cultures as possible, so that it can peddle its commodities to them all...It thrives on bursting bounds and slaying sacred cows. Its desire is unslakeable and its space infinite. Its law is the flouting of all limits.'

Eagleton argues that the rise of the global anti-capitalist movements has shown that thinking globally is not the same as being totalitarian and develops a range of arguments against the postmodern critique of its own caricature of radical politics. For example he observes that conviction is not the same as authoritarianism and truth is not the same as dogmatism. One can be passionately democratic and committed to the truth that experiences differ. He argues for a radicalism that gives ontological priority to experience of the poor and seeks to enable collective action to sub-ordinate the market to democratic control.

Once one has learnt the jargon of high theory it is quite easy to prick its wildly over inflated balloons. But Eagleton goes further and shows that it is entirely possible to return to questions that matter. He develops stimulating and important meditations on virtue, suffering, death, politics and revolution. But his consideration of these questions is primarily ethical with the result that the hard political questions about strategy are not taken on.

Omissions are inevitable, but the book does have one obvious failing. Eagleton makes much of Hardt and Negri's argument that the poor have an ontological privilege when it comes to rebellion because they incarnate the failure of the system and so have less delusions about it and less of a stake in the system. But he ignores Hardt and Negri's

warnings about anti-Americanism. Eagleton's scathing contempt for American consumerism and fundamentalism is persuasive and his argument that these are two, mutually dependent, consequences of the same ethical and political failure to respect the dignity of ordinary people is very interesting. But he completely ignores the radical America that Howard Zinn's history records and takes no account of the genuine popularity of radicals like John Steinbeck, Woody Guthrie and, in the current era, Bruce Springsteen. This omission gives Eagleton's account of America something of the feeling of a very English caricature.

After Theory is not written for a non-specialist audience. Slavoj Žižek and Frank Kermode are wildly enthusiastic about it. But it will be particularly appreciated by people whose encounters with 'high theory' have been intimidating rather than enlightening. It proves the validity of Nietzsche's dictum that "Those who know they are profound strive for clarity: those who would like to seem profound...strive for obscurity." Hopefully, *After Theory* will prove to be one of many new books that seek to explore important philosophical questions in a spirit vastly more democratic than the narcissistic obscuratism of high theory.