



Specific Theory

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Specific Theory

Peter Galison

Almost everything about Jean-Paul Sartre grated on Michel Foucault. But Foucault objected to nothing more strenuously than Sartre's role in the French political and philosophical scene, where the older philosopher delivered judgments as if seated in a heavenly courtroom. True, the figure of the intellectual from Zola to Sartre, donning the mantle of the judge, could speak procedure, reason, and law against the arbitrary exertion of power. In its time such on-high interventions were powerful. But for Foucault such a claim to global authority no longer carried force. Against the role of a universal intellectual he contended that a new figure was coming into view, the specific intellectual. Exemplary for Foucault were the words of J. Robert Oppenheimer, whose arguments on the nuclear balance of terror stemmed not from his status as an intellectual, but from his direct experience with the building and regulation of nuclear weapons.

When I think about the future of criticism and theory, Foucault's intervention strikes me as helpful—it suggests exploring what one might call, by analogy, *specific theory*.

In my field of science studies, claims about *the* true nature of science, *the* scientific method, and *the* universal pattern of scientific change all seem increasingly dated, artifacts of the 1950s, 1960s, or 1970s—if not the Viennese 1920s. Of course there is nothing to stop someone from trying to lump the algebraic geometer's exploration of string theory with the field biologist's morphological study of a beach grass, but nothing much seems to be gained by such an amalgamation. The string theorist doesn't do experiments. Indeed, for most purposes the string theorist is not concerned with particular lab results. And when the morphologists are comparing flower forms, their highly exacting examinations fit badly into the rubric of experimentation—

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at least experimentation in the sense of a particle physicist or molecular geneticist. Not only do methods differ radically, but the many kinds of scientists are often after different sorts of things. The accelerator physicist pits precise theoretical predictions against ten–decimal place data, but elsewhere (for example, geology or morphological biology) explanation is far more important than prediction. Evolutionary biologists and paleontologists spend much more time trying to understand why our distant forebears looked the way they did than prognosticating about our distant descendants.

Over the last decade, science studies has aimed at accounts more local, more contextual, and less scientific than its once hoped-for science of science. Indeed, the study of science (singular and universal) has begun to seem a bit like an all-out effort to make a theory of all the world's red objects. Possible, I suppose, but not the most illuminating task to undertake. Instead of trying to measure this or that domain of science against a transcendental set of virtues (prediction, quantification, objectivity, precision, experimentation), science studies has sought to identify how those aims and regulative structures were created, circulated, and ordered in priority. Instead of looking for a universal pattern governing the social basis of scientific work, the best recent explorations have pursued an integrated account of the circumstances of knowledge production and the nature of that knowledge. Early modern laboratory work, nineteenth-century imperial field work, twentieth-century large-scale experimentation, contemporary DNA dragnetting—each raises different ideals for systematic understanding. Each is embedded differently in already existing institutions; each *generates* new institutions along with concepts and techniques.

The move away from one-size-fits-all studies of “science” is but one chapter of the story. In many disciplines, from art history to literary studies and across the interpretive social sciences, one senses a broad shift away from universalizing accounts of *the* nature of literature, *the* defining features

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of art, and *the* true nature of social structures. But is the alternative to such nineteenth-century *Wissenschaftlich* ideals a splintering particularism? Are we really left with no more than a relentless historicism and therefore a Hobson's choice between grand narratives of progress and a curio display of scholarly diggings?

I don't think so. It no longer moves many of us in the humanities to see the objects of our study as usefully herded into a single, well-defined, overarching account. We no longer put much stock in ordering the gamut of art into a great theodicy, an unfolding that culminates in modernist depth models, realistic depiction, or honest flatness. Case studies, those micro-inquiries that once promised an obvious inductive ladder toward a universal theory, no longer seem so evidently to speak for themselves—not in science, not in art, and not in anthropology. There is no ethnographic day pass from theory, no convincing way to act as if each object of study held, deep in its archive, an account that will be disclosed once and forever.

But these days the most interesting uses of theory—in which the theory links a particular case with a wider domain—do not seem to be grand systematic philosophies. The relation of case to theory is not usefully modeled on the relation of an overarching theory (such as Newton's universal law of gravitation) to a particular instance (the calculated orbit of Jupiter's third moon). Instead, theory arrives in a more piecemeal way, with concepts as tools to disrupt texts, images, and experience, to throw into relief historical, cultural, or literary practices that for too long have appeared as inevitable. A familiar example from the theoretical interrogation of the way history is written: we now see it as contingent, not inevitable, that historical narratives are structured to display historical continuity or full causal articulation. This kind of insistence on contingency is an important negative function for criticism.

But criticism in the context of specific theory can do more than undermine complacent presuppositions. By turning empirical material through different perspectives, it can crack open new questions, questions not previously visible in the subject matter itself. It took critical work to make landscape into a topic of historical inquiry, not just a fixed backdrop to historical action. Gift exchange as a topic of inquiry did not leap fully formed from an archival folder or from a statistical survey or from the testimony of a native informant. Gift exchange was pushed to the surface *as a problem* by anthropologists, sociologists, and historians using assemblages of theory from across the disciplinary map—from semiotics to economics. Indeed, for my money, the history of the self became riveting as a problem just *because* it was extricated theoretically from universal human nature. (Self-fashioning as a universal process is a pretty vacuous idea; self-fashioning as

a linked set of cultural, legal, and literary Renaissance practices helps us understand one of the halting, fragile paths taken to become who we are.)

For a case study to succeed, that is, for the specific to stand for more than itself, some form of theory (implicit or explicit) will play a role. After all, a case study in history, psychology, or anthropology is not identical to other case studies the way an arbitrary core sample is when it is bored out of a homogeneous stratigraphy. Or at least the axes of similarity must be articulated, animated by a problematic. Historicism—that imperial empiricism which brooks no residue—is hermetically sealed, incompetent to propel the kinds of questions that open possibilities of learning, even from the oldest of our empirical concerns.

Sometimes specific theoretical questions can be quite abstract. (What concept of enframing is implicit in mid-Renaissance painting? How did this kind of locally produced biological knowledge delocalize?) But specific theory can equally well press us towards the most concrete of concerns. It too often is forgotten that theoretical questions about the locality of knowledge powered early concerns with the history of the book, paper, and media studies of forms as diverse as typewriters, television, and telegraphy. It seems to me among the greatest triumphs of the last decades that we now pose the *production* of a degree of generality as a subject of inquiry and that universality is no longer so easily assumed to be self-evident.

Our present difficulty is that in the context of specific theory, criticism has to find its way through a narrow pass. On the one side lies a specious claim of theory pretending to stand entirely outside of time and space. On the other lurks an equally vacuous ambition that criticism could emerge entirely from the object of study—the lure of writing only through “actors’ categories,” that mirage account of the past without a trace of Whiggism.

But there is space in which to work between the zero distance allowed by the dream of an extreme empiricism and the infinite scale of a magical universalism. There is space because the horizon of criticism can have a radius that is *finite*. That radius is neither zero (airlessly compressed into a monadic subculture), nor infinite (aetherially expanded into a view from nowhere). Such a finite horizon exists because, though we are in the present with all its particularities, we are *not* caught without recourse within this or that self-contained micro-worldview. All that postwar talk of our being trapped inside Gestalt-like microcultures seems increasingly antique. Where is the form of cultural production that is not incessantly borrowing, altering, exchanging in piecemeal bits? Certainly not in the physical or biological sciences; not in the plastic or performing arts; not in the human sciences.

This messiness, this slippage creates a clearing for specific criticism. It

makes it possible for finite theory to refuse to lodge itself in an Archimedean point outside the world and, at the same time, to resist collapsing into ethnographic news releases for a particular subdomain of culture. Specific theory is lodged in an expanded present, a present in which it is simultaneously possible to ask philosophical questions that open up empirical work *and* to pose critical historical questions about the categories deployed by our philosophy.