Glossary of Terms

Aesthetics

The philosophical study of beauty and art extends back to antiquity. Cultural theory tends to follow Immanuel Kant's description of aesthetics as a distinct mode of cognition and perception. The perceiver is described by Kant as "disinterestedly interested" when encountering beauty in order to stress the fact that even if an aesthetic judgment does not employ logic or reason, it is nevertheless universal; that is, not simply a matter of individual opinion or taste: the beautiful is beautiful for everyone. Kant's theory has received widespread critical attention by theorists such as Theodor Adorno, Pierre Bourdieu, and Herbert Marcuse, who have questioned the political and social implications of the supposed universality of the aesthetic.

Affect

A word whose theoretical use spans the seventeenth-century materialist philosophy of Baruch Spinoza, nineteenth-century German psychology, and the contemporary writings of Gilles Deleuze and Eve Sedgwick. In Spinoza's *Ethics* affects are described as multifaceted modes in which bodies (generally defined as "matter" and not exclusively as "human bodies") interact with one another. Often defined narrowly in popular discourse as "emotion" or "excitement," affect is in fact a broader categorization of concepts (i.e., depression, ecstasy, joy, shame) that seeks to understand how bodies interact beyond narrower psychological and physiological criteria.

Alienation

A concept that describes a tendency in which subjects become separate from one another, from determining their own needs, and from the means to bridge these divisions. Alienated consciousness is a confluence of these types of separation within the subject. Not only is alienation a concept used to describe the cultural consequence of exclusion, it is also used to counter their effects and its normalcy. Many theorists see educational institutions and radical political and social movements as ways to reduce or eliminate alienation.

Avant-garde

Pioneering or highly innovative artistic forms, groups, or trends are described as avant-garde because they challenge or overturn established aesthetic norms and institutions. A military term denoting the foremost group in an infantry regiment, it was used initially by Henri St. Simon (1760–1825) to describe elite French social classes of lawyers, scientists, and artists. The word has since been used to trace how formal and social rebellions occur in the art world. For example, Peter Bürger's theory of the avant-garde draws from modern histories of Dada and Surrealism, artistic movements that challenged the norms of the bourgeois art establishment in the first half of the twentieth century.

Biopolitics

This relatively recent concept was developed by Michel Foucault in a series of lectures in 1978. Foucault describes European governments since the eighteenth century as biopolitical because governance and social control became increasingly organized around the management of the social and physical health of populations. In disciplinary societies, governments exercise control through punishment and the threat of death. By comparison, biopolitics seeks to control

and order birth rates, hygiene, sanity, and sexual mores, organizing the shape and character of the social body through the management of life. The concept has been reinterpreted by Giorgio Agamben, Antonio Negri, and others, who use Foucault's ideas to examine the historical precedents of the contemporary exercise of biopolitics (e.g., in the writings of Aristotle and Hannah Arendt, the events of the Holocaust, etc.) as well as its future implications on a global scale.

Capital

Karl Marx and cultural theorists following him describe capital as the social relations of production that appear to us in the form of commodities. Economists define capital differently: as an asset that (hopefully) accrues a profit. The difference in definition here follows from the fact that the former trace the entire production process that results in capital (historically and materially) instead of exclusively focusing on the end product. Capital is thus seen as an extensive process involving technology, the extraction of value from bodies and minds, and an entire cultural and social sphere of relations and knowledge related to this process. *Capitalism* is the name for this process, which again differs from the standard economic definition, which views it as a form of economic organization based on profit accumulation, a free market, and the pursuit of individual self-interest that is supposed to result in collective social good.

Class

Class is a general categorization of a group which shares similar experiences, traditions, degrees of wealth, types of employment and education, and access to political participation. Classes have tended to be given names such as bourgeois (upper class), proletarian (working class), or middle class, but these large-scale definitions are often limiting and make it difficult to understand the multiple ways in which group identity in contemporary societies is experienced. Class distinctions have tended to be organized around economic status, but social status is also negotiated culturally through the establishment of ideas of "taste," appropriate modes of dress and behavior, and so on. Class divisions persist today on a global scale and can lead to significant socioeconomic conflicts.

Cognitive Mapping

Fredric Jameson used this concept to explain and counteract the ways in which the experience of alienation makes it difficult to understand the character of everyday life within the larger scale and history of cultural and economic processes. Drawn from a reading of Kevin Lynch's *Image of the City* (1960), this concept makes explicit spatial dimensions of those spheres of daily life (such as the economic and cultural) which were once separate and today coincide in confusing ways.

Colonialism

An economic, political, and cultural process in which nations or dominant groups invade, reorganize, and assimilate entire regions or countries. Colonialism is distinct from imperialism, which is a form of political control that can be exercised at a distance or indirectly (e.g., US "cultural imperialism" points to the potential impact of US films, television programs, novels, etc., in countries around the world). By contrast, colonialism requires the incursive nation to settle within the colonized space and exert control over its people and resources through physical (e.g., military force) and cultural (e.g., schooling, the establishment of official languages) means.

Commodity and Commodity Fetishism

A commodity is a product or service produced for exchange or use by someone other than their producer. To understand a commodity is to know how it is produced and to realize the manner in which commodities become fetishes, obscuring the reality of their process of production and seeming to be a natural part of social reality. Due in part to this complex process of value-making, Karl Marx and others describe the commodity as having magical or illusory qualities that make it appear to be untouched by the labor process that brings it into being. The process that creates these qualities is called commodity fetishism.

The Commons

Perhaps more typically named "the public sphere" (if not quite the same as it), this concept describes a physical and cultural space free of market controls or the protocols of privatization. Due to the increasing enclosure and commodification of previously public political processes, forms of cultural expression, and spaces for social interaction (ranging from elections to editorial critique, from access to the airwaves to the use of public space), cultural theorists appeal to historical examples of the commons, and generate

models and ideas about new commons, in order to show the necessity and viability of genuinely democratic and non-hierarchical social and political structures.

Critique

A term widely used to convey a contention made against ideas, practices, or artifacts; in popular use, to critique something is to denounce or negate it as in some way deficient or problematic. In cultural theory, "critique" names an investigative process by which the origin and conditions of possibility for a given idea or practice are identified and explored in depth, often with the aim of highlighting the social and historical character of widely accepted (and so naturalized) modes of thought and action. The distinction between "immanent critique" and "transcendental critique," made initially by members of the Frankfurt School, has come to be increasingly important in contemporary thought. Immanent critique works from within the concept, object, or practice under investigation, and attempts to develop an understanding based on its premises, assertions, and internal contradictions. By contrast, transcendental critique works from the outside, either basing critique on pre-existing norms and concepts by which it makes its assessment, or hoping through critique to establish foundational (as opposed to historical and contingent) insights and conclusions.

Dialectic

Though it has a lengthy philosophical history as a mode of inquiry based in question and answer, contemporary notions of dialectical thinking emerged in the nineteenth-century German Idealist tradition, especially in the work of G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831). Dialectics was reconceived as a self-critical method of thinking that attempts to expand one's ability to conceive how thought is mediated by seemingly extraneous factors, such as temporality, space, and the socioeconomic conditions of daily life. While dialectics is often mistakenly imagined as a highly mechanical method, consisting of the establishment of thesis, antithesis, and then synthesis of ideas, it is instead of a mode of thought which interrogates the contradictions within ideas with the aim of generating new ones, which are themselves assessed and interrogated. For Hegel and Marx this movement is a progressive one which characterizes not just the history of ideas, but the movement of history itself.

Diaspora

Literally meaning "to disperse," the concept has been used to describe the forced or voluntary displacement of ethnicities, religions, and other populations from once indigenous geographical spaces. Cultural theorists trace how this displacement affects potential and actual community formation and how new communities cohere in places distant from those where diasporic individuals or communities once dwelt.

Discourse

A broadly used term that conveys the linguistic characteristics of a given cultural phenomenon. Linguist Émile Benveniste (1902–76) defines discourse as any utterance that implicates a speaker and listener. This working definition is used by numerous cultural theorists who explore the production of meaning as a social process rather than as one based in the mind or through predetermined laws of communication. The term was also used by Michel Foucault, for whom "discourse" was the name of distinct areas of knowledge (e.g., historiography, medicine, philosophy, psychiatry, etc.), the practices and rules surrounding them, and the mode by which power works through the exercise of language and control over "truth."

Empiricism

An epistemology based in the acquisition of knowledge through the five senses. The founding theorists of empiricism – John Locke, David Hume, and John Stuart Mill – argued against rationalism and theories of knowledge produced without direct experiential evidence. These thinkers believed all thought derived from impressions acquired from one's interaction with the physical world of objects. Cultural theory has often questioned this theory of knowledge because experience-based epistemologies elide or ignore the historical contingency of many of their suppositions, and underestimate the difficulty of apprehending phenomena in the cultural and social world with the same (supposed) degree of certainty as the physical one.

Enlightenment

An intellectual period spanning the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and primarily located in Britain, Germany,

and France. Critical of all forms of authority, especially religion and older economic organizational models, the large number of novel philosophical positions associated with the time arose with publication of Denis Diderot's *Encyclopédie* (1750–65). Philosophers in the Enlightenment expressed a faith in reason and saw the production of knowledge as inherently progressive. However, many theorists have since questioned its liberating potential, while still others now view the ideas generated during this time as responsible for some aspects of the contemporary era's technological, ideological, and political destructiveness.

Epistemology

A term which means "the theory of knowledge" and whose inquiries are among the most prominent in philosophical or theoretical inquiry. Many cultural theorists examine the practices and underlying conditions of epistemologies to discover how learning and knowledge are situated within discourses and institutions of expertise, power, and capital.

Ethnicity

A broad social category which describes complex religious, cultural, and national characteristics which generate ideas of belonging to a specific social group often (though not always) located in a defined geographical space. While race is thought to be determined by physiological or genetic traits, ethnicity is usually imagined to be a more flexible type of affiliation; nevertheless, the precise relationship of ethnicity to race remains an issue open to theoretical challenges and debate. Both race and ethnicity have formed the basis of discrimination and stereotyping by majorities against minorities.

Gender

Conceptually distinct from the genetically determined category of "sex," gender names the complex ways in which sexual difference is lived out socially, politically, and culturally. The concept of gender draws attention to the social and historical production of the norms, codes of conduct, "natural" forms of behavior, and defined social roles (e.g., woman as care giver, man as wage earner) that cultures assign to different members of society and seek to naturalize through appeals to their biological origins and necessity. Gender theorists

have made fundamental contributions to our understanding of the ways in which the production and management of difference has limited the range of individual identities and produced significant social and political injustice.

Labor

A purposeful activity common to all forms of human society. Subjects labor in various ways as a key expression of their existence, within a variety of conditions and divisions that are often inherited from previous generations. Political acknowledgment of the significance of all forms of labor has fostered labor movements, unions, and legal frameworks, all of which seek to protect the laborer against sanctioned abuse and exploitation. Feminism has challenged the unofficial status of labor conducted outside of the delineated workplace by women, such as the unpaid work carried out in domestic space.

Nation

Nations are "imagined communities" according to Benedict Anderson, and his influential account suggests that a subject's identity is largely shaped by her nation's culture. Thought nations have come to seem like almost natural divisions of people; they constitute fictions of group belonging which have come over time to connect political and social rights to geography with significant force. A nation is a people whose close affiliation to one another is defined by a shared geography established through a complex conglomerate of state and legal institutions, and traditions and belief structures. Though globalization was thought to have created conditions in which nations and national belonging would come to an end, nations remain one of the primary modes of group identification in the world today.

(Neo-)Liberalism

Liberalism is an ideology that became politically relevant in the seventeenth century. Among its main principles are the rights of the individual and his or her freedoms, a secular constitution and legal framework of authority, and the nation-state as the primary organizational form of power. Neoliberalism adheres to many of the principles of liberalism and attempts to extend its market orthodoxy to spaces and practices once deemed protected from the brute logic of capitalist economics, i.e., education, labor, medicine, morality.

Orientalism

A discipline and theory produced within a range of Western institutions (i.e., diplomatic practices, academic disciplines, art museums, periodicals, narrative forms) which serves to construct pernicious myths about Near and Middle East cultures. Among these myths or fantasies is the image of the oriental as lacking subjectivity and as deviously fanatical. The older stereotypes of the Orient developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and famously detailed by Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978) have returned with great force in the general views adopted since 9/11 about the beliefs and practices of Middle Easterners.

Patriarchy

This term literally means "rule of the father" and describes a related set of social norms and institutions – rooted in the hetero-normative family and everyday gender relations – which seeks to ensure male domination. A sustained patriarchy seeks to disempower women and dominate all sociopolitical spheres of authority. Despite decades of sustained criticism, patriarchy continues to play a significant role in the organization of contemporary societies around the world.

Phenomenology

The "study of things shown" is rooted in the work of René Descartes (1596–1650), but it has been reimagined in the writings of Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) and Martin Heidegger (1889–1976). Primary in importance for phenomenology is an understanding of how appearances affect consciousness prior to the attempt to conceptualize objects and events. By bracketing out prior assumptions, this method seeks to grasp things intelligibly rather than to prescribe their qualities from within thought or consciousness.

(Post–)Fordism

A dominant mode of economics that follows the reorganization of Fordist forms of production. Fordism (a term derived from the practices of US industrialist Henry Ford) was characterized by the repetitive labor of the production line, exemplified by the North American automobile industry and its (relatively) high-paid labor force.

In the later part of the twentieth century, in many parts of the world this form of industrial labor has been replaced by new forms of work based on the provision of services (everything from nursing to call-center employees to bond traders) and the reshaping of industrial production around a globally dispersed, more malleable, and cheaper labor force. The cultural and social implications of post–Fordism include less job security, a decrease in unionization and the size of middle classes, greater disparities in wealth around the world, new geographic zones of industrial labor (e.g., the *maquiladoras* in Mexico), the privatization of government services, and the financialization of daily life.

Praxis

Refers to action in which subjects make a conscious plan or calculation. Praxis is differentiated from rudimentary labor, especially when enacted in the framework of politics. The concept has a long theoretical history stretching back to Aristotle, who divided all human endeavors into theoretical and practical work, with praxis signifying an application of a theory. Theorists as diverse as Sir Phillip Sidney, Antonio Gramsci, and Slavoj Žižek examine the category of praxis as a way to think through the ramifications of carrying out a theory or plan of action.

Problematic (problématique)

When used as a noun, this term conveys the way in which Louis Althusser (and his followers) complicate and instigate ways to theorize in the present. Theoretical contradictions and antinomies are two categories of problematic, whose horizon of interpretation is the social totality. Often the aim of cultural theory is to explain how problems have no easy, immediate solutions. Problematics are valued by theorists of culture because many other discourses offer superficial answers to important issues, or use accusation or fault (seen in *ad hominem* political attacks) to evade the difficulty with which larger socioeconomic causes must be explained and understood.

Progress

Progress is an ideology that imagines history as a linear movement of improvement and inherent innovation. As one of the most powerful ideologies of modern societies,

"progress" has the tendency to prescribe interpretations of particular events or periods of time, making them seem either a good or difficult step toward a better time; seldom is history seen as somehow regressing or staying the same. The causes of progress are generally linked to developments in technology, politics, economics, or culture. Since the trauma of World War II, and in the context of the globe's ongoing environmental crisis, some social critics have tried to draw attention to the limits and problems of seeing human activity through the lens of ideas of progress.

Queer

A synonym for "gay" or "homosexual," and once used primarily in a pejorative way. Countering use of this word as invective, activists in the 1980s reappropriated the term in the ongoing social and political struggle against discrimination and scapegoating of gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered individuals and communities. Since its revaluation as a word, queer theory has played an invaluable role in refashioning our understanding of subjectivity and the forms taken by political, social, and cultural activism.

Race

This concept is used to categorize biological, genetic, and physical characteristics in order to "type" cultural or ethnic groups. Although imagined as a scientific, descriptive tool, race has been used to relate biology to supposed social and cultural traits possessed by groups (e.g., intelligence), often with the aim of establishing hierarchies and justifying stereotypes. Race is not a pre-existing category representative of any reality in identity, but rather an indelible myth used to serve social and political purposes. Race has inevitably led to the practices and attitudes of *racism*.

Revolution

A historical event or brief period of time in which an established order is dismantled or overthrown. Revolutions are numerous throughout history, with the Industrial Revolution and the American and French Revolutions being the most well known. The demand for the instant change of longstanding political and social orthodoxies is often the impetus behind revolution, but revolutions are also the unwitting result of developing discontent with daily life or the power of new ideas to garner rapid,

widespread support. "Counter-revolution" signifies the attempt by established powers to thwart, undermine, or oppose revolution.

Simulacrum

This term gained increased importance in the work of Gilles Deleuze and Jean Baudrillard, who describe it as a form of representation with no object or event to which it refers. This is different than an image (or, in empiricism, an idea), which is believed to reflect or be a mimetic representation of reality. Visual representation has the power to mediate the way spectators see reality, and as such simulacra are influential in changing the very way "reality" is conceived.

Spectacle

A term used to describe a concerted and large-scale expression of visual phenomena which threatens to overwhelm the spectator's senses. In cultural theory, a more technical concept of spectacle is associated with the writings and practices of Guy Debord and the Situationists in the 1960s. Writing in a Marxist tradition, Debord understood spectacle as the latest stage in the development of capitalist social relations. In *Society of the Spectacle* (1967), he describes an ever-greater intensification of commodification – now including the production of immaterial commodities such as images – which resulted in ever more disparate and distant social relations. "Separation perfected" became the phrase associated with the spectacle's alienating consequence.

Three Worlds (First World, Second World, Third World)

This geopolitical division was first named by French journalist Alfred Sauvy in 1952. With the onset of the Cold War, an ideological and territorial conflict between the United States and the USSR created cultural and political divisions across the globe. The First World identified the dominant capitalist regimes allied with the United States (such as Great Britain and France), while the Second named the countries allied directly with the USSR (such as Cuba and Yugoslavia). The Third World was associated with former colonies. The non-alignment movement arranged after the Bandung conference in 1955 sought to mobilize Third World countries against the respective hegemonies of the

other two worlds. Since the end of the Cold War in 1989 these terms have been used to identify relative levels of economic development and political progress (as viewed from the West).

Totality

A horizon of cultural interpretation and theorization, a totality is a concrete historical period or overall relation of social forces, developments, and changes within which theorists situate their analysis. Different categories can substitute for the word "totality" in cultural theory, including "world history," "global capitalism," and "civilization." Theorists G. W. F. Hegel, Karl Marx, Georg Lukács, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Fredric Jameson see totality as a "vantage point" within which they interpret and engage with the interconnectedness and disjuncture of different realms of daily life: collectives, economic processes, political and ideological institutions, cultural industries, and ideologies, to name a few. Totality as an interpretative imperative prevents a myopic perspective from misidentifying the causes of specific events or topics.

The Unconscious

The unconscious is the name for cognitive processes which occur beneath or behind conscious thought. Among its varied theorizations, Freudian psychoanalysis imagines the unconscious to be the most important dimension of psychical life. The unconscious is said to be a source of the subject's deepest drives, which become "knowable" only when exhibited in symptoms such as dreams and slips of the tongue.

Utopia

Taken literally, utopia means "no place," but the word has been used most commonly to signify an ideal society. Utopias typically take the form of philosophical or literary creations that portray a near future place in which the social problems and quandaries defining a historical period are resolved through significant social change. This genre and the social desire it expresses can be found in nearly all cultural artifacts, from the philosophy of Plato to contemporary science fiction novels and films. Fredric Jameson has suggested that throughout history utopian constructions have flourished when political energies are most greatly stalled.

Virtual

Connotations of this word may cause one to believe it only describes the experience of navigating a human avatar through a programmed space on a computer. While much critical work examines the ramifications of this activity, "virtual" also means that which is highly abstract to the point of being "unreal" and "in principle" meaningful for this reason. Virtual is therefore useful for delineating ontological questions concerning what is real, actual, potential, and possible in any given situation.

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