

Dire Times, Critical Thinking, and Theory

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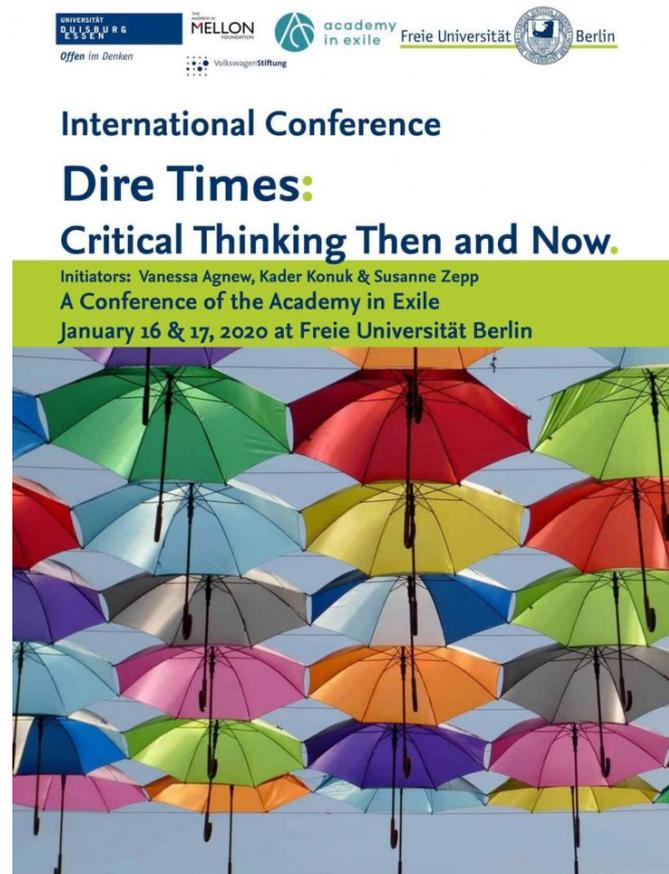
16.03.2020

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This essay is based on a talk given in Berlin on the international conference “Dire Times: Critical Thinking Then and Now!” organized by the Academy in Exile.

In his concise characterization of the centrifugal force that animates ‘theory’, Jonathan Culler writes about the propensity of works that come to function as theoretical sources to have effects outside their particular native field, their capacity to contest common sense, and ability to elicit self-reflection.¹ Analogously, one could say that a deliberately theoretical work produces results that cannot be disproved within the framework of a discipline, although this entails that it cannot be proven by this or that discipline either. For example, in theorizing Turkish literature in the period of neoliberalization, say from 2000

onward, one might be drawing on work in economics, political theory, and history. However, the conclusions of such a theoretical work cannot be contested by any of these disciplines, since left to themselves they would not have undertaken this theoretical work that cuts across their sources, which made it possible. One’s use of the sources and their interpretation can of course be criticized, and theorists will revise the theory if they are convinced by this criticism or if they move onto different sources. Yet, this does not mean that the economist’s or the historian’s criticism can substitute for the theoretical work undertaken here, since they had not even imagined that these conclusions could have been drawn from the same sources or materials before the existence of the theoretical work in question. If they could have imagined it, they would have already undertaken it.



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So, here is a discourse, named theory, that embodies a no man's land in which proofs or counter-proofs can only lead to other readings, construction of a different set of problems, or shifting to a different perspective, but not to a final judgment of truth or falsity. Truth, in the realm mapped by theory, is the effect of a singular process of inquiry rather than being the principle that guides research. If the conventional image of science as problem-solving privileges truth as overdetermining principle, theory foregrounds the process of constructing problems that find the solutions they deserve.

These characteristics perhaps turn theory into one of the best tools we have for critical thinking in a period in which the principle of truth is said to be less and less binding. Theory can do this because it enables us to reflect on, analyze, and understand the present. And understanding the present is already a big achievement in the name of critical thinking, given that we seem to be increasingly incapable of grasping the forces that define it. This inability, however, is not necessarily due to the so-called regime of post-truth. One could equally claim, in a move typical of theory, that we are surrounded by the atmosphere of a 'truth industry'. According to a chorus of truth, whose voices gather more like the humming K. listens to on the telephone in *The Castle* than the distinct voice out of a megaphone, today we are supposed to know exactly what we should be thinking about Peter Handke, Kurds in the Syrian war, the MeToo movement, Jeremy Corbyn and Brexit, populist movements and totalitarian leaders, and so on.

It is hardly surprising that the 'truth' in question is invariably indexed to a warmed-over moral value feeding on the capitalist *axiomatique* that rules over the depoliticized societies we live in, but its mechanism is interesting. In a way reminiscent of Baudrillard, the constant injection of truth or reality into the system is stipulated precisely by their loss and this functions as a "deterrent" for the realization of or search for the loss itself.² The industry of truth or the real thus hides the fact that these have already evaporated. It is no wonder that the hallmark of such a state of affairs, according to Baudrillard, is "nostalgia".³ Moreover, as Jameson suggested, a pervasive cultural nostalgia is not incompatible with a profound socio-political amnesia; rather, their coexistence marks a new period: the postmodern.⁴ The inability to offer aesthetic or cultural representations of the present parallels the sense that our only future is the present society. In this sense, the global culture industry of the United States today —with its endless remakes, adaptations, recycling among various media, vampires, zombies, super heroes, and historical persona — thrives on nostalgia. One should only remember Cesare Zavattini, screenwriter and theoretician of Italian neorealism, to measure the distance of our contemporary situation:

"The most important characteristic, and the most important innovation, of what is called neorealism, it seems to me, is to have realized that the necessity of the 'story' was only an unconscious way of disguising a human defeat, and that the kind of imagination it involved was simply a technique of superimposing dead formulas over living social facts. Now it has been perceived that reality is hugely rich, that to be able

to look directly at it is enough; and that the artist's task is not to make people moved or indignant at metaphorical situations, but to make them reflect (and, if you like, to be moved and indignant too) on what they and others are doing, on the real things, exactly as they are."⁵

Storytelling has finally won a decisive victory, it seems, and the only survivors of the catastrophe are the living dead.

This pervasive culture of nostalgia deserves particular attention. In Turkey, for example, the discourse of revisionist history has been a significant enabler of the rise of the ruling political party, once lionized for its liberal potential, now famed for its authoritarian regime. This is, of course, not to accuse historians or denounce alternative historiographical work. One can nevertheless 'theoretically' suggest, I think, that history as a specific topic of discourse among others has become dominant, in Turkey, from 1980s on into the 2000s at the expense of possible contenders, say political economy which dominated the previous period. And it is telling that the current government is surrounded by a host of historians who also happen to be TV celebrities. A perceptive cultural critic, Nurdan Gürbilek, had noted this tendency long ago in Turkey: in the wake of the 1980 *coup d'état*, the increase in the interest for the past runs proportional to the decrease of its historical burden, as a result of which the past turns into a material for pop history.⁶

The spirit of restoration is also observed in the field of literary studies. People attempt to define the proper Turkish literary canon, discuss the need to revise it or create a new one. Publishers rediscover literary authors, both national and minority, from the early days of the republic. For the critic, implanting domestic specimens with concepts from the latest critical paradigms is the sign of achievement, rather than the grasp of the latest configuration of the world order which might also supply essential critical tools to reflect on works of art. Finally, the authors themselves survive so well in the cultural atmosphere of nostalgia with their stories that they can match each genre in the global marketplace. At least we do not have to worry about the survival of literature, as Tim Parks commented recently, since "there's never been so much of it."⁷

What theory can do in such a situation is to disinvest the affective regime of nostalgia and its truth industry to offer alternative truth-effects, which is also the basis of the counter political knowledge it constructs. In fact, the most destructive or ennobling thing one can do in criticizing a work is to outline the forces that animate it. Historiographical work may be important, but also important is the kind of political cultural atmosphere in which the knowledge it brings functions. Gilles Deleuze once suggested that there is less in common between a race horse and a horse that plows a field than between the plow horse and an ox.⁸ The being of a thing, that is, is determined by the assemblage of effects and affects through which it concretizes. Similarly, what makes a knowledge political is the atmosphere it operates and circulates in. It will not provide critical political knowledge if it is enabled by the cultural atmosphere of nostalgia. There is no reason to believe that this political knowledge will

be easy to achieve. We must be ready to acknowledge that no information, fact, or presentation would in and of itself necessarily provide such knowledge unless the culture in which these facts are orchestrated is somehow politicized.

References

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3. "When the real is no longer what it was, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is a plethora of myths of origin and of signs of reality—a plethora of truth, of secondary objectivity, and authenticity." Ibid, p.6.
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SUGGESTED CITATION: Eken, Bülent: Dire Times, Critical Thinking, and Theory, in: KWI-BLOG, [<https://blog.kulturwissenschaften.de/eken-dire-times/>], 16.03.2020

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17185/kwi-blog/20200316-0900>

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DOI: 10.17185/kwi-blog/20200316-0900

URN: urn:nbn:de:hbz:464-20200316-144644-9

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