Lament or Expectation: After Theory Revisited

Li Tang
School of Foreign Languages, Southwest University for Nationalities, Chengdu, China

ABSTRACT
This essay makes a comment on Terry Eagleton’s After Theory, discusses the major issues of this book including the relationship between theory and politics, postmodernism, cultural theory, anti-theory and the like, and verifies Eagleton’s “political criticism” position. This essay intents to indicate that After Theory is not a lament for “the death of theory” but an expectation to a new paradigm of theory.

After Theory (2003) has been widely considered to be Eagleton’s manifesto on “the end of theory” ever since it was published. On its prefatory note, Eagleton points out that this book argues against the so-called current orthodoxy. He asserts that this orthodoxy cannot meet the demands of the contemporary political situation, and the purpose of this book is to explain the reason, furthermore find out the remedy (see prefatory note). Therefore, “lament on theory” is not the major purpose of this book. To some extent, After Theory is an epigrammatic argumentation toward theory, conveying a dissatisfaction about the deficiency of nowadays theory. Eagleton’s real purpose is to appeal emphasis on the political–critical function of theory, namely, the innovation of theory. His “after theory” is not a declaration of “the end of theory,” but a dissatisfaction of the current theory and an expectation of a new theoretical paradigm.

Eagleton points out, “if theory means a reasonable systematic reflection on our guiding assumptions, it remains as indispensable as ever” (Eagleton 2004, p. 2). In the afterword of Literary Theory: An Introduction (Second edition, 1996), Eagleton asserts, “theory indicates that our classical ways of carving up knowledge are now, for hard historical reasons, in deep trouble. But it is as much a revealing symptom of this breakdown as a positive reconfiguration of the field.”(Eagleton 1996, p. 207) He regards literary theory as one part of institutionalization, as the reflection of political ideology. “(...) the history of modern literary theory is part of the political and ideological history of our epoch” (Eagleton 1996, p. 169). According to him, surely there is some certain
political tendency carved in every literary theory. The importance of theory lies in revealing, criticizing, and challenging the mainstream value. Therefore, “literary theories are not to be upbraided for being political, but for being on the whole covertly or unconsciously so” (Eagleton 1996, p. 170). He emphasizes the importance of political dimension of theory

(... ) literary theory has been indissociably bound up with political beliefs and ideological values. Indeed, literary theory is less an object of intellectual enquiry in its own right than a particular perspective in which to view the history of our times. (Eagleton 1996, p. 170)

He apparently denies the death of theory: the “universal values” which lead to the death of theory do not exist: “if they were ever to do so, the theorist could relievedly lay down his or her theorizing, which would have been made redundant precisely by being politically realized, and do something more interesting for a change” (Eagleton 1996, p. 208).

After Theory, indeed, is a reflection upon literary theory also its function and status in contemporary consumption society. The title of the first chapter of After Theory – “The Politics of Amnesia” – indicates Eagleton’s appeal of reemphasizing political dimension and critical nature in literary theory, also its guiding function in practice. To him, Marxism is perhaps the firmest position he has hold during his such a long academic career. “Literary production,” “capital,” and “consumption” are the key words for Marxist study. In After Theory, Eagleton reflects upon these significant topics. It seems that he equals the popularity of consumption, entertainment, body, sex, and alike in culture to the loss of faith. He asserts, “a more canny, consumerist kind of capitalism, however, persuades us to indulge our senses and gratify ourselves as shamelessly as possible” (Eagleton 2004, p. 5–6). The consumption capitalism “amuses ourselves to death,” makes the public lose morality and ration. This not only leads to the further expansion of consumption society but also identifies the self-fulfillment of individual with the survival of the system. Since conservatism gained the upper hand from 1970s, people indulged themselves into the pursuit of material desire and the meaningless recreations, thus led to the continuous decrease of historical sense and responsible sense. In a society which is full of consumptions and recreations, the absence of memories of collective and effective political action is inevitable. Following by this, lots of contemporary cultural ideas have been out of shape. To this, Eagleton sighs: “There is a historical vortex at the centre of our thought which drags in out of true” (Eagleton 2004, p. 7). He thinks it is urgent to solve this problem. “The future would simply be the present infinitely repeated” (Eagleton 2004, p. 7), which suits the intention of the person in power if we cannot find an alternative method. Therefore, the paradigm shift of theory is pressing. To him, the ideal paradigm of literary theory is to insist on the relevance between critical activity and political behavior.

Eagleton defines culture like this: “Pleasure, desire, art, language, the media, the body, gender, ethnicity: a single word to sum all these up would be culture” (Eagleton 2004, p. 39). Meantime, “cultural ideas change with the world they reflect upon” (Eagleton 2004, p. 23). Various new cultural ideas emerge from capitalism, however, “the concept of culture grew up as a critique of middle-class society, not as ally of it” (Eagleton 2004, p. 25). This causes the complicated relationship between culture and capitalism. Since 1970s, the crisis of capitalism worldwide kept increasing continuously,
“Third Worldism” gave way to “postcolonialism.” To some extent, Eagleton does not approve the popularity of postcolonialism so much. He claims:

much post-colonial theory shifted the focus from class and nation to ethnicity. This meant among other things that the distinctive problems of post-colonial culture were often falsely assimilated to the very different question of Western ‘identity politics’. Since ethnicity is largely a cultural affair, this shift of focus was also one from politics to culture. (Eagleton 2004, p. 12)

In other words, the focus of theory has shifted from politics to culture, from poststructuralism to postmodernism and postcolonialism, which seems to be easier to be understood and realistic. “Poststructuralism was a current of ideas, but postmodernism and post-colonialism were real-life formations” (Eagleton 2004, p. 53).

Eagleton asserts that what probably will end is postmodernism, replaced by a new global narrative of capitalism. Postmodernism, to Eagleton, is contrary to “totalities, universal values, grand historical narratives, solid foundations to human existence and the possibility of objective knowledge” (Eagleton 2004, p. 13). It attacks ultimate truth, objectivity, eternal moral value, scientific research, the faith of historical progress, and alike. Meantime it questions cultural elitism and social normalization, tends to cultural relativism, diversity, discontinuity, and heterogeneity. Postmodernism advocates those who are out of “discipline,” namely, the marginal, perverse, and aberrant, and regards them as the subversive power of social normativity. Nevertheless, Eagleton does not totally agree with this anti-normative and anti-disciplinary behavior. He asserts the postmodernist bias toward normative, integrity and consensus is a severely political disaster. “We have shifted from a national culture with a single set of rules to a motley assortment of sub-cultures, each one at an angle to the others” (Eagleton 2004, p. 17). In postmodernist condition, the distinctions between the real and the fictional, history and lie, culture and economy, high art and popular art, left wing and right wing, and alike, get blurred. Consumption and entertainment occupy the major trend of the society. In such a society, mass culture and various sub-cultures are regarded as important social power; social hierarchies and traditions are under satiric assault. Social spirit shifts from self-disciplined and submissive to hedonistic and insubordinate.

One major purpose of After Theory is to recover the power relations between literary theories and political ideology. Eagleton is unsatisfied with the deficiency of “cultural politics” and cultural theory. “As leftist political hopes faded, cultural studies came to the fore. Dreams of ambitious social change were denounced as illicit ‘grand narratives’, more likely to lead to totalitarianism than to liberty” (Eagleton 2004, p. 45). Under this circumstance, “cultural politics” comes into being, which emphasizes that the effectiveness of politics depends on its cultural factor. With the increasing dominance of culture industry in nowadays society, “culture, economic production, political dominance and ideological propaganda seemed to have merged into a single featureless whole” (Eagleton 2004, p. 49). On the surface, cultural theory blends politics and culture, and this blend keeps the vigor of politics. Yet gradually culture replaces politics. The heyday of cultural theory indicates the recession of politics in theory. As leftism retreats to neo-pragmatism, the political right becomes increasingly ambitious and begins to dismantle cultural theory from inside. Cultural theory, which advocates focusing on social activities and realistic experiences, is rather a conservative retreat of politics than the practice of theory.
To some extent, cultural theory has not abandon politics; it also reflects upon political ideas. Indeed, cultural theory “became the continuation of politics by other means” (Eagleton 2004, p. 29). The characteristics of consumption society – discourse, desire, and other new theories alike – were not simply alternatives to a political leftism that had failed. They were also ways of deepening and enriching it...Cultural theory was there to remind the traditional left of what it has flouted: art, pleasure, gender, power, sexuality, language, madness, desire, spirituality, the family, the body, the ecosystem, the unconscious, ethnicity, life-style, hegemony. (Eagleton 2004, p. 30).

The reason why Marxism shifted to culture is partly out of political impotence and disenchantment. All in all, in Eagleton’s view, culture theory is not an effective theoretical paradigm under nowadays situation. Since the moment it was thrust into prominence, it has been in perpetual crisis. “For it has been called upon to take over these functions in a post-religious age; and it is hardly surprising that for the most part it has lamentably failed to do so” (Eagleton 2004, p. 99). The inevitable result of cultural theory is that, it must start self-reflecting ambitiously, so that “it can seek to make sense of the grand narratives in which it is now embroiled” (Eagleton 2004, p. 73). Culture theory once promised to solve some problems, yet it failed.

Eagleton discusses about the anti-theory trend since 1980s. He claims that although anti-theory is somewhat an interesting doubt, “anti-theory, however, means more than wanting nothing to do with theory” (Eagleton 2004, p. 54). He refutes the ideas of anti-theorist just as Richard Rorty and Stanley Fish from the following aspects: first, theory is one part of life which cannot set itself apart. Theory is life, culture is convention; therefore, it is difficult for us to verify it because we are in our social lives and conventions. Second, anti-theorists assert that only via standing outside culture and theory that can we criticize them. However, “reflecting critically on our situation is part of our situation” (Eagleton 2004, p. 60). Self-reflection roots in human mind is a kind of critical spirit. Thus, we can and we must stand inside our culture and theory to launch our self-reflective campaign. In Eagleton’s view, “most of the objections to theory are either false or fairly trifling” (Eagleton 2004, p. 101). To some extent, anti-theory is our nature; meantime theory is necessary for us to uncover the fact. The purpose of anti-theory is, somehow, a catalyst to the paradigm shift of theory.

Eagleton laments that “the golden age of cultural theory is long past” (Eagleton 2004, p. 1). He asserts that although the time of high theory past away, we are still under its influence. To him, neither high theory nor the following cultural theory is the ideal paradigm. What he looks forward is a new one, which insists on the connection between critical activities and political activities. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, a new and ominous phase of global politics has opened. In contemporary situation, theory faces both challenge and hope:

(Theory) presents cultural theory with a fresh challenge. If it is to engage with an ambitious global history, it must have answerable resource of its own, equal in depth and scope to the situation it confronts. It cannot afford simply to keep recounting the same narratives of class, race and gender, indispensable as these topics are. (Eagleton 2004, p. 221)

Theory must find a new method, a new paradigm, to solve questions in new dimensions.
After Theory is not a lament to theory; even if so, it is merely a lament to high theory and cultural theory, because both of them cannot suit nowadays society. After Theory is, actually, an expectation of building new paradigm of theory on a more grand and responsible level. This new paradigm yearns for solving those questions which are evasive by postmodernism: truth, virtue, faith, objectivity, morality, religion, revolution, nature, death, evil, non-being, willpower, non-utilitarianism, and alike. Eagleton’s conception on new paradigm not only conceives a more expanded Marxism, but also the reassessment on Western liberalism. To those who insist on “foundationalism,” it is high time for them to reflect upon the foundation of Western culture. The non-utilitarianism he advocates is a refutation against the capitalist selfishness; meantime, “objectivity” in his view is an affirmation on the independent existence of “the other.” His ideas on new paradigm are neither merely a simple defense for traditional Western thoughts nor the radical politics of left intellectuals, but a critical reflection upon material culture and Western value since enlightenment (see Selden, 2005, p. 276). His later works insist on his Marxist position and his conception of this new paradigm, focusing on the questions he wants to solve: Materialism (2017), Culture (2016), Culture and the Death of God (2015), Hope without Optimism (2015), Why Marx Was Right (2012), Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate (2010), to name a few. Meantime, he adds new dimensions to his criticism, for instance, the zeal toward literariness and literary text itself: How to Read Literature (2014), The Event of Literature (2013), and alike.

To sum up, After Theory is not a lament, but an expectation. “Theory was a kind of homoeopathy, using reflection in order to get us beyond it” (Eagleton 2004, p. 72). Only through reflection upon old paradigms of theory can we find a new, promising paradigm. Anyhow, as Eagleton says, “We can never be ‘after theory, in the sense that there can be no reflective human life without it” (Eagleton 2004, p. 221). This book indicates not an end of theory, but a new beginning: “It needs to chance its arm, break out of a rather stifling orthodoxy and explore new topics, not least those of which it has so far been unreasonably shy. This book has been an opening move in that inquiry” (Eagleton 2004, p. 221).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Li Tang is Associate Professor at the School of Foreign Languages, Southwest University for Nationalities. She got PhD degree in the Program of Western Literary Theory and Literature at College of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Sichuan University. Her academic interest covers literary theory and criticism, English and American literature, and cross-cultural studies.

References

Eagleton, T. (1996). Literary theory: An introduction. 2nd ed. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
Eagleton, T. (2004). After theory. New York, NY: Basic Books.
Selden, R., P. Widdowson, and P. Brooker. (2005). A reader’s guide to contemporary literary theory. 5th ed. Harlow: Pearson Longman.