

Poor Theory

Notes Toward a Manifesto

Poor theory is less a theory than a way of proceeding.

Poor theory proposes to find ways of making the most of limited resources.

Poor theory uses the tools at hand to take the present to task. In the process it tinkers with theoretical technique and analytical object.

Poor theory suggests the need to 'work around' intransigent problems, when clear solutions are not discernible and the means at our disposal are limited.

Poor theory reflexively re-encounters the history of theory through paying attention to the murky, unsystematic practices and discourses of everyday life. Poor theory is conditioned by reflexive imbrication with probable pasts and arguments with/about possible futures, and thus comes to see the present, too, as heterotemporal.

Poor theory proceeds not through 'tabula rasa,' not by wiping the slate clean and starting afresh. That, to some extent, was the modernist aspiration, which has proven to be always costly and often undesirable. By contrast, poor theory proceeds through appropriations and improvisations, through descriptions that do not leave what it describes unchanged.

Poor theory is theory shaped by the fact that we are always confronted by objects and situations that are 'riddled with error' (Benjamin) and that outpace theory. Critically using the tools at hand, poor theory questions their construction and re-orientes their practice. Tinkering calls for a tactical, recombinatorial, experimental ethic toward theoretical objects, and an historical analysis of the changing political contexts of intellectual inquiry.

Poor theory suggests not a resignation to epistemological futility but an openness to that which outpaces understanding. Objects of analysis present, in their contingency, in their being unsystematic, a degree of intransigence that frustrates mastery. The intractability of the object throws into relief the possibility of error in our methods.

Poor theory puts the stress neither on knowledge nor on ignorance, but on finding a relationship to what we do not know. It takes seriously the possibility that fascination can be turned into a critical method. Poor theory proceeds with fascination and urgency, instead of mastery, and a recognition that the critical tools we have at hand have their limits. It recognizes, for instance, the limits of archival preservation (from the inherent aging of media and materials to a lack of funding or political will), the limits of legibility (given the opacities of translation), the limits of a rational impulse to understand and thus fix the meaning of a messy problem or situations characterized by excess. But, nonetheless, we proceed, armed with the awareness of these limits, tinkering, working against and around them.

The 'poor' in 'poor theory' suggests a kind of discomfort not so much with theory as with its indiscriminate and indiscriminating use. It is not an endorsement of bad or sloppy theorizing, nor is it an all-too-easy condemnation of the 'poverty of theory.' Poor theory still engages with political economies and epistemic shifts, with historical arcs and ruptures, with new directions

and enduring legacies, but, more experimentally, it sits among the insistent desiring practices, obscure forms of address, and tangential intimacies of a changing transnational landscape.

Poor theory is alert to novel ways in which particular forms of life come to matter, and to the relational labor involved in those valuations. Neither seeking to make epochal generalizations nor to fetishize the new, it is nevertheless a prompt to think theoretically in spaces and through times that have not often cohabited with the space of theory.

Shaping paths 'around' intransigent problems, poor theory seeks not to erase the problems of 'theory,' but, rather, to rearticulate pasts, presents and futures via different conversations, not simply re-forming prior modes. Observing a general economy of the critical modes, poor theory invites us to jettison the economic rationalities that reduce our theories to use values and wise investments and other naturalized vestiges of a system of surplus accumulation that profits even from waste and catastrophe. In an era of global fiscal crisis, poor theory invites informal economies and popular boycotts into the theorization of global imaginaries in formation.

Poor theory is more a matter of *de*-scriptions than of 'thick descriptions.' Its procedures have something in common with 'bricolage' and 'détournement,' but with a difference. In the era of information and electronic technologies, bricolage necessarily becomes arbitrage. Cultural arbitrage exploits existing hierarchies by tracing and refracting imbalances and unevenness in global culture, much as economic arbitrage exploits profit price differentials in financial instruments. Putting 'difference' to good use, recognizing merit in what is generally considered meretricious, turning compost into compositions: these are some strategies of poor theory.

Poor theory overlaps with but is not identical to many other projects: 'poor cinema' (Julio García-Espinosa et. al.), 'weak thought' (Gianni Vattimo), 'architecture for the poor' (Hassan Fathy), 'poor theater' (Jerzy Grotowski), and 'arte povera' (Germano Celant et. al.), for example.

Poor cinema is a powerful movement in film making, growing out of the aesthetics of hunger (Glauber Rocha in Brazil) and imperfect cinema (Julio García-Espinosa in Cuba). Poor cinema values creativity over technical possibilities, and tactical, partial engagements over comprehensive programs.

Poor theory, unlike 'weak thought,' is not primarily concerned with arguing for a kind of philosophical anti-foundationalism: its concerns are more everyday and social.

If poor theory desires to do more than advocate for the use of mud bricks and the return to traditional building methods or their equivalents, it is because 'local knowledge' under today's spatial conditions cannot afford to be nostalgic or to have a merely local application. Poor theory looks for the points of communication and networks of contiguity between the urban poor in scattered city centers and across national borders. Poor theory thinks historically, relationally, and theoretically around and against denials of co-evalness (Johannes Fabian). Through new mixings of the practical and the theoretical, it destabilizes prior and continuing formations of the national, the colonial, the imperial and the postcolonial as pure categories.

Grotowski's 'poor theater' is verbally close but ideologically distant from poor theory. Poor theater was an attempt to strip theater of its spectacular elements, and to reduce it, in good Stanislavski fashion, to the relation between actor and audience. Poor theater was a protest against theater's *over-abundance* of resources; the ascetic was its aesthetic. Poor theory may be

the diametrical opposite of poor theater. It sees an abundance in what is commonly labeled poor. It explores the conditions in which pronouncements of abundance and scarcity are enunciated.

Arte povera tried, among other things, to turn compost into compositions. Nevertheless, the direction some curators saw in it was a powerful move from 'zero to infinity', from nothing to everything. By contrast, poor theory has to be concerned not with nothing or with everything, but with the 'not quite', with 'disappointment'.

Poor theory is not so much a new theory conceived from whole cloth as an invitation to do theory-work through an intermingled multiplicity of approaches and topics.

Poor theory is not a lever, a toolbox nor a key. Poor theory is an open set of engagements.

Work in poor theory can proceed in many different ways. It does not simply celebrate fragmentation and pluralism; rather, it seeks a complex interdisciplinary engagement across cultures, histories, and practices. It draws inspiration and rigor from all disciplines, but it does not seek to redefine theory as a singular disciplinary endeavor. It may be particularly suitable to mingling familiar sites of theory with sites still incompletely engaged by other forms of theory. It may turn its iterative methods and generative re-mixtures toward, for instance, the zones of affect and economy, capital and life, value and reproduction, production and culture, subjectivation and materiality, science fictions and technopolitics.

We fully expect that it will be elaborated in unexpected ways. It is open to re-mixture because its borders are always available for examination and always under construction. We encourage different individual and collaborative projects to emerge out of poor theory's engagement with heterogeneous probings, fragmentary thinking, and open-endedness, and its resistance to totalization, restriction, and closure.