Thinking Dangerously in an Age of Political Betrayal

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> Thinking is not the intellectual reproduction of what already exists anyway. As long as it doesn't break off, thinking has a secure hold on possibility....Open thinking points beyond itself.
> — Adorno

> hat is, there are no dangerous thoughts for the simple reason that thinking itself is such a dangerous enterprise. ... nonthinking is even more dangerous.
> — Hannah Arendt

Thinking has become dangerous in the United States. The symptoms are everywhere, but one symptomatic display of anti-enlightenment, religious fundamentalism can be observed in the Texas GOP Party platform which states, among other things, that "We oppose teaching of Higher order Thinking Skills [because they] have the purpose of challenging the student's fixed beliefs and undermining parental control" to a Tennessee bill that "allows the teaching of creationism in state's classrooms."[1] Couple this with the call on the part of the Texas Republican party to ban the income tax, eliminate corporate taxes, sack the Environmental Protection Agency, the Department of Education, and the Department of energy, along with policies designed to force teachers to teach creationism and climate change denial in the schools.[2] What is often ignored in the reporting of such overt displays of ignorance is that religious and ideological fundamentalism are at the root of a right-wing political movement to mis-educate young people, keep the American public ignorant, and hasten a return to the Gilded Age. Just in case, students disagree with this retreat into ignorance, one freshman Tea Party representative in Arizona is pushing a Loyalty Oath bill in which "public high school students in Arizona will have to 'recite an oath supporting the U.S. Constitution' to receive a graduation diploma."[3] But, ignorance is not simply a matter of pedagogy, it also drives a great deal of state and federal policy. For example, the Koch brothers financed American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) "hit the ground running in 2013, pushing "models bills" mandating the teaching of climate change denial in public school systems."[4] At the same time, policy makers at the state level define a return to the Dark Ages as progress. As John Atcheson observes,

> For example, North Carolina law-makers recently passed legislation against sea level rise. A day later, the Virginia legislature required that references to global warming, climate change and sea level rise be excised from a proposed study on sea level rise. Last year, the Texas Department of Environmental Quality, which had commissioned a study on Galveston Bay, cut all references to sea level rise – the main point of the study. We are, indeed, at an epochal threshold. As Stephen Colbert so aptly put it: if your science gives you results you don't like, pass a law saying that the result is illegal. Problem solved. Except it isn't. Wishing reality away, doesn't make it go away. Pretending that the unreal is real doesn't make it real.[5]

At a time when anti-intellectualism runs rampart throughout popular culture and the political landscape, it seems imperative to once again remind ourselves of how important critical thought as a crucible for thinking analytically can be both a resource and an indispensable tool. If critical thought, sometimes disparaged as theory, gets a bad name, it is not because it is inherently dogmatic, jargonistic, or rigidly specialized, but because it is often abused or because it becomes a tool of irrelevancy—a form of theoreticism in which theory becomes an end in itself. This abuse of critical thought appears to have a particularly strong hold in the humanities, especially among many

graduate students in English departments who often succumb to surrendering their own voices to class projects and dissertations filled with obtuse jargon associated with the most fashionable theorists of the moment. Such work is largely rewarded less for its originality than the fact that it threatens no one.

What is sad about the issue of losing one's voice is that it is the first step in the triumph of formalism over substance. Endnotes become more important than content, ideas lose their grip on reality, and fashion becomes a rationale for discarding historical scholarship and the work of older (unfashionable) public intellectuals such as C.W.Mills, Ellen Willis, Paul Sweezy, or even James Baldwin.

At the same time there are many students who find the esoteric language associated with dangerous thinking and critical thought to be too difficult to master or engage. The latter points to the fact that some theories may be useless because they are too impenetrable to decipher or that there are theories which support bad practices such as high-stakes testing, creationism, faith-based evidence, the spanking of children, incarcerating children as adults, and other assumptions and policies that are equally poisonous. Theory is not inherently good or bad. Its meaning and efficacy are rooted in a politics of usefulness, accessibility, and whether it can be used resourcefully to articulate frameworks and tools that deepen the possibility of self-reflection, critical thought, and a sense of social responsibility. For instance, a theory is bad if it inadequately grasps the forces at work in the world and simply reproduces it as it is. Theory is also injurious when it is used to legitimate modes of inquiry and research that are bought by corporations, the military, and other state and private institutions to legitimate dangerous products, policies, and social practices.

Theory has no guarantees and like any other mode of thought it has to be problematized, critically engaged, and judged in terms of its interests, effects, and value as part of a broader enhancement of human agency and democratization. At its best, theory, thinking dangerously, and critical thought have the power to shift the questions, provide the tools for offering historical and relational contexts, and "push at the frontiers…of the human imagination."[6] Moreover, theory functions as a critical resource when it can intervene in the "continuity of commonsense, unsettle strategies of domination," and work to promote strategies of transformation.[7] As Adorno observes, "Theory speaks for what is not narrow-minded—and commonsense most certainly is."[8] As such, theory is not only analytical in its search for understanding and truth, it is also critical and subversive, always employing modes of self and social critique necessary to examine its own grounds and those poisonous fundamentalisms in the larger society haunting the body politic. As Michael Payne observes, theory should be cast in the language of hints, dialogue, and an openness to other positions, rather than be "cast in the language or orders."[9]

It is important to note that defending critical thought, thinking dangerously, and theory is not the same as solely mounting a defense of academics as public intellectuals or the university as the only site of critical thought, though both are important. When defined this way, theory is easily dismissed as an academic exercise and practice mediated through an impenetrable and often incomprehensible vocabulary. Theory and the frameworks it supports are just one important political register that keeps alive the notion that critical reflection and thought are necessary not only to address the diverse symbolic and material realities of power, but also for engaging in informed action willing to address important social issues. In this respect, as Lawrence Grossberg has brilliantly argued, theory is a crucial tool that enables one to respond to and provide a better understanding of problems as they emerge in a variety of historical and distinctive contexts.[10] Hence, theory becomes a toolbox that guides the work of many artists, journalists, and other cultural workers in a variety of public spheres who are well aware that their work has consequences when translated into daily life and must be the object of self-reflection.[11] Paraphrasing Grossberg, theory is not simply about the production of meaning but also the making of effects. At the same time, critical thought functions to "lift…human beings above the evidence of our senses and sets appearances apart from the truth."[12] Salmon Rushdie gestures towards the political necessity of critical thought, informed action, and its effects by insisting that "It's a vexing time for those of us who believe in the right of artists, intellectuals and ordinary, affronted citizens to push boundaries and take risks and so, at times, to change the way we see the world."[13] As Hannah Arendt noted, thoughtfulness, the ability to think reflectively and critically is a fundamental necessity in a functioning democracy. And the formative cultures that make such thinking possible along with the spaces in which dialogue, debate, and dissent can flourish are essential to producing critical literate and actively engaged citizens. This is especially true at a time when as Jonathan Crary points out "Mechanisms of command and effects of normalization [have] penetrated almost everywhere" and they have become "internalized in a more comprehensive, micro-logical way than the disciplinary power of the nineteenth and much of the twentieth century."[14]

Theory is at its weakest and most oppressive when it supports a commonsense understanding of the framing mechanisms that guide the actions of human beings. One consequence is that it disavows dialogue and critique, and shapes knowledge and ideas into fixed and absolute meanings. It also shuts down analysis and poisons the

culture with an orthodoxy that limits critical agency to following the orders of others. As such, it is transformed into a pedagogical parasite on the body of democracy. This is quite different than a call for theory and critical thought that practice rigorous analytic work enabling students, intellectuals, artists, and journalists to be attentive to how they function as individual and social agents. Bad theory is also at fault for failing to address and engage the layered, complex social, political, economic, and cultural forces that shape not only our desires, values, and modes of identification, but also guide, direct, and the commanding ideologies and institutions of society. As a form of intellectual inquiry, theory thrives in those public spaces that both legitimate the world of ideas and refuse to separate them from addressing the major troubles of our time. At the same time, it is an important register, if not a reminder in such perilous times, for determining as Judith Butler observes, "not only the question of whether certain kinds of ideas and positions can be permitted in public space, but how public space is itself defined by certain kinds of exclusions, certain emerging patterns of censoriousness and censorship."[15] Rather than being a mechanistic enterprise, offering formulas and recipes, theory should provide the frameworks and tools for what it means to be a thoughtful, judicious, layered, complex and critical thinker willing to engage in communicative and collective action. Theory does not resemble the discourse of blind action, a stripped down instrumental rationality, or the vision of accountants. Nor, in this instance, does theory become an end in itself, an ossified discourse that defines itself to the degree to which it is removed itself from the world and vanishes in a black hole of irrelevancy and opaqueness. Theory as a critical enterprise is about both a search for the truth and a commitment to the practice of freedom. Not one or the other but both. Theory should be used to both understand and engage the major upheavals people face and to connect such problems to larger political, structural, and economic issues. In addition, theory is invaluable as a response to particular problems, allowing intellectuals, artists, academics, students, and others to connect their intellectual work and critical inquiries to the daily realities and struggles of a world in upheaval, one that is moving quickly into the clutches of a new type of authoritarianism.

America has moved a great distance away from the critical theories of thinkers such as Sigmund Freud, Jacques Derrida, Theodor Adorno, Edward Said, Herbert Marcuse, Leo Lowenthal, Ellen Willis, Simone de Beauvoir, and others. At the current historical moment, critical thinking is utterly devalued, viewed either as a nostalgic leftover of the weighty ideological and political battles that characterized the period roughly extending from the 1960s to the late 1980s or theory is dismissed as the province of overly privileged and pampered academics. Critical ideas and concepts in support of an equality, justice, freedom, and democracy, in particular, have lost their material and political grounding and have become sound bites either scorned by mainstream politicians or appropriated only to be turned into their opposite. Unfortunately for the promise of democracy, those who advocate theory and critical thought in the service of civic courage, engaged citizenship, and social responsibility are now either viewed as eggheads, elitist, or traitors. In this instance, theory is disdained and used as a form of self-sabotage, reduced to politically illiterate narratives couched in the discourse of critical thinking. How else to explain the disingenuous portrayal in the mainstream press of George Will, Thomas Friedman, and David Brooks as public intellectuals, despite the fact that they trade in a kind of ersatz theory. In the latter case, theory becomes a weapon used to empty language of any meaning, employed primarily to make war on the possibility of real communication, all the while reinforcing the ideology of demagogues.

If theory once inspired critical practice both in and out of the university, it seems that the heyday of critically informed thinking is over. As higher education has become corporatized, teaching and learning are increasingly defined through the metrics of commerce and profit while students are viewed largely as consumers. Critical thought and dangerous thinking is now viewed as beyond the pale of market considerations and thereby is seen as having little value. This is particularly true since the radical right has not only taken seriously the notion that pedagogy and changing consciousness is the essence of politics, but also have developed cultural apparatuses outside of the university that function as powerful forms of public pedagogy in promoting the values of a number of fundamentalisms, including religious, educational, and market-driven ideologies. Culture for the right-wing has always been a crucial site of power in the modern world and they have used this machinery of public pedagogy to create market-addicted subjects who appear hopelessly captive to the illiterate ideologies and slogans pumped out by Fox News, right-wing talk radio, and the editorial section of the Wall Street Journal. Ideas matter in this instance, but not in the service of freedom or justice.

Sound bites now pass for erudite commentary and merge with the banality of celebrity culture which produces its own self-serving illiteracy and cult of privatization and consumerism. Moreover, as the power of communication and language wanes, collapsing into the seepage of hateful discourses, the eager cheerleaders of casino capitalism along with the ever-present anti-public intellectuals dominate the airwaves and screen culture in order to aggressively

wage a war against all public institutions, youth, women, immigrants, unions, poor minorities, the homeless, gays, workers, the unemployed, poor children, and others. In this instance, thinking degenerates into forms of ideological boosterism and the crucial potential of thinking to serve as a dynamic resource disappears from the American cultural and academic landscapes. When thinking itself becomes dangerous, society loses its ability to question itself and paves the way authoritarian regimes of power. The success of conservatives in colonizing, if not undermining, any model of critical reflection often takes place by reducing thought to a matter of commonsense while supporting rampant forms of anti-intellectualism—most evident in the Republican Party's recent war on evidence-based arguments, science, and reason itself. At the same time, the success on the part of right-wing ideologues, conservative foundations, and anti-public intellectuals to shape domestic and foreign policy and gain the support of most Americans for doing so speaks to a roundly successful pedagogical and political strategy to manipulate public opinion while legitimating the rise of an authoritarian. At the least, this war on reason and politics raises serious questions about the failure of the academy to counter such views. In particular, it raises questions about the alienating nature of what passes for critical thought, theory, and informed commentary in the academy. Moreover, the issue here is not weather critical intellectuals can use theory to solve the myriad problems facing the United States and the larger world, but what role critical thought plays in various sites as crucial to developing the formative culture that produces critical modes of agency and makes democracy possible.

The assault on critical thought is taking place in a variety of spheres, including higher education, especially at a time when corporatism, a mad empiricism, and market-driven ideologies are the dominant forces at work in defining what counts as labour, research, pedagogy, journalism, and learning. The notion that thinking dangerously produces forms of literacy in which knowledge is related to issues of agency, public values, and social problems is quickly disappearing from higher education and other sites. For example, Republican governors in states such as Texas, Maine, and Florida defunding those fields of study in higher education that cannot be measured in economic terms, while redefining the mission of the university as merely an adjunct of corporations, the military-industrial complex, and government intelligence agencies. Unfortunately, higher education houses an increasing number of intellectuals who have slipped into diverse forms of unprincipled careerism in which matters of critical thought have less to do with politics and power, or social justice for that matter, than with a kind of arcane cleverness--a sort of ineffectual performance that allows them to threaten no one. This probably sounds harsh, but personally I have seen this trend growing since the 1980s and actually believe it has a lot do with the cultural capital and investment in careerism that many academics now bring to the academy and their roles as intellectuals—partly a response to the corporatization of the university. These are middle and ruling class intellectuals on the move, always looking for new opportunities, all too willing to be quiet, safe, and ready and eager for the next promotion. In addition, too many academics are giving in to the seductions and rewards of corporate power, and are complicit in destroying theory and critical thought as tools that enable faculty and students to relate the self to others, public values, and the demands of a robust democracy. Of course, what often happens in this case is that by not having any viable vision or sense of the political, for that matter, such academics do an incredible injustice not only to their roles as potential public intellectuals but also to critical thought itself. As Larry Grossberg once put it, they are clueless in taking up the challenge of theorizing the political and politicizing theory.

What is sad about this state of affairs is that theorizing the politics of the twenty-first century may be the most important challenge facing the academy and any other public sphere committed to critical thinking, thoughtfulness, dialogue, and the radical imagination. If we lose control of those spheres that cultivate the knowledge and skills necessary for rigorous analysis along with a culture of questioning, it will become more and more difficult for students and others to question authority, challenge commonsense assumptions, and hold power accountable. Thinking, theory, and ideas become critical and transformative when they become meaningful and have some purchase on peoples' lives. They also play a powerful role in shaping the formative cultures necessary to keep the spirit of democracy alive in a society. Theory or general frameworks of thought are always at work in what we say and practice. The question is whether we are aware of them and whether they constitute a hidden dimension of thought or are critically engaged frameworks. But the so called abuse of theory and critical thought in the academy is not simply the fault of errant professionalism and careerism. Defining theory and dangerous thinking as part of a critical pedagogy and emancipatory project becomes increasingly difficult for part-time faculty and those not on the tenure line who are harnessed with the increased pressures posed by the corporate university coupled with the market-driven production of an ongoing culture of uncertainty, insecurity, and fear which makes the black hole of despair more paralyzing and crippling.

Killing the imagination and the quest for truth is not too difficult when faculty are struggling to survive the

tasks of teaching too many courses, receiving poverty wages for their teaching, laboring under savage debts, and are excluded from the power relations that govern their time. Under such circumstances, time becomes a burden rather than a luxury to be used to enable one to be self –reflective, thoughtful, and capable of critically examining the assumptions and institutions that shape our lives. Of course, at the same time, there are still a number of public intellectuals including Cornell West, Chris Hedges, and Stanley Aronowitz to Gayatri Spivak and Dorothy Roberts who use theory to address a range of social problems both in and outside of the university including issues such as right-wing fundamentalism, the attack on the welfare state, racism in America, and a host of other issues. Moreover, there has been a resurgence of public intellectuals in and outside of the academy who are refiguring the role of dangerous thinking and critical thought as central pedagogical elements in fashioning a new language for politics, one that begins with the question of what a democracy should look like and in whose interest it should operate. Such intellectuals refuse the notion that any appeal to theory automatically makes them suspect. All of these intellectuals accept the notion that thinking becomes critical when it "brings theory into the focus of analysis by refusing to accept its authority without proof, by denuding that the grounds on which is authority is claimed be revealed, and, eventually, by questioning those grounds… theory is an activity rather than a body of knowledge…in that it produces practices" and refuses to be satisfied with the world as it is.[16]

On the other side, the diatribes against theory and dangerous thinking by the press, media, etc. can be construed as a kind of resentment, the product of a turf war, a defense of neoliberal fundamentalism, or an expression of ignorance and anti-intellectualism in the service of power. Of course, it is all these and more, but I think one important issue highlighted by Bob McChesney and others lies in the corporatizing of the media and its ongoing refusal to address important problems with intellectual rigor and theoretical depth--not to mention any simple honesty (Fox being the most obvious and horrible example).[17] The dominant media have become lap dogs to corporate power, serving largely as a source of entertainment, hate, and militarism, all provided in ways that resemble barking commands. Public spaces are simply being eaten up and turned into offshoots of what Fox News and hate right-wing talk radio have become, a toxic advertisement for various elements of right wing and fundamentalist discourses. Of course, there are alternative public spheres and one should never underestimate the power of resistance, even in times such as ours, but the colonizing of alternative views, ideas, and knowledge available to people constitutes not only a crisis of theory and critical thought but a crisis of pedagogy and democracy itself. This is not new, but it has become more intensified and dangerous. But in the current historical conjuncture, serious questions have to be raised about what role artists, intellectuals, journalists, writers, and other cultural workers might play in challenging the authoritarian state while deepening and expanding the process of democratization. One answer might be found in the important work of people like Edward Said, Pierre Bourdieu, Arundhati Roy, Noam Chomsky, Cornel West, Naomi Klein, Stanley Aronowitz, Bill Mckibben, and others who have provided important work in this regard.

One important function of dangerous thinking is that it foregrounds the responsibility of artists, intellectuals, academics and others who use it. Mapping the full range of how power is used and how it can be made accountable represents a productive pedagogical and political use of theory. Theorizing the political, economic, and cultural landscapes is central to any form of political activism and suggests that theory is like oxygen. That is, a valuable resource, which one has to become conscious of in order to realize how necessary it is to have it. Where we should take pause is when academic culture uses critical thought in the service of ideological purity and in doing so transforms pedagogy in to forms of poisonous indoctrination for students. Critical thought in this case ossifies from a practice to a form of political dogmatism. The cheerleads for casino capitalism hate critical theory and thought because they contain the possibility of politicizing everyday life and exposing those savage market driven ideologies, practices, and social relations that hide behind an appeal to commonsense. Both the fetishism of thinking and its dismissal are part of the same coin, the overall refusal to link conception and practice, agency and intervention, all aggravated by neoliberalism's hatred of all things social and public.

While there is more than enough evidence to distrust the appeal to democracy, especially in light of how the term is utterly debased at all levels of mainstream politics and in the culture in general, I think it is a term with a long legacy of struggle and needs to be reclaimed and fought over rather than abandoned. Derrida is particularly instructive in his insistence on distinguishing between the reality and promise of democracy—a distinction that points to democracy as a signpost that anticipates something better and in doing so offers a political and moral referent to think and act otherwise. I also think that the left and liberals have lost sight of the power of democracy as a term that can bring together a variety of diverse struggles, thus providing a referent for moving beyond particularized struggles while not abandoning them.

As part of an appeal to radical democracy, I think it is crucial for educators and other cultural workers to find

ways to talk about the social contract as a means of both invoking matters of the social and justice, or what John Rawls once called "the infrastructure of justice, and also affirming freedom as a constitutive part of the social, rather than in opposition to the social. Young people have raised serious questions about what a democracy looks like and who it might serve. Critically interrogating the meaning, reality, misappropriation and promise of democracy along with the necessary agents to have it come into fruition is an important political task.

The right-wing in its various guises has deeply devalued any democratic notion of the social and critical thought that it has become difficult to think in terms outside of the survival-of the-fittest ethic and culture of cruelty that now dominates reality TV, the bullies who set policy in Washington, and the sycophants who are media cheerleaders for Obama, the bankers, and corporate America. Fortunately, we have a number of brave souls in and out of the academy who refuse to give up the language of democracy–from Harvey Kay and Chris Hedges to the indomitable and courageous Bill Moyers.

Needless to say ideas without institutions in which they can be nurtured tend to fall to the margins of society. This is all the more reason to defend public and higher education and all of those public spheres where democratic ideas, values, and practices are taken seriously, and intellectual rigor becomes the norm rather than a side show. Think of the informed critical writing and interviews one can find in Truthout, Salon, Truthdig, Monthly Review Zine, Democracy Now, TomDispatch.com and a range of other online sites that refuse prescriptions and barking commands. These are the new cultural apparatuses of freedom for the 21st century and they need to be defended in the name of dangerous forms of thinking that are self-reflective, infused with democratic values, and expand the public good.

Critical thought and thinking dangerously are not just about reading texts and screen culture closely or for that matter using abstract models of language to explain the arc of history, politics, and human behavior. They are also about the frameworks we develop in terms of how we deal with power, treat one another, and develop a sense of compassion for others and the planet. I was so taken a few years ago by a similar sentiment reflected in a story that Jürgen Habermas told about being at Herbert Marcuse's side as he was dying and being moved by Marcuse's last few words "I know wherein our most basic value judgment are rooted--in compassion, in our sense of the suffering of others."[18] While it makes little sense to be trapped in a kind of ossified intellectual rigor, there is no excuse for believing that action uninformed by theory is anything but an expression of thoughtlessness.

We live in an era when conservatives and the financial elite collapse public concerns into private interests, define people largely as consumers, and consider everyone potential terrorists. Moreover, the apostles of neoliberal capitalism militarize and commodify the entire society, consider youth as nothing more than a source of profit, define education as training, undermine the welfare state in favor of a warfare state, and define democracy as synonymous with the language of capital. We live in a period that the late Gil Scott-Herron once called "winter in America." As the forces of authoritarianism sweep over every major institution in America, the time for wide-spread resistance and radical democratic change has never been so urgent. Such change will not come unless the call for political and economic change is matched by a change in subjectivity, consciousness, and the desire for a better world. This is, in part, a theoretical challenge and supports individual and collective efforts to reconfigure those public spheres where theory can emerge and be refined into modes of critique, understanding, and collective action. As a mode of resistance, dangerous thinking is the basis for a formative and pedagogical culture of questioning and politics that takes seriously how knowledge can become central to the practice of freedom, justice, and democratic change. At a time of lowered expectations, thinking dangerously raises the bar and points to making the impossible, once again, all the more possible.

Endnotes

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