INTRODUCTION
POST-THEORY?

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The common assumption behind this volume of essays is that current discussions of ‘post-theory’ often lack serious engagement with the legacy of theory or any strong commitment to a renewal of critical practice. All too often, the prefix in post-theory is taken to indicate a straightforward surpassing of a necessary but now dated and overcome theoretical stage within the humanities. The term ‘post-theory’ therefore often serves as a concise articulation of the barely disguised desires, anxieties, repressions and blind spots of those who would move on, in all manners of ways, ‘after’ theory. The semantic extensions of the prefix ‘post’, however, envisage possibilities that are more problematic than that, and provide the foundation for a questioning of the desire to ‘forget’ theory.

It is with those possibilities and that questioning that Post-Theory, Culture, Criticism is concerned. This volume provides the space for a revaluation of theory by bringing together a collection of essays that produce provocative re-articulations of theory, culture and criticism. What the essays share, in their response to the ‘post-theoretical’ condition, is an interest in the following pressing questions:

- Have we ever been theoretical (enough)?
- What exactly is the relation between (post-)theory, culture and criticism? How can it, or how should it, be (re-)articulated today?
- What are the implications of post-theory for the relation between culture and politics?
- Is there anything ‘new’ to be to read in the time of post-theory, and if so, how is one to read it?
The current desire for ‘post-theory’ needs to be put in perspective; it must be understood in the historical context of theory’s institutionalisation, particularly in the Anglo-American academic world (see Lothriinger & Cohen 2001: 1-9; and Rabaté 2002). Post-theory in this volume is not understood in its facile and improbable sense of a condition ‘after theory’, ‘theory overcome’ or even ‘without theory’, but rather as an undertaking (without, necessarily, any of an undertaker’s duties). This undertaking involves, first of all, theory’s task in theorising its own institutionalisation and internationalisation; and secondly it envisages a critical return upon theory’s ‘others’ (its repressed, its excluded, its unthought) in terms of a theory ‘yet to come’ (see McQuillan et al. 1999: ix-xx).

In terms of the prospects for such a post-theoretical renewal, which would proceed through a reconsidered critical practice, it is highly improbable that any rigorous rearticulation of critical discourse could suspend a discerning reading and criticism’s objects have become so diverse that they exceed textuality to embrace culture as a whole, thereby increasing the temptation to overlook certain important lessons from theory’s pasts. In many ways, it is this exceeding of textuality and the increased focus on culture that could be seen as the inheritance of post-theory: a legacy that renders more urgent the re-articulation of the relation between theory, critical practice, textuality and culture.

The essays in the volume cohere in offering precisely this kind of rearticulation. A prominent feature they share is their acknowledgement of the need for evaluating the seemingly irresistible extension of ‘theorems’ to the field of culture, and the consequent importance of a readjusted critical practice. Indeed, the essays provide a concerted and noteworthy effort to perform the ‘and’ in the phrase ‘critical and cultural theory’, attempting readings of culture that variously affirm or trouble the viability of a critical practice that would be post-theoretical. After all, does not ‘and’ typically denote the articulation of distinct entities, which may or may not retain their identity following their conjoining, and is it not this that post-theory would be above all: moving on the articulation between culture and critical practice?

The volume contains essays by Fred Botting, Ivan Callus, Stefania Cassar, Andrew Cooper, Thomas Docherty, Rainer Emig, Stefan Herbrechter, Donald Morton, Christopher Norris and Scott Wilson. The contributors provide essays on alternative critical histories of cultural theory, on current issues involved in the reading