



After Theory

Terry Eagleton

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As heralded everywhere from NPR to the pages of the *New York Times Magazine*, a new era is underway in our colleges and universities: after a lengthy tenure, the dominance of postmodern theory has come to an end. In this timely and topical book, the legendary Terry Eagleton ("one of [our] best-known public intellectuals." -*Boston Globe*) traces the rise and fall of these ideas from the 1960s through the 1990s, candidly assessing the resultant gains and losses. What's needed now, *After Theory* argues, is a return to the big questions and grand narratives. Today's global politics demand we pay attention to a range of topics that have gone ignored by the academy and public alike, from fundamentalism to objectivity, religion to ethics. Fresh, provocative, and consistently engaging, Eagleton's latest salvo will challenge everyone looking to better grasp the state of the world.

After Theory Details

Date : Published 2004 by Basic Books (first published 2003)

ISBN : 9780465017744

Author : Terry Eagleton

Format : Paperback 240 pages

Genre : Philosophy, Nonfiction, Theory, Criticism, Literary Criticism

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Jonfaith says

When the very foundations of your civilization are literally under fire, however, pragmatism in the theoretical sense of the word seems altogether too lightweight, laid-back a response.

After Theory begins as an intellectual history and concludes as a cautionary tale. Unfortunately in between there is a messy didactic midriff where Eagleton labors to define Truth and Morality. Such an exploration undercuts the wonderful narrative of the opening chapters where Eagleton paints with tremendous skill and never avoids landing a quick jab:

The most avant-garde cultural journal of the period, the French literary organ Tel Quel, discovered an ephemeral alternative to Stalinism in Maoism. This is rather like finding an alternative to heroin in crack cocaine.

and

Fate pushed Roland Barthes under a Parisian laundry van, and afflicted Michel Foucault with Aids. . . It seemed that God was not a structuralist.

Eagleton weaves his history of Theory and points that its time has now passed. It thrived from 1965-80 and compares this fifteen years with rupture of High Modernism from 1910-1925. He argues that Barthes, Derrida and others were the Joyce and Schoenberg of this later, messier time. He also notes how most of the Theory Gang were left leaning if not further radicalized. The proximity to May '68 isn't really confronted subsequently nor the spot of bother which was both the Cultural Revolution as well as the Islamic Revolution of Iran 1979, the latter of which proved to be a pickle for Foucault. I suppose this is picking battles but such remains distracting, especially given the strange turn the book takes to epistemology and ethics, which comprise chapters 4-7, nearly half of the text. I would give the work two stars on such a twisted agenda but the writing and humor are deserving of more.

John David says

Being a theorist – cultural, literary, or anything else – could be intimidating if you're doing it after the impressively productive years of the '60s and '70s. These were the acme years of people like Habermas, Derrida, Bourdieu, Foucault, Lyotard, Rorty, Jameson, and several others who played a major role in completely reshaping what theory means inside and outside of academic discourse. In "After Theory," Eagleton confronts a world where many of these people's ideas, once considered controversial, are now practically de rigueur. He also shows himself to be a very different thinker than I've always assumed him to be. His socialism has hardly abated, but for some reason, I always had him pegged as a staunch postmodernist, too. But that couldn't be further from the case.

The structure of the book is a bit confused and unfocused. The first half consists of statements about the birth of postmodern theory which are true enough, but Eagleton gives you no idea of what he's trying to establish or any point he's trying to make. Perhaps he was trying to spell out some basic postmodern assumptions: a

deep distrust of grand narratives, truth, and objectivity, and an overt focus on culture that wasn't there in modernism. The second half quickly becomes focused and razor-sharp. He comes out to defend the idea of truth, objectivity, and the morality and ethics as theoretical pursuits. And he makes these arguments brilliantly – by showing that, if postmodern assumptions were true, then postmodernism itself couldn't be, i.e. by showing that it's internally inconsistent. To pick an exceedingly simple example, if truth didn't exist, then neither could the statements of postmodernism be considered true. He ends by saying that postmodernists have a bad history of associating all of these things – narratives, truth, objectivity, et cetera – with fundamentalism, and showing why this makes absolutely no sense.

If you're even somewhat familiar with the overall shape that theory has taken over the last fifty or so years, and have serious doubts about some of its claims, you've probably thought about some of the things that Eagleton talks about here. I know I have. I just wish that I was able to articulate them so capably. There's one major gripe that I have with the book: some of his pronouncements about American leaders and foreign policy seem grossly strident and out of place. Whether one agrees or not isn't really the point, either: they just looked embarrassing in a book in a book that was mostly about the internal contradictions of postmodernism and critical theory. Well, that, and the slow, bumbling start that I mentioned above. But if you stick with it, he does actually get around to making some important points that really make you scratch your head as to how these ideas could have been held so uncritically by such otherwise intelligent people.

roz_anthi says

Απλούς και απολαυστικούς. Ο Eagleton για μένα αντιπροσωπεύει το φίος που ιδανικό θα αποζητούσα σε λοιπούς τους φίλοισθενούς. Και, χοντας παρακολουθείσει από κοντά μια ομιλία του, μπορεί να πω πώς ο τρόπος που γράφει δεν αποχειρεύει καθηλους από τον τρόπο που μιλάει: φυσική τητα, χιονομορ, στρεγη αναλυτικό σκηνή που δεν προφέτει στην παγδά του δογματισμού;. Ήνας ωραίος, σύγχρονος μαρξιστός.

Ryan says

Great book for students of theory; Eagleton offers an astute synthesis of the "big metaphysical questions" that often go overlooked because of disciplinary boundaries....

Okay, I just finished this book. I was having a hard time getting through the last pages because Eagleton relies so heavily on theory, but then I got to the PostScript and it made the book worth it. Don't read this book if you're conservative, it will make your head spin. If you have even a moderately progressive bent to your political beliefs, the PostScript of this book will renew your energy and faith.

sologdin says

Surly leftist ponders the demise of high theory, which has been perhaps greatly exaggerated.

Starts with the proposition that "if theory means a reasonably systematic reflection on our guiding assumptions, it remains as indispensable as ever" (2), which is consistent with the author's other twenty or so

books, all of them serious monographs on theory.

And then moves into assorted kvetching about the types of things into which theory has gotten itself, such as sexuality, colonialism, and so on—as against the signature concerns of Marxism. It is in some ways an intraleft critique by Marxism of Marxism’s prodigal children.

Includes at no extra cost some well-placed uppercuts to the Bush regime back in the early days of the Iraq War. We are all nostalgic for Bush the Younger now, I think.

Amanda says

Although I don't always agree with Terry Eagleton, this book was a great read. Eagleton's writing allows the everyman access to artistic theoretical views. Informative and humorous, Eagleton makes theory much less boring

Szplug says

Notwithstanding the constraints that Eagleton's Marxist mores place upon the socio-cultural interpretation herein, this is lucidly expressed and soundly reasoned stuff, if a touch too diverse and unfocused. It's curious how much Eagleton's polemical tenor reminds me of the French intellectual Pascal Bruckner—of whom I've recently read—though the latter's political stances would only intermittently be in accord with those of the author; while Eagleton's reasoning about the reversed universal/particular and confident/cautious stances of the Postmodern Right and Left both align with and diverge from those subsequently expressed by the likes of John Lukacs and John Gray. Which is all to say that Eagleton's generalized but well-considered interpretation of how *Cultural Theory* was expounded upon and extended by a select group of profound but elusive thinkers in the second half of the twentieth century, carving out a theoretical and antagonistic niche where it served, in a manner, as a sort of ersatz metaphysics, become the new font of ideation to be used against an Enlightenment reason that set the bar for humanity's progress so high only to savagely kick the supports out from beneath us such that we were forced to scramble for some manner of hold to maintain our precarious position, gets at several important truths and impetuses for how cultural and linguistic anthropology led us to this pervasive adherence to signification, semiology, and relativism.

What we opted for was language analysis taken unto a formalism that qualified everything and stripped it of all pretense towards certainty. This was an almost inevitable process, with the revelations of science and technology and the shocks they, and the terrific eruptions of bloodshed and alienation that accompanied them, administered over the past century: authority and ordered meaning being a necessary precursor to abuse, in freedom and being, of the individual *and* community. The postmodern intellect was ever finding and seeking change, avoiding stasis, the proclivity for slippage back into the *naturalness* that led to brutality, fascism, the imposition of one will upon that of another, the negation of the humanity of the *other*. What Eagleton attempts herein is to steady the drilling rhythm, assess the proper place and valuational qualities of *culture*, situate ourselves such that we can reclaim enough of the bases and roots that were deemed lost—or discover new ones relevant to our globalized, technologically permeated age—such that we might challenge the regnant societal devolution and concomitant systemic stasis that has paradoxically been engendered by a sea of change. Here is one of his summative salvos against a postmodernism that, in his determination, provided few new answers whilst dismissing many of the old questions:

It has been shamefaced about morality and metaphysics, embarrassed about love, biology, religion and revolution, largely silent about evil, reticent about death and suffering, dogmatic about essences, universals, and foundations, and superficial about truth, objectivity and disinterestedness. This, on any estimate, is a rather large slice of human existence to fall down on.

That is, we *need* to address these human essentials with vigor, passion, and belief in our purpose—need to reaffirm and/or rediscover truths and absolutes, avow that objectivity and values are copacetic and complementary, not antagonistic and exclusive—sufficient for the economic, political, philosophical, and cultural redresses and realignments that must be effected if we are to salvage the type of societies that the author still believes are realizable *and* necessary. Otherwise, we're playing ineffectual word games in cloistered halls, tilting at ever more marginal windmills and/or dividing ever more finely our goals, while effecting precious little—and losing what former gains remain—on the larger stages that matter. As Eagleton states:

We can, perhaps, be ironic about our deepest commitments, acknowledging their arbitrariness, but this does not really slacken their grip upon us. Irony does not go as far down as belief.

Frankly, it's refreshing to read a committed leftist voice speaking in utterly clear tones while avoiding the hedgerow mazes of irony and diversity and niche radicalism and abandonment of any absolutes in meaning and verity that have constituted—read, *plagued*—the partisans of *les Gauches* since the emergence of the New Right in the eighties and their ascendance—assisted by the evaporation of Communism and inspissation of Libertarianism—in the nineties. I've seen Eagleton catch a lot of flack because he's wealthy, owns several properties, and is deemed to be pontificating shopworn professorial Marxism inutilely from the cloistered (and well-compensated) confines of his academic perch. Fuck that nonsense. He's gained experience over the years, earned wisdom, observed failures and flailing, had time to drink in progressive trends and econo-socio-political realities, and has, IMO, adjusted his critical filter and prescriptive rangefinder accordingly. That's not to say he's abandoned Marx, because, as a recent title of his testifies to, he still believes the Big Man was right. And while he takes too much and too freely from the dinner spread of that bitter German chef—from stubbornness instead of naivety—Eagleton also displays what seems to me to be a usable sense of what is achievable within the framework of his Old School Marxism and its concomitant staking to a class-political-economic trifecta; he refuses to lose the good in pursuit of the perfect; and perceives that the Hegelian dialectic is a useful tool in this actually existing world abounding in contradictions—and bully for him for doing so. It is my opinion that the lack of a vibrant, envisioned, and realistic left-wing has caused a noticeable imbalance in the Western world, one that has subsequently been filled by the irrational screeds of frenetic fundamentalism and rebarbative resentment couched within nationalist and religious denunciations of a tepid millennial outreach towards international comity and empirical soundings. So three cheers for Eagleton putting it out there in this slim but substantive book.

One thing must be said, however: dude harsches on the United States more than seems right or fair, and tends to obliviousness about how the capitalist seesaw *raises* people in addition to pulling them down. Indeed, as the book proceeds the author's ends become a bit tangled amid the strands of his exposition upon the potentialities for Socialism within an exploration of ethics and norms, morality and evil, revolution and violence, contingency and death. Be that as it may, it is his *critique* that most interests me, and I can readily absorb the less tenable portions of any given thinker's solutions if his polemical eye is sharp and straight and sound in its discerning gaze. Which, IMO, it is—and whether or not his focus fades at times, the entirety of his thought interested me to the core. The thing is, I've a third book by Eagleton—*Ideology*, penned between these two recent ones on theory—kicking around on the shelves, and he's proven to so adeptly combine piercing insight and prickly humor in a package utterly forsaking the obfuscatory waxing that populates so much of (post)modern academia that I've determined to read everything of his that I can get my hands on.

Danielle says

I really hated this book. I got halfway through, tried to read the rest about four times, and finally am adding it to my "abandoned" shelf. Eagleton's representations of postmodern theory are shallow, overly pessimistic, and often just plain wrong. Very disappointing considering his standing and his rather engaging writing style.

Andrew says

The question of how we should make sense of our world "after theory" is indeed an interesting one. And while Eagleton doesn't really answer it, he does a good job of providing us with some very interesting avenues of thought to pursue, and gives us some ideas of what the intellectual discourse he calls "theory" has failed to address.

Like Marshall Berman, his vision is of a pluralistic sort of modernism with a strong ethical and humanistic backbone based on principles of solidarity. It's not the sexiest theory, and like Berman, he espouses it in a roundabout, often ranty way, with a straw man or two, but I would definitely consider both writers fellow travelers.

Stef Rozitis says

The difficulty I have with giving this book stars is I enjoyed and agreed with it more than the two star rating expresses. Eagleton comes across as sarcastic, creative in his metaphors, passionate and well read as he strives for meaning in the modern context (and largely in opposition to post-modernism but nearly every other way of thinking also gets criticised). I like a bit of coherent, passionate criticism and I enjoy sarcasm. If this was a ranty sort of a person at a party I would probably spend quite a long time talking and listening and being entertained.

But I read this, expecting more backed up opinions not just sermonising rants. I am convinced that Eagleton has read all the literature he refers to and is informed by, and in particular I found his interpretation of various biblical passages pretty informed and interesting. But at other times when he makes biting criticisms against opponents I wish he would reference properly so I could look for myself whether I agree with him. Otherwise his omniscient, pompous tone is a bit too much albeit he is saying awesome stuff from a political and moral point of view.

I think a couple of his criticisms are unfair, as when he constructs a type of person called an "anti-essentialist" (I never saw any theorist actually identify themselves with that particular label) and then turns them into a cartoonish pastiche of extremes of ideas that I don;t believe anyone actually espouses in that way (an arguing style he passionately condemns elsewhere in his book) and then pokes fun at. His arguing style is contradictory, hypocritical and know-it-all (and a lot more fun than I wanted to admit).

He says marxist things, strongly and beautifully pro-feminist things and some post-colonial things (although there is a bit of a colonist about some of his ways of expressing himself). He seeks meaning. He humanises. But he also remains completely non-reflexive speaking ponderously out of his high ivory tower of

unacknowledged privilege...which doesn't mean he is wrong (I think a lot of what he says is either right or close to right) but just that he needs to back himself up better for his knowledge to be more useful.

I loved it, I hated it, I didn't really regret reading it although as a lowly student I know any of my lecturers would quickly deflate me if I took that tone (and also make me remove that level of sarcasm from my writing). I think it is worth reading if you are enough of a thinker and reader to have your own thoughts as well. It's eloquent and entertaining. It lacks humility. It did help me work out why I am hating another book I am reading (Hot Six) so much.

Flawed but with wisdom.

Richard says

Eagleton takes on the previously verboten topic of ethical living in day to day for politically progressive left wing people. Believing that the good life is more than material satisfaction, but something best defined by living a life that allows one to flourish in a society that allows others to fulfill themselves as well.

Eagleton is reacting against Post-Modern and relativist scorn of morality, ideology, and clear thinking, "grand narratives."

So too, does Eagleton think America is overrun with the cult of the individual, having gone through a set of values, America finds itself divided between the emphasis of the will and religious fanaticism, both used to find meaning in a world in existential crises. Finding meaning, becoming immortal in perpetuating the self, anything meaningless or reminding us of our mortal, meaningless life is seen as a threat, empty and the enemy.

Eagleton ends with an afterword telling the Americans who he feels are trapped amidst a sea of reaction and headed in to a bleak period to take heart, offering them the dedication.

Matt says

I love about 90% of this book. Towards the middle to late middle he began to ramble a bit and his thinking is perhaps over-spiced with Aristotelian thought (which really isn't the worst thing in the world, I'd just prefer not to get it second hand for all that) and perhaps a little bit too redundant at times.

However- and this is a big however- most of the book is brilliant. He is well-versed in what he diagnoses and criticizes and he can illustrate his points with wonderful, clearly-wrought images and metaphors which lighten his text and provide immediacy and accessibility.

He argues that postmodern thought has disdained grand narratives and universalism (essential-ism, value, uniqueness, subjectivity, etc) and thus sort of argued itself out of the world. the conditions of globalization and globalized cultural struggle between the haves and the have nots is far too pressing and fecund to be ignored. He wants us to return to big ideas and a larger scope on the world around us. He wants to encourage

us to engage in large ethical decisions and issues of being and non-being....it's pretty exciting stuff, when you get right down to it.

He's warm and funny and obviously widely and deeply learned, all of which makes him an ideal guide and inspiration for those with a social conscience and a love for the Real, Written Word.

Beautiful, on the whole, and definitely something I'm going to have to buy for my own and re-read soon....

Rally Soong says

Having unfortunate to be in college during the "cultural critique" era of the 80's, I had lots of fun with but ultimately useless (except as good training for reading and writing and thinking) literary theories. Eagleton is a must read. As with all (post)collegiate life, one sheds these ideas as one dispose the mullet, the soul patch, and the MC Hammer pants. Here Eagleton brings the urgency of politics and chastise the culture vultures for having lost the original vision of the purpose of critique in the post 9/11 world. He brings up the Enlightenment as an unfinished task...for those who are and fancy themselves to be progressives, he reminds them the social obligations...a good kick in the arse from one of the original theorists.

Danny says

Eagleton's a good stylist, but often it feels like he's tilting at windmills... his critiques of "theory" would have been far more compelling if he'd actually linked the theoretical ideas he's criticizing to particular theorists. Still, he's probably right in arguing that "theory" fails to address a lot of Big Questions.

Reid says

This was my first Eagleton book and I appreciated it. Here he is writing about how his fellow critics have to get beyond postmodern lightweight concerns and start dealing with some meaty issues, like poverty, the fate of the earth, the impact of the form of capitalism that's reigning supreme currently, etc. He wasn't out to solve anything, just to offer a post-9/11 interesting, insightful and humorous discussion to direct the conversation. I liked it quite a bit, it was informative just to listen in on these topics and level of conversation and thinking.
