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Theory and the Ethos of Argument

The Way We Argue Now: A Study in the Cultures of Theory. Amanda Anderson. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2006.

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<1> *The Way We Argue Now* is about argument, of course, but it also concerns a community of discourse, its titular “we,” that turns out to involve scholars of Marxism, new historicism, feminism, cultural studies, queer theory, psychoanalysis, deconstruction, and more. If we spend most of our time regarding these critical modes as diverse and even antithetical, Anderson's work reminds us that they are as one under the heading of *theory*. The theorist's typical ambitions—exposing inequitable social relations to critique, speaking truth to power, and dismantling illusory notions of aesthetic ideology, for example—have enabled innovative research agendas in the academy and have had a share in the broader culture's rethinking of such matters as gender relations in the last few decades. But theory has also come under fire in various ways. Most relevant for this review's purposes are not the conservative, often non-academic arguments that refuse the value of theory altogether, as in the “culture wars” from the 1980s and early 1990s. Anderson's argument is deeply internal to academic discourse on theory and, at the same time, broadly critical of that discourse. Thus her book shares more with a study such as Terry Eagleton's 2004 *After Theory*. But then Eagleton's despair about theory's relevance to progressive political goals is quite unlike Anderson's approach. *The Way We Argue Now* offers a less predictable and more constructive undertaking, hopeful and respectful about theory even in the course of challenging some of theory's most characteristic assumptions. The result is at times startling. Anderson's style is brisk, and she pulls no punches in her analyses. At the same time there is always a sense of measure and care in her approach. These combined qualities are not merely incidental features of Anderson's temperament. Instead, her manner is also her matter, leading into her most characteristic claims. As she says in her concluding pages, “Argument with those from whom we differ is a form of respect and it implies an aspiration to universalism” (187).

<2> That sentence neatly indicates Anderson's difference from most self-identified theorists, for in yoking together “respect” and an “aspiration to universalism,” she runs against one of the few routines of thought which have unified theoretical discourse since the 1970s. On the one hand, theorists typically proffer one or another kind of artfully moral or virtuous self-conception. Theory is generally understood by its practitioners to facilitate some genuine version of respect—attention to the other, hospitality, and so forth. On the other hand, theorists since the poststructuralist turn seldom reach for a term like *universalism* as a companion concept to ameliorate human interactions, nor do theorists often embrace other concepts that Anderson sets out to recuperate, notably *reason*. In a wide array of discourses—early Foucault, deconstructive psychoanalysis à la Deleuze and Guattari, or the performativity theory of Judith Butler—terms like *universalism* and *reason* amount to the favored mystifications of a dominative culture, variously styled as disciplinary, bourgeois, or heteronormative. What characterizes Anderson's work at the broadest level is its challenge to the commonplace supposition among literary and cultural historians that being theory-minded is tantamount to embracing some version of a suspicion hermeneutics that reflexively rejects human agency and sociality as conceptualized within the Enlightenment or “liberal” modernity. Anderson articulates an affirmative vision of rational inquiry and debate. Reason and argument, in her rendering, are devices for reciprocal understanding rather than pretenses that enable the empowered to secure their hegemony.

<3> Anderson's affirmative idea of rationality derives principally from a Kantian tradition of thought on human agency and sociality. She draws especially on the work of Jürgen Habermas, who, more emphatically than Kant, extrapolates conceptions of reason and agency into a larger terrain of intersubjectivity with direct bearing on ideas of sociality and political modernity. Anderson lucidly engages the ways in which cultural theorists have supposed this Habermasian



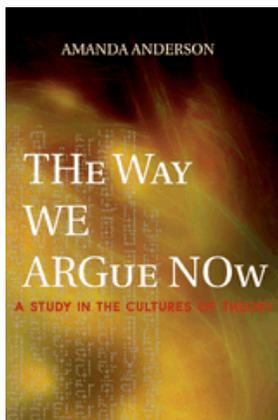
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Issue 3.3



ambition to depend upon an unwarranted idealism concerning communication and social interaction.

<4> Most of the book's chapters appeared before as independent essays, and given that Anderson's mode of exposition is minutely attentive to the particular features of specific arguments, much of the book can easily be read in pieces. Her procedure typically involves carefully reconstructing a specific debate and then proposing an overcoming or diagnosis of the debate, pointing out how the parties in the debate fail to accomplish a sufficiently nuanced and balanced conception of the broadly anti-materialist tradition of Kantian-Habermasian thought. A case in point is Anderson's reading of the contention between Judith Butler and Seyla Benhabib over the best way to conceptualize the relations of philosophical and political reflection with regard to feminism. Anderson has in Benhabib a rare ally among theorists, a figure who already endorses many aspects of the Habermasian program. But Anderson is careful to set forth how Benhabib's conception of Habermasian social theory remains blinkered to certain aspects of identity politics, simply foreclosing, for instance, the possibility that sadomasochistic sexuality might be a justifiable subjective and intersubjective practice. If Benhabib emerges as falling short of a sufficiently flexible conception of intersubjective relations, however, Butler emerges as either confused or evasive, seeking to promote what Anderson persuasively reads as a cryptonormative position, an "evasion of normative explicitness" (23).

<5> The earlier chapters operate somewhat independently of each other. One in particular examines Satya Mohanty's 1997 text *Literary Theory and the Claims of History*. In that work, and in subsequent works, Mohanty has set about reinvigorating the critical rhetoric of realism, truth and objectivity, all in order to overcome what he views as mainstream theory's knee-jerk antirealism. The last decade has offered us a variety of efforts to reopen questions of objectivity and truth, of course, the assumption being that scholars in the humanities had spent too long seeing such concerns as wholly naive or mistaken. As Anderson is careful to note, Mohanty's argumentation is one specific form of that approach, a form in which the concerned critic proffers a rhetoric of fact (or truth) but precisely in the name of a specific set of political values (for Mohanty, a concern to overcome exploitative social relations). Anderson respectfully examines Mohanty's critical motives but also concludes—correctly, I think—that his program remains conceptually unstable, proposing to unify discourses of fact and value without offering a consistent vision of those terms either in their relative priority or their coequality.

<6> A clearly sustained argumentative development begins with the third and final part of the book. Headed "Ethos and Argument," this run of three chapters addresses the ways in which Habermasian theory has been described in a series of critical contexts: first pragmatism, then Foucauldian theory, and finally a tradition of liberal thought about political legitimation.

<7> The first chapter in this sequence, on pragmatism, focuses specifically on an American neo-pragmatist community of discourse, centered on Richard Rorty and finding important expressions in such figures as Stanley Fish and Barbara Herrnstein Smith. Anderson begins by pointing to a performative contradiction in their pragmatist rhetoric. She spotlights a tension between the pragmatist rhetoric of philosophical modesty (we must give up on the metaphysical ambitions of the philosophical tradition) and the subtly aggrandized self-conception of the pragmatist thinker (some of us have the temperament to forge ahead without the metaphysical consolations of the philosophical tradition). What emerges is a pragmatist conception of character—stoic, ironic, skeptically postmodern—and Anderson challenges the point that this vision of character can coherently dispense with the Habermasian idea of reflective and intersubjective attunement that pragmatists generally seek to dismiss.

<8> The chapter on Foucauldian discourse was especially telling for this reviewer, as perhaps for all scholars of nineteenth-century literary studies, where Foucault was for so long a primary reference point. Anderson's reading is usefully and uncommonly attuned to the remarkable career of Foucault's thought and, especially, the respects in which his charismatic authority made it possible for scholars to draw inspiration from the larger sweep of his corpus without always registering carefully the developments and even the about-faces in his career. Anderson accepts the widespread understanding that Foucault's later work, beginning with the second volume of his *History of Sexuality*, outlines an ethics of the self. In that sense, late Foucault can be read by his supporters as effectively countering Habermas's accusations that postmodern-era theorists lack a coherent understanding of their own normative commitments. What is more, notes Anderson, theorists have thereby credited Foucault with a kind of ethos, a practice of self-cultivation, that trumps the reason-centered vision of selfhood and argument associated by those same theorists

with Habermas and the Kantian tradition. Thus Foucault's familiar rhetorical moves—his dislike of being labeled, for instance, and his refusal of terms—come to seem like a style of selfhood, a performance of political concern that nonetheless forswears conventional marks of such concern, such as a rhetoric of knowledge, truth-telling and consensus seeking. From the vantage point that Foucauldian critics typically take up, Foucault can seem artful and humane while Habermas comes off as an arid rationalist.

<9> Anderson demonstrates the falseness of the opposition there between ethos and rational argument by showing how Habermasian theory does in fact offer its own vision of ethos, if in ways that are not always obvious and that reflect some ambivalence on Habermas's part. She begins by allowing that Habermas does at times invoke an ideal of rational life, in which reason looks like a subjectively bearable device for disembedding from forms of socio-historical particularity. And at such moments, it seems plausible to style Habermas as promoting rationalism in opposition to ethos, because identities built around pre-given forms of socio-historical particularity are exactly what ethos amounts to for many of the critics against whom Anderson is arguing. Anderson's claim is that Habermas presents the regulative ideal of communicative rationality as itself an historical development involving its own distinctive form of identity. Here is where the social and intersubjective orientation of Habermasian theory becomes especially crucial. Within individuals and collectivities, commitments to rational interaction and democratic process can be regarded, not as the evacuation of ethos or affect, but rather as an intersubjective accomplishment within history.

<10> That point is developed in Anderson's final chapter on proceduralism, a liberal political theory that investigates how certain processes, rules and institutional arrangements might be understood to establish political justice and legitimacy. Just as Anderson's previous chapter sought to complicate a presumptive antinomy of ethos and reason, this chapter disputes the commonplace view that proceduralism commits its adherents to a radically impersonal and arid conception of socio-political arrangements. She contends that proceduralism can, in effect, constitute an ethos. Anderson takes up a wide range of critical touchstones here, extending from Lionel Trilling's 1971 *Sincerity and Authenticity* to latter-day political theory. Central to this chapter, and to Anderson's larger ambitions with this book, is the task of lending credence to an idea of reasoned argument as a kind of identity value, an ethos all its own rather than a refusal of ethos.

<11> Other scholars have sometimes attempted to define a kind of rapprochement between Habermasian perspectives and those perspectives which insist on the importance of embedded, specifically situated aspects of identity. (Benhabib's feminist work is a case in point.) Most often, such efforts try to define a role for affect, or for some specific pre-given aspect of identity, within the Habermasian standpoint, which thereafter can do its more familiar work of defining the procedural arrangements within which varied identities might pursue justice. Anderson's version of this gesture insists that such a rapprochement is a mistake if it takes the form of supplementing Habermasianism by securing a place for *fixed* identities. To enshrine any form of identity in that way would be, she argues, just another way of reinscribing what she earlier presented as the false opposition between ethos and rational argument. The core of Anderson's case is that rational argument *is* an ethos.

<12> That point makes good sense, I think, although some readers will struggle to accept its entailments. Conceived as an ethos, rational argument involves continually questioning the authority of any given construction of individual or collective identity. It is to see seeking as a way of being and disembedding as a form of embeddedness. Anderson is a brilliant reader and arguer. She makes a convincing case that her proposal has as much coherence and cogency as do the many theoretical accounts that have arrayed themselves against the liberal tradition in general and Habermas in particular. But in a way that is fully consistent with her thinking, *The Way We Argue Now* does not exactly put these confounding issues to rest. Instead, it powerfully outlines how theorists in remarkably various quarters might advance their conversations by disembedding themselves from a number of staling oppositions that have for too long reinforced a relatively static discourse of theory.

