

Theory's Empire: An Anthology of Dissent
Daphne Patai

Excellent Anthology, many points of view

It includes articles from a goodly number of professors still willing to think. Noam Chomsky is a surprising entry.

I'm a Slightly Order Guy (white, straight... totally out of fashion) who was flattened by a couple of feminist profs upon returning to campus last year. Michel who? I read Foucault, Derrida and Rorty to try to make sense of it all. It didn't. A high school friend of mine, a prof who fled to Canada to dodge the draft, and certainly no conservative, informed me that I was encountering a social phenomenon; philosophy had little to do with it, and recommended two excellent books: "Literature Lost" and this.

"Literature Lost" is an easier read, and benefits from the topical organization that a single author can provide.

"Theory's Empire" is among other things a celebration of the English language. The authors are so literate! It also provides a wonderful diversity of perspectives with regard to literary theory, political correctness, and the trends and motivations that have driven so many college departments so far from their stated objectives of unbiased research, intellectual curiosity and open debate.

Here's the first page of one of the delicious articles, "The Cant of Identity" by Todd Gitlin:

"THE MORE VOCIFEROUSLY a term is trumpeted in public, the more contestable it is under scrutiny. The automatic recourse to a slogan, as if it were tantamount to a value or an argument, is frequently a measure of the need to suppress a difficulty or a vagueness underneath. Cant is the hardening of the aura around a concept. Cant automates thought, substitutes for deeper assessments, creates the illusion of firmness where there are only intricacies, freezes a fluid reality. Cant is sincere, usually, and its sincerity also protects against scrutiny. Cant comforts. And cant tends to corrupt its opposition into countercant. There is the cant of identity and the cant that rises with righteous and selective indignation against the "political correctness" of the Left, though not against that of the Right.

The cant of identity underlies identity politics, which proposes to deduce a position, a tradition, a deep truth, or a way of life from a fact of birth, physiognomy, national origin, sex, or physical disability. The hardening of one of these categories into cant begins with binary thinking-things are either raw or cooked, male or female, this or that-a propensity that may indeed be, as Levi-Strauss maintained, universal. Anxiety generated by difference may well be embedded in the human condition; so may be the animosity that accompanies anxiety. Perhaps the capacity quickly to classify "the other" as same or different, friend or enemy, once conferred a benefit for survival. But whether or not it was originally a means of natural selection, this sort of binary thinking certainly helps clans, elites, and nations maintain themselves. From binary thinking follows a propensity for identity thinking, which categorizes strangers-this is a person of Type X, not Type Y. The identity thinking of the powerful reassures them that they deserve to rule; the identity thinking of the oppressed affirms that they are not who the rulers think they are. If the identity affirmation of the oppressed begins as a defense against claims of superiority, it can swerve into its own sense of superiority. All forms of identity politics are overly clear about who the insiders are-"normal Americans," "the people," "la Raza,"-and overly dismissive of outsiders. In either case, cant makes for efficient simplifications, but only at the price of rigidity. Cant is what we have when we think we know more than we do. Its opposite is curiosity."

The collection is so rich that many more reviewers will be able to cover it from entirely different perspectives with meaningful posts. I'll close by encouraging you to simply enjoy.