

# Theory, Interdisciplinarity, and the Humanities Today:

## An Interview with Vincent B. Leitch<sup>1</sup>

**Nicholas Ruiz III:** Is theory solely an apparatus for problem identification? Or does it have a broader, even artistic purpose? Is there an aesthetic of problematization?

**Vincent B. Leitch:** I would say that among the primary functions of literary and cultural theory today are both identification and problematization. For purposes of clarification and in my teaching, I often treat these separately. When I read a work of criticism or theory, whether as a referee, reviewer, researcher, or teacher, I inquire into its mode(s), its identity. If, for example, I were reading a critical book about a contemporary American poet, I would ask a range of key questions concerning its “identity”: Does it factor in the poet? In what ways? Is there attention to historical context? What kind of historiography operates here? Are there accounts of modes of distribution and reception of the poetry? How does tradition figure? Which features of poetry are scrutinized and which not? Why? What roles, if any, do race, class, gender, age, and disability play? What about language and philosophy of language? Does the critical text have a message? What are its ideological vectors? How does it handle existing knowledge and research? Is it at all critical of its subject? How so? Are there any contradictions? What are its strengths and weaknesses? So here you see that the effort to isolate the distinctive features of a work – to identify it – quickly tips over into uncovering problems.

While I was working on the Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism during the late 1990s, I spun off a “Short Guide: Theory Heuristics” for students (an unpublished

1,500 word text) that lays out two dozen ways to both identify and problematize critical works and theories. But there are many more. Doubtlessly, the street smarts of the common reader, if articulated, would include a substantial number of ways to identify and problematize discourse.

Parenthetically, there is an Althusserian inflection to the word “problematic” that deserves mention here, if only briefly, which suggests that economic conditions at a certain historical moment – conjuncture – of the mode of production generate problems not to be simply identified and quickly solved. I’m thinking, for instance, of a conflict like that between labor and capital: it depends structurally on the exploitation of the one by the other, as we see today in an innovative (yet old) form such as Wal\*Mart, with its million plus ununionized employees (almost half of whom are temps without benefits). There are lots of elements that go into this new “problematic.” What roles, for example, do the government, corporations, school, family, and church play in forming today’s labor conditions? How about gender conventions and the work force?

To answer your question directly now, I am reluctant to aestheticize the task of problematization. That said, there is an art and pleasure in putting into operation such schema as mentioned above. And, to be sure, there are virtuoso performances of theory and criticism.

I want to make one last point about the broader purposes of theory: the job of problematization does not presuppose a future world free of problems. Quite the contrary. For a theorist, a “problem” might be a logical or historical impasse or an unconscious presupposition as well as an outright oversight, a deliberate exclusion, or a purposeful

error. In this context, “problematization” has more of a diagnostic than a straightforward problem-solving mission.

**NRIII:** How is the currency of interdisciplinarity a product of the consolidation of the past half-century of theory?

**VBL:** Half century, you say? The fusion and pastiche characteristic of the post-WWII postmodern period, a result of collapsing boundaries and social implosions signal, according to Jürgen Habermas, Jean Baudrillard, Pierre Bourdieu, and others, the historical erosion of autonomies established during modernity, the latter spanning from the Enlightenment to modernism. I know that’s a mouthful. This erosion affects nowadays, for example, the autonomy of arts, the sovereignty of nation-states, the separation of the public and private spheres, the inviolability of borders. In recent decades, not surprisingly, the autonomy of many academic disciplines has given way, to a greater or lesser extent. It seems an era of interdisciplinarity. “Theory” is born out of this moment. It is an unstable fusion of literary studies, linguistics, psychoanalysis, anthropology, Marxism, philosophy, gender studies, poststructuralism, new historicisms, postcolonial and ethnic studies, an open-ended postmodern assemblage that displaces the modernist formalism dominant from the 1930s to the 1960s in the U.S.

During the 1970s, the rise of interdisciplines as well as of theory initially felt like an explosion more than a consolidation. But with the antitheoretical and nostalgic pre-theoretical culture wars initiated by neoconservatives starting in the 1980s, theory, that most interdisciplinary and vanguardist of fields, became in part defensive and interested

in consolidation. This period is quickly followed by the spread of cultural studies and post-theory (that is, post-poststructuralism), where we are still today in the U.S., a moment of broadly disseminated, theoretically inflected interdisciplinary cultural studies defensive when political conditions warrant it.

By the way in the late 1990s, I was one of the developers of a Theory and Cultural Studies program at Purdue University, formed in the English Department, at a time when the philosophers in the interdepartmental doctoral program in Literature and Philosophy, which I co-coordinated for a decade, decided against mutating into cultural studies. For them mixing two disciplines in equal measure was okay, but not multiple disciplines in unequal proportions. Then and now there is a limit to interdisciplinarity. Modern autonomy lives on and has its habits and strengths.

The departmental structure of the American college and university looks pretty much today the way it did a half century ago. So too does the job market, a great respecter and enforcer of established disciplines. Postmodern interdisciplines are generally housed in underfunded and nomadic programs or institutes, not departments. So we live in a time of limited and constrained interdisciplinarity. Postmodern implosion thus far has been a partial, a limited phenomenon: nation-states and borders continue to operate; private and public spheres are distinguishable still; the arts remain distinct and recognizable; traditional disciplines retain autonomy and power. Take note: there does not exist a department of theory anywhere in the U.S.

**NRIII:** What is postmodern interdisciplinarity?

**VBL:** Ah, well, I argued in an article with that title, published by the Modern Language Association's (MLA) annual Profession for the year 2000 and revised in my book, Theory Matters (2003), that university professors are disciplinary subjects, (i.e., certified specialists); that academic interdisciplinary work, cultural studies included, does not change mainstream disciplines; that the university is a disciplinary institution; and that, nevertheless, the conception of interdisciplinarity is being reconfigured today.

Whereas modern interdisciplinarity dreams of the end of the disciplines with their awful jargon and fallacious divisions of knowledge, the newer postmodern interdisciplinarity respects difference and heterogeneity, proliferating several dozen new interdisciplines such as black studies, women's studies, media studies, cultural studies, postcolonial studies, science studies, disability studies, body studies, queer studies, etc. Significantly, these fields directly challenge modern humanistic objectivity and the idea of the university as a serene ivory tower, organized and disengaged. They struggle against the hegemonic order, have activist roots; engage in community outreach of a political sort. Yet, still and all, they submit to modern disciplinarity, its requirements, standards, certifications as well as its methods (exercises, exams, rankings, supervision, norms). So it's a mixed phenomenon, postmodern interdisciplinarity.

Another significant feature of postmodern interdisciplinarity concerns the existence of differences internal to the traditional disciplines. Astronomy has physics, geology, and mathematics, not just as neighbors, but as guests. Literary

studies is entangled with history, religion and mythology, psychology, sociology, etc. In recent times, the autonomy of many disciplines has imploded. Hybridity has trumped purity. But the university, a throwback modern institution, finesses the eruption of difference and the proliferation of new interdisciplines by shoring up traditional departmentalization occasionally softened by a Humanities Center here and some modestly funded and volunteer-staffed interdisciplinary programs there.

**NRH:** Is theory academically “institutionalized” and, therefore, somewhat of a “docile body”?

**VBL:** Yes, theory is institutionalized in some ways, but in some ways not. On the latter point, there is no department of theory, nor a separate discipline. It piggybacks on existing disciplines and interdisciplines. It keeps changing shape, having multiple strands and configurations. Just in the past 15 years or so, there are many more theory subspecialists and very few and increasingly fewer theory specialists or generalists, who preside over the whole field. Also it has no specific location now. It’s not unusual for someone in geography or architecture, for example, to show up in my class or office. This is theory with a rhizomatous deterritorialized profile.

There are territorializations of theory in institutionalized forms, including, of course, standardized theory courses and curriculum, textbooks, guides, reference sources, and websites; specialized journals, special issues of journals, book series, and dedicated shelves in book stores; plus professional organizations (e.g., Society

for Critical Exchange, Literary Criticism Division of the MLA, International Association for Philosophy and Literature). A handful of recognized U.S. research universities maintain a strong theory faculty and profile. Certain other institutions of theory hold something resembling flagship status: the School of Criticism and Theory's Summer Sessions; the quarterly journal Critical Inquiry; the annual Wellek Library Lecture Series in Critical Theory at the University of California in Irvine; and possibly the Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism itself, but certainly the required ubiquitous two theory survey courses it caters to, namely Introduction to Criticism and Theory and Critical Theory from Plato to the Present.

But now is theory a docile body? No and yes. No, to begin with, because theory is linked with a set of rambunctious progressive critical forces such as feminism, ethnic and postcolonial studies, queer theory, psychoanalysis, Marxism (including orthodox, Third World, Western, and post-Marxist versions), poststructuralism, and cultural studies. Insofar as theory teaches ideology critique and self-reflection, it is not particularly docile. Its irreverent inquiries into conventions of gender, race, and class alone render it threatening to the conservative hegemonic order, as does its serious critical attention to popular culture. Also its long-standing link with aestheticism, that is, antiutilitarianism, puts it at odds with the status quo.

But the premise that institutionalization engenders or means docility is naive. The neoconservative attacks on the university, especially the humanities, which date back to the 1980s Reagan era and continue into the present, suggest otherwise. The quarter century-long low-grade animosity to tenured radicals in the U.S. university occasionally flares into a crisis or cause célèbre, as in the 2005 case of

the leftwing Native American professor Ward Churchill, reminding us that there are unruly academics, perhaps under every bush. Academic institutionalization should not be scorned in some knee jerk way. It has uses and potentials.

**NRIII:** On a lighter note, in the Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism (2001), all of the theorists selected were born in the 1950s or, by far, exceedingly earlier. Is there an age requirement for theory? Do any theorists working today, born in the sixties or later, strike you as heralding a new era of theory? Or perhaps, is the “natural selection” of the Market, that which increasingly subsumes the University, selecting against theory and theorists?

**VBL:** That’s a very complicated question. To start with, when we six editors of the Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism made our choice of figures during the late 1990s, we had a set of selection criteria, which I drew up at the start of the project with the consent of our editor in New York. The criteria include significance, influence, uniqueness, poignancy, pertinence, and resonance (i.e., with other figures in the anthology), plus also readability, teachability, length, and translation. Our standpoint was teaching the history of Western theory and criticism from the ancient Greeks to the present (Gorgias to bell hooks). Out of 300 to 400 potential figures, we selected, in the end, 148. (The anthology is 2,600 pages long.) Of these, two dozen or so were living theorists, a dozen of them baby boomers born between 1946-1957. Your question highlights indirectly a certain dwarfing effect on our contemporaries when they are set in the long duration of theory’s history. It’s a

matter of perspective. There are, of course, theory anthologies that focus solely on the contemporary period. That typically creates a magnified presentist perspective.

You ask if there is an age requirement of theory. Yes, in a sense. Theory, like creative writing, gets enclosed in the university during the last half of the twentieth-century. (This, by the way, tends to cut it off from literary journalists and poet-critics.) A Ph.D. or advanced education is the required price of admission nowadays for theorists. That takes time. It's rare for a contemporary theorist to emerge as a major figure before the age of, say, 35 or 40. A wunderkind would be anyone under 30. It's a different universe from music, mathematics, or poetry, where talent and genius can still emerge early.

You ask me to name critics and theorists in the generation born after 1960 that might be candidates for a second edition of the Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism. No deal. In order for a figure to be selected, three of the six editors have to agree. That's a key protocol of our collaborative project. So I won't step out on my own and name any favorites. Not incidentally, the collective shifting process in my experience generally turns out better results than shooting from the hip. I should say we are looking toward a new edition in 2010 or so, and I am sure it will include theorists born after the 1960s. Also it will, I hope, go global, including some ancient and modern sources from Africa, China, India, Japan, etc., reaching beyond Western traditions.

But you ask an either/or question at the end there. Either a new era of theory or perhaps market imperatives against such a possibility. That formulation seems wrong to me. The search for the new, like that for the bigger and better, is precisely

in harmony with market imperatives, which advertisers, campus boosters included, ceaselessly evoke, no? I imagine a traditional community would not seek the new, which represents a threat, but take comfort and sustenance from the unchanged old.

I agree with you that the university is being “corporatized,” that is, subjected to free market principles and practices, including a *sauve-qui-peut* neo-Darwinian philosophy of competition and natural selection, as you indicate. And, of course, this impacts theory (as well as other fields), its institutionalization, its bases in the humanities and “soft” (nonquantitative) social sciences, particularly its current hosts, namely literary and cultural studies programs. Here we encounter a whipsaw phenomenon characteristic of the corporate university. On one hand, there is less funding, reduced hiring, more reliance on part-time teachers, increased student-teacher ratios, huge student debt, and cutbacks. On the other hand, stepped up competition occurs in credentials, obtaining grants, getting jobs, securing publication, earning tenure and promotion, staying current. So we should expect continued, no doubt increased, obsession with the cutting edge, the new, the hottest thing, young guards, shelf life, etc., especially in state-supported research universities where publish-or-perish criteria are pretty fully joined to neoliberal market values. I figure theory to compete and maintain its allure. But also we should expect fewer regular jobs, more adjuncts, exacerbated class stratification for the professoriate, graduate student debt bondage, proportionally decreased humanities majors.

How will theory fare? It’s good news, bad news. Insofar as postwar higher education married the new and “theory” (broadly speaking) and insofar as the

institution persists in this relationship – as I believe it shall– theory will survive under the aegis and considerable protection of the new, of research, and of market vanguardism. Yet to the considerable extent that “market forces,” such as pragmatic administrators, supporters, and clients devoted to bottom-line utilitarianism, prefer vocationalized education, the humanistic hosts of theory will find their justification and mission tipping ever more toward service functions. Private universities in the U.S. will have more latitude here, no doubt. Some leading state universities can be expected to seek privatization, their state government funding having reached lows near 15% of annual operating budgets. All this spells stratification in theory education and demand, I imagine. Another case of enforced uneven development during postmodern globalized times.

**NRIII:** In the midst of theory’s consolidating space in the academy, where does the discipline of the humanities find itself today? Is it being subsumed, transformed, or is it obsolescing?

**VBL:** That’s a monster question. It deserves a monograph of its own. Well, okay, I feel that contemporary theory in conservative political moments adopts a consolidating posture – a defensive shoring up, redignifying, monumentalizing. But also the dissemination of theory continues apace, it being scattered across many disciplines, specialties, and subspecialties, with no end in sight. It’s gone capillary in that sense. Not surprisingly, there are holdouts, a phenomenon requiring a nuanced inquiry of its own.

How do things stand with the humanities? Hum, well, first, I'd want to break down that large category into its constituent parts, because I believe each discipline would deserve separate discussion. I'm thinking of English, classics, history, modern languages, art history, philosophy, etc. In the U.S. context, one usually refers to the standard definition of the "humanities" established in 1965 in law and current today, which founded the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and was later ratified by the National Humanities Alliance in 1981 (the NHA consists of 80 advocacy organizations and institutes). There are also, of course, humanities wings to some of the U.S. social sciences, particularly anthropology, comparative religion, political theory, sociology, international relations. In addition, many of the new postmodern interdisciplines come, in whole or in part, under the designation "humanities," such as ethnic studies, gender studies, film studies, semiotics, cultural studies, plus fields like American and other area studies.

If one conceives "humanities" in this broad sense, and if one factors in all relevant institutional matrices, it is difficult to think of the wholesale subsumption or obsolescence of the humanities. Institutions that come to mind include not only scholarly disciplines, departments, related professional organizations, and humanities centers, but also libraries, publishers, museums, learned societies, foundations, public agencies, public TV and radio. Speaking symbolically, the NEH and National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) have survived four decades, and they are comparatively well-funded today by admittedly skimpy U.S. standards. Whenever there are periodic rightwing calls to close down these national endowments, usually for moral, financial, or ideological reasons, a broad

multifaceted defense is made. There are strong humanities advocates and lobbyists, with the NHA at the forefront, constituting a weighty united front.

It strikes me that today the keyword “humanities,” however, functions more and more as an administrative category of the university in relation to the three other major academic spheres contending for a share of budgets and a place in the sun, namely the sciences, social sciences, and professions (medicine, law, business, etc.). Personally, I rarely think of this term and its improbable constellation in my day-to-day work. It’s mainly used by administrators and external critics of the university. When a provost or legislator invokes the term, it’s usually in the context of budget struggles. In this sense the word holds negative connotations for me nowadays. I realize it’s a different situation in small colleges and community colleges, where divisional structures often take priority over departmental units.

Derived historically from the old trivium/quadrivium, seven liberal arts, and Renaissance and Enlightenment humanisms, the term “humanities” also today summons up nostalgia for earlier happier days when the other three areas held less prestige and captured less financial and human resources. This entails a well-known conservative narrative of decline. To illustrate, my father studied Greek and Latin in the 1930s. I studied Latin, French, and German during the ’60s. My children studied German and Japanese in the 1990s. The Greek and Latin classics no longer hold center place in liberal arts curricula. The Great Books are increasingly giving place to minority literatures and popular culture, especially TV, music, film, and the Internet. Humanistic values are losing ground against scientific and practical ones. This pits general knowledge, advanced literacy, refined and balanced judgment,

intellectual discipline, critical thinking, appreciation of the arts, and historical and ethical awareness against triumphant specialization, efficient quantitative assessment, technical skills, risk-benefit calculation, the arts for display of wealth, studying foreign language for business use and philosophy for efficient argumentation. It is the standard morose narrative of the subsumption and obsolescence of the humanities. But if we put that against the NHA and the alive-and-well NEH and NEA, embattled but fighting on, it's a mixed story for the humanities today in the U.S.

I believe we humanists must band together and continue to fight battles over budgets, space, public relations and against censorship, insidious quantification, the misuse of history, amoral technoscience, antisocial economic and business policy, and the wholesale corporatization of the university. And we must use offensive as well as defensive tactics, all in the name of the "humanities," acting as a united front for mutual benefit and the public good. Still, in my experience these battles are special occasions, usually crises. I think strong academic unions would be a better solution for many of our problems.

You know very few academic people call campus humanities institutes or centers home. Visits there tend to be infrequent like a holiday or vacation. For good or ill, the specialized department remains the central structure of the research university and liberal arts college, not at all peripheral like the synthetic category "humanities" is in most cases. Community colleges are another and different matter, requiring a separate account. I am aware of no strong department of humanities per se in the system of U.S. research universities.

By the way, I taught in the Department of Humanities at the University of Florida as my first job in the 1970s. It was staffed with several dozen full-time faculty, drawn from literature, history, philosophy, art, religion, music. It was a teaching not research department. Its primary mission was staffing a required sequence of introductory lower-division undergraduate courses (Humanities I, II, III), spanning from the ancient Greeks to the modern abstract expressionists, existentialists, and confessional poets. But it was put out of business in that decade, following four decades of life. You will not be surprised to learn that the University of Florida's separate research-oriented departments of English, foreign languages, history, philosophy, etc. were enhanced during that period of general growth. We are speaking here of the very moment when the contemporary theory renaissance took off. This latter story I tell in my book, American Literary Criticism from the 1930s to the 1980s (1988).

To conclude this rumination on the humanities, I do believe that the humanities have been transformed in a way that its famous pioneering pre-WWII advocates at Columbia University and the University of Chicago would neither recognize, nor probably approve. I take that to be the gist of conservative attacks, starting in the 1980s, particularly William J. Bennett's To Reclaim a Legacy (1984), Allan Bloom's The Closing of the American Mind (1987), and Dinesh D'Souza's Illiberal Education (1991). In a certain sense postmodern cultural studies has unceremoniously, quietly taken much of the space of while displacing the modern humanities program, especially with its transdisciplinary reach into the social sciences, notably sociology; its concern with method but particularly "theory"; its

links to vital vernacular materials (especially postwar popular culture versus the Great Books); its wide popularity with scholars and students; and its commitments to standpoint epistemology and social constructivism as opposed to pure objectivity. Yet, clearly, cultural studies lacks grounding in history, philosophy, foreign language, and the Great Books, which very much characterized mid-century modern humanities curricula. Where cultural studies most stands out in comparison, however, is in its interests in ideology critique, race-class-gender analysis, non-Western cultures, and evaluations of commodification, market cooptation, and lately globalization. Unlike Cold War humanities, it countenances social roles for the arts and culture, political resistance, and counterhegemonic thinking. The transformation and updating of the humanities, a postmodern humanities, would in my mind look very much like cultural studies.

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<sup>1</sup> The interview took place in April 2005.