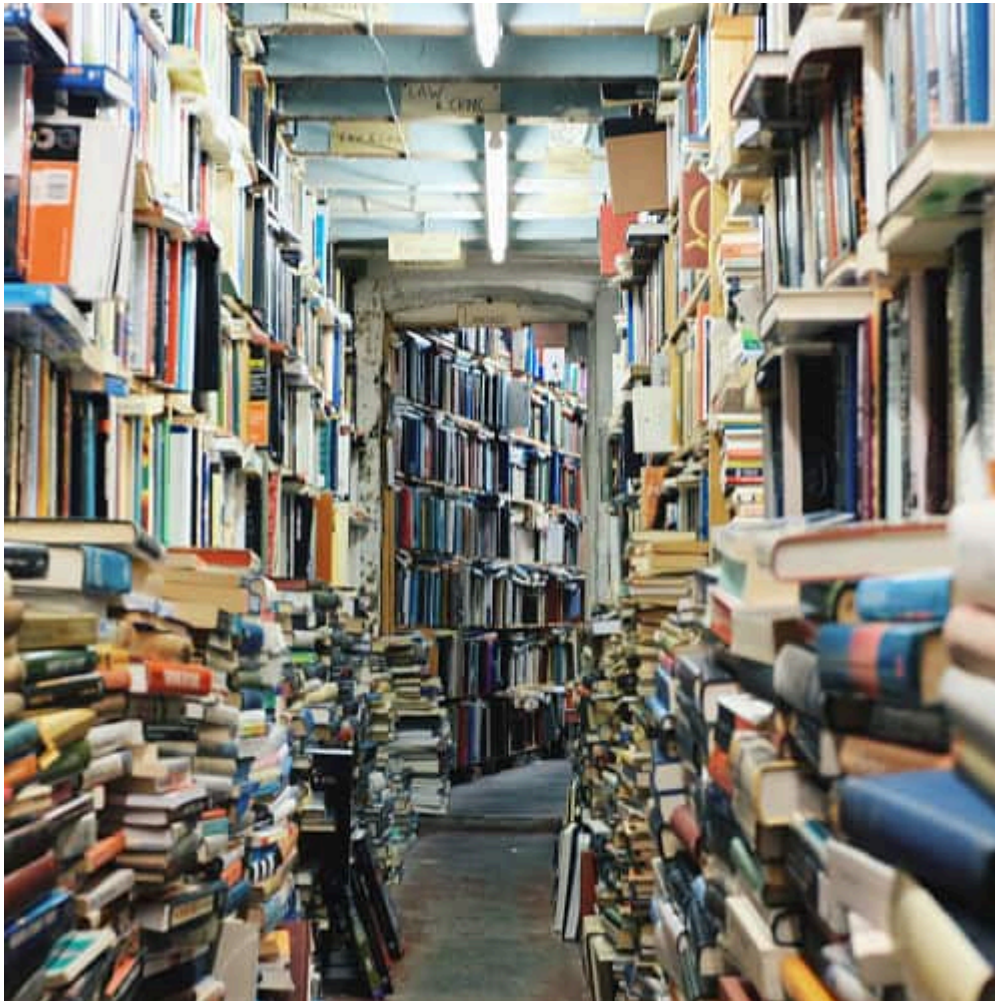




# An encounter with theory

written by Ghassan Hage  
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Today we will reflect on what it means to 'encounter, dwell in, read, critique and make use of theory'. The idea of an 'encounter' with theory is particularly meant to interpellate those of you who meet it as they are working on their PhD, en passant as it were, and to differentiate you from those who come to their research already dwelling in a particular theory, perceiving reality with its categories, reasonably knowledgeable of its beautifully lit spaces as well as its dark corners, its pitfalls as well as its potentialities.

An encounter is often already a timid mode of dwelling and the distinction



between the two is not absolute. It differs for instance according to whether you are a writer already endowed with a well developed theoretical habitus which gives any encounter an intensity and a depth that is dissimilar to the encounter initiated by other students who do not have a long history of dealing with theory.

An academic fantasy would like to imagine a world of PhD candidates who are all invariably theoretically and philosophically savvy. I know from a long experience that this is hardly the case. For many PhD students, indeed for most writers, the encounter with theory might vary in duration and intensity, but it will remain just that. So to explore the theoretical encounter is significant to many.

*As importantly, the way we end up dwelling in a particular theory, or even in theory generally speaking, is heavily influenced by the encounter, which is a kind of 'first contact' with theory.*

So, I want to spend the bit of time we have here trying to instill in you a kind of practico-ethical disposition towards such an encounter; how to recognize theory, how to treat it properly such as to have a good long term relationship with it if this is indeed the outcome. I want to use today to expand, and develop for myself just as much as for you, as one needs to constantly remind oneself of these things, a few pet ideas of mine, like:

- A theory is not a generalization but a transposable generative device that can oscillate between the general and the empirically specific;
- Theory has exchange value and use value. It can be deployed for its own sake and it can be deployed analytically;
- A theory offers a tool or a set of tools. It is neither a church you adhere to nor a football team you support;
- Whenever possible, when first encountering a theory that you don't like, say, I don't find this theory useful, rather than I don't agree, or, this is wrong – I want to encourage you to have a Facebook approach to the theoretical encounter: that is, there should only be a 'like' button to use at this early stage of dealing with theory. If you don't like a theory just



ignore it. There is no need to scream 'I don't like' from the rooftops at the level of the encounter – you will have plenty of time to engage critically when your encounter evolves into a serious dwelling.

Thinking through what you want of theory is not something important just now because you are starting your PhD. It is something you will continue to face throughout your professional lives as academics and writers. I am continuously reminded of this personally. A few years ago, I was in a Paris bookshop and by chance I came across Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's book *Métaphysiques Cannibales*, which you might call an innovative book of theoretical anthropology (there's a great English translation of it now by Peter Skafish). Some parts of it spoke to my concerns more than others, but on the whole I found it a breath of fresh air and I was voraciously reading it in the bookshop for a good half an hour before I purchased it. Most importantly, I thought that a number of theoretical propositions in the book concerning 'ontological perspectivism' were immensely productive. I found myself re-thinking there and then as I was reading it some perennial issues that concern me such as inter-cultural relations in the West and in Israel/Palestine. I was certain that it could help me generate some new insights. I have now written a number of articles (now part of my *Alter-Politics* book), which at least partly touched on this.



# ALTER-POLITICS CRITICAL ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE RADICAL IMAGINATION

GHASSAN HAGE



As I began writing publishing these ‘ontologically-inspired’ articles, I was being invited here and there to participate on panels discussing the ‘ontological turn’ in anthropology. The way some people were interacting with my new theorizing made me immediately return to the importance and pertinence of thinking through what constitute a good theoretical encounter. For, to begin with, everywhere around the world there was always someone to hint with a concerned tone that I should be careful ‘joining the ontological turn’. It was indeed as if I was joining a religious sect. And if it is true that some ‘ontologists’ behave like priests of theory, it is the case that some forms of anti-ontologism smack religious



fervor even more. Then there were the many colleagues and friends who wanted to know how could I reconcile my known affinity to Bourdieu with the 'ontological turn'? Have I not heard what Latour and Bourdieu think of each other? It was very hard to say 'I found this or that idea or aspect of the ontological turn useful' without being put in a position where I had to answer a question formulated along the lines of 'but how on earth can you believe in x and y', and where believing in x and y - often having something to do with essentialism - never occurred to me. It was as if I couldn't say that I liked the Christian conceptualization of love without being immediately asked 'but how on earth can you believe in the Holy Spirit?'

*This is why the first important thing to remember, and live, as a practical ethic is that theory is not a church or a football team.*

You should never belong to a theory or declare yourself a supporter of a theory. Even if you already are a follower, I urge you to get over it. It is not a healthy way to exist, take my word for it. It's one of those 'been there done that' things for me.

There is a more difficult question that needs to be dealt with here: 'If theorists think of their theories as a coherent whole, does that mean that it is not rigorous to pick whatever one wishes to pick from a theory?' My view is that if a theory is a set of tools, one can pick one particular tool from the set without being committed to use the whole set, as long as one understands the ramifications of the particular tool one is using. This can be done with various degrees of sophistication, of course.

*The more one has a good understanding of the totality of tools in a tool box, and the way they relate to each other, the more one is capable to engage in selective usage.*

While there is always the danger of someone choosing a chisel without realizing that it is useless without a hammer, there is always a possibility of choosing a hammer that proves useful in combination with a variety of other tools. But then





again, some people choose the chisel and end up finding a creative way of using it without the hammer. So, nothing is absolute here, I am just offering analogies.

Recently, Frederic Jameson has proposed that if the hero of modernity is the orchestra conductor, the hero of post-modernity is the curator. He also argued that the curator is to the orchestra conductor what the theorist is to the philosopher. Even if it leaves out Marx's idea of the creative theorist as someone who creates fire by rubbing previously opposing theories against each other which particularly appeals to me, I still find this idea of theory as a curated collection, as opposed to a symphonic whole, evocative and useful. At the same time, however, it is a particularly limited metaphor that feeds into the idea of theory as something one exhibits rather than something that one uses. One inevitably does both with theory, but do I need to tell you about the pitfalls of exhibitionism? Any kind of exhibitionism.

*Let us just say that the temptation for theoretical exhibitionism is built into university education.*

While we all know how true that mundane formulation is, that 'the more we know the more we know how little we know', we paradoxically remain vulnerable to the seductions of appearing masterful, and of mastering the discourse of mastery, those 'sound bites' that give us the allure of authority. 'Theory', being mainly male-dominated theory, has historically played a crucial role in providing those sound bites. It is very seductive and one easily falls for it: I still fall for it all the time though I like to think that I do so less and less. And of course, global warming is here to remind us that 'mastering the discourse of mastery' is very far from mastery.

I know it is hard to convince you of this but it is so much nicer to read a straightforward theory-free text or a text that shows itself to be honestly struggling to make sense of theory, than a text full of those half-baked theoretical 'sound bites' delivered as 'final truth'. But this is where theoretical exhibitionism inexorably leads to. I see it as partly behind one of the most negative aspects of



theorizing, contributing to what I call paraphrasing Marx 'theoretical fetishism'.

There is no doubt that theory is consumed like a commodity on a market-like space in the academic/intellectual world. Theories, like many other commodities, go in and out of fashion. Some become so fashionable that they become a must. Indeed one can do a whole Bourdieu-ian analysis of the field of theoretical taste. There are orthodoxies and heterodoxies. There are forms of symbolic violence. There are dominant and dominated... and so on. What's more, people do not only make statements about themselves by being for or against theory in general, but they do so by choosing particular theories over others, and, perhaps more importantly, by the way they theorise: some are unsophisticated mimics of others theories, some are avant-garde theorists who break new grounds and open new horizons.

*And so, as in any field, and again, as Bourdieu states, one is classified by their classification. Or to paraphrase this, theorists end up being theorized by their theorization.*

Accumulated in the form of cultural capital theory is more often than not experienced phallically, as a valued possession that one can 'show off'. And we can move from Bourdieu to Freud's conception of 'the narcissism of small differences' for a useful understanding of some of the incredibly affective and over the top rivalries that mar the world of theory. The way both some of the producers and consumers of theory differentiate themselves 'theoretically' from others, one would think that the fate of the earth is at stake. In Arabic there is a word called '*takhween*' which refers to the tendency of making of anyone we disagree with a traitor of some sort or another such that the differences between us become automatically incommensurable and a matter of life and death. It strikes me that there is a fair bit of that in theoretical positioning. I've gone back to some of my own writings and I can't say that I am not guilty of that too sometimes.

But a Bourdieu-ian or Freudian approach to the market of theory are not the only



ones that are productive here – and I am doing a theory of the utilization of theory here exemplifying how a theory has to be useful and have a yield: generate some understanding and insights that would not have been possible without it – otherwise why bother with theory? It is in this vein that one can also usefully approach the ‘theory as commodity’ reality from the Marxist perspective hinted above. For, the appearance of theories on the market and the logic of their production and consumption makes them akin to capitalist commodities. They are experienced fetishistically in the way Marx analyzed the capitalist commodity in his famous conception of ‘commodity fetishism’.

*That is, theories appear as relating to each other and are valorized against each other in the very same way Marx understood the production and power of the fetish.*

For him, the world of the capitalist commodity is such that ‘(t)he products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race.’ So it is with the world of theory, which is the product of human labour (reading, thinking, writing, editing, printing, etc...) but is experienced fetishistically as a product with intrinsic power that has no relation to the labour that has produced it.

It remains a mystery how we academics, who should know from experience how long and how much work it takes to produce a decent sentence on anything, let alone a decent theory, allow ourselves five minutes of reading someone else’s work to declare it ‘rubbish’ or ‘agree’, utterly devalorising and showing little respect for the amount of dead and living labour that has gone into its production. As with Marx, this fetishistic absenting of the labour process that is behind what we are consuming is not the simple product of a mental mistake: once I know ‘the truth’ I’ll stop behaving this way. Fetishism for Marx was ‘more like the experience of the sun ‘rising’. It was, and I am sorry to use the word if you happen to be sensitive to it, an ontological form of mystification. This was different from the ‘ruling ideas are the ideas of the ruling classes’ conception of





ideology that invites an epistemological conception of mystification. The latter can be argued and debated against. But with fetishism, no matter how much we are taught that it is the earth orbiting the sun we will still experience the sun rising. Or as Godelier put it long ago: “It is not the subject that deceives himself; it is reality that deceives him”.



[Photo by Davide Cantelli](#) (Unsplash)

To take this critical approach to theory on board means that it is not so much by preaching the right attitude to theory that a diminishing of the unhelpful fetishistic tendencies listed above can come about. Rather, what is needed is a different mode of interaction, a different practice and a different mode of experience of theory that can allow us to begin the process of de-fetishisation. That is, one needs to workshop theory in a way that highlights its use-value, rather than just simply think about the right way to theorize; that’s what I hope to initiate with you.



*The first thing we need to ask ourselves as we are writing is this: 'what has this theory helped me see, understand or explain that I otherwise would not have seen?'*

At a most immediate level, this is to oppose a common tendency among non-experienced academic writers to use a quote from a theoretician at the end of an empirical paragraph or section à la 'This shows that Rancière is right when he argues ...'. Such a form of quoting makes it appear as if the main aim of one's study is to prove a theoretician correct. Unless it is exactly the aim of one's thesis to prove a particular theoretician right, this is a very poor usage of theory. This is particularly infuriating in anthropology when a thesis is about Africa or the Middle East, etc. As this form of quoting Western theory at the end of theory-free account implicitly implies something like 'this shows that Badiou or Butler well understood the situation in Mozambique without ever bothering to go there'. By the way, I bet you neither Badiou nor Butler nor anybody like to be used this way. I certainly hate it when I see another academic using my work just to give authority to what they are saying about racism etc... I much rather seeing it activated in a way that has helped someone see new things.

Secondly, we need to workshop a way of thinking in terms of a labour theory of value of the theoretical works we are reading.

*This is essential if we are to learn to be respectful of them as works of labour not as something that just pops up on the theoretical market for your instant enjoyment in a commodity fetishist-mode.*

Think how much it takes you to write an idea. Do you like someone reading a couple of paragraphs you have spent many days writing in the two-three minutes it takes to read them and in those few minutes judging them to be 'wrong', 'bad,' or 'meaningless,' let alone 'stupid' or 'idiotic'. This labour can be accumulated labour too. Not everyone is as well read and as philosophically sophisticated as everyone else. I might sound elitist saying so but, the fact of the matter is that if



you are reading a well-established thinker and you feel they need to be given a 101-type lecture in 'social causality', 'essentialism' or whatever else, you should think twice and three times before doing so, as there is a high chance it is you who has not understood the complexity of what they are saying rather than them not being up to your standard of sophistication. So, it might be useful to read them again. In the domain of exhibition, 'critique' requires less labour and yields a lot more cultural capital and theoretical grooviness than 'understanding,' so it is understandable that one prefers to make a sound bite such as 'there is no theory of change in Pierre Bourdieu' than actually understand the complexity of Bourdieu's theory of reproduction. And why do you need to say 'there is no theory of change in Pierre Bourdieu' I might ask? If you want a theory of change go to someone you think has a theory of change and forget about Bourdieu. It's like saying 'Judith Butler makes bad hamburgers' (I actually don't know whether Judith Butler makes good or bad hamburgers but I am taking a wild guess...).

To acquire a good ethic of using theory you need to continue well after this seminar to read writers who live up to an ethic of critical respect, who even while critical of others are always able to understand and forefront the amount and quality of labour that has gone into the work they are consuming. That is, ultimately, critics who see other theorists as fellow craftspeople engaged in a common pursuit. Not surprisingly this ethic is more present, though I wouldn't say prevalent, among women/feminist writers for example in the writing of Lauren Berlant, Judith Butler or Marilyn Strathern than it is present in the spaces offered by the Badiou, Bourdieus and Latours of the world. But there are always male theorists that also stand out. I find Evans-Pritchard's critique of Levy-Bruhl exemplary in this regard. I also particularly like George Steinmetz's introduction to his *The Devil's Handwriting* and the way he plays Said, Bourdieu and Lacan against each other to help elucidate the logic of German colonialism.

*This post was first published on [Ghassan Hage's blog, Hage Ba'a](#).*

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