Foucault in the Bush.
The Social Life of Post-Structuralist Theory in East Berlin's Prenzlauer Berg

There was a murmur of applause. Hamlet was again a good story to them, but it no longer seemed quite the same story to me.

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ABSTRACT *This essay seeks to make critical theory an object of ethnographic contextualization and inquiry through an exploration of the social life of post-structuralist theory in 1980s East Berlin. The 'Prenzlauer Berg Scene' of artists and writers utilized post-structuralism as a distinctive register for defining their social identity and as an analytical and interpretive paradigm for articulating their alienation from the state-crafted language of GDR public culture. The essay discusses how the subversive practice of post-structuralism in the Prenzlauer Berg came at the price of linguistic exclusion and political withdrawal from mainstream GDR society. In conclusion, it is argued that the Prenzlauer Berg case emblematizes the difficulty of politicizing expert theoretical registers since these registers' objective critical 'power' relies upon structures of epistemic inequity that cultivate distinctions between critical experts and naïve practitioners.*

KEYWORDS *Critical theory, intellectuals, dissident communities, East Germany*

My title is borrowed from one of anthropology's most wonderful parables, Laura Bohannan's prescient 'Shakespeare in the Bush' (1966). If you remember her essay, Bohannan discovered that the 'universal' message of *Hamlet* became impossible to convey to a gathering of Tiv as they persisted in negotiating her narration and in re-interpreting the events of Shakespeare's drama according to their own cosmology of criticism. Thus, Hamlet's ghostly visions were explicable only by the micropolitics of witchcraft, and so on. The moral of Bohannan's tale remains compelling—no text, no matter how canonically sacred, is universally transparent in either its meanings or its applications.

This essay can be read as a parable of the fate of another kind of text in another context. Following the textualist-reflexive 'turns' in anthropology (first in the late sixties, then again in the mid eighties; see Hymes 1974; Clifford & Marcus 1986; Daniel & Peck 1996), the local metamorphoses of literature

are no doubt anticipated by most ethnographers. But imagine this author's surprise while doing historical research on the urban counterculture of 1980s East Berlin when I discovered that a collection of theoretical texts I had come to assume as having had a relatively predictable, if complex, set of meanings and applications were, under further scrutiny, being put to work there in rather unfamiliar ways. As we will see below, the 'Prenzlauer Berg Scene' of artists, writers, critics, and performers in 1970s and 1980s East Berlin seized upon a francophone theoretical literature (widely referred to as 'post-structuralist')[1] as an analytical grammar for parodying and ironizing the public language and public culture produced by the German Democratic Republic (GDR). In its East Berlin context, post-structuralist theory acquired several forms of local value: as an analytical resource for cultural criticism; as a material and symbolical commodity form that imbued both possessor and deployer with the cosmopolitanism and chic accorded to all rare western luxury goods; and, most importantly, as the communicative medium of a diversity of idiosyncratic interpretive and representational practices. Post-structuralism's specialized language of expression and interpretation served both to insulate the artistic community from the rest of GDR society and to galvanize its speakers in the performative defense of intellectual *Kultur* (culture) in the face of what the artists saw as the pervasive corruption of cultural life in the GDR occasioned by the state-crafted and -accredited language of the GDR public sphere.

While reading through the texts produced in the Scene, the citations (Foucault, Deleuze, Baudrillard, etc.) were familiar enough to this author. But, when it came to the social practices occasioned by the artists' absorption of the post-structuralist canon, they seemed foreign to, and distanced from, my own professional intellectual experience of theory. The artists had not (as I had) wrestled in quiet solitude with the intricate messages of post-structuralist theory in libraries and classrooms and coffeeshops. For the artists, the intricacy of the messages was a means to another end; they wished to leverage the analytical sophistication of French theory to complete a revolutionary, ontological caesura in the GDR state's economy of public language and culture. To be sure, I was familiar with a post-structuralist theory that occupied a high-status register of ideational abstraction, and that was deployed in lectures and in conversation as an almost ritual demonstration of epistemic sophistication. But in a truly connoisseurial spirit, I never imagined it would 'do' anything outside a classroom other than to provide conceptual frameworks and an index of academic distinction. Certainly, I never would have imagined the need to live my life *post-structurally* in order to gain anything

from the texts. Yet this is precisely what happened in a decaying working-class neighborhood of East Berlin. Like Bohannan, I had felt that not only were the messages of post-structuralist theory more or less the same everywhere, but that the messages comprised the extent of the medium. The artists taught this anthropologist about the versatility and situatedness of theory as mode of intellectual practice.

How to do Things with Theories

I make the assumption as a point of departure that the reader shares the author's proclivity to engage theory largely as texts of strictly ideational or conceptual import, in other words, as texts out-of-context. By tracing the social life of a particular corpus of theoretical texts in intercultural transposition and translation, this essay will demonstrate that there is much to be gained from making theory an object of ethnographic inquiry,[2] that is, from studying theory as texts that condition and that in turn are conditioned by actual intellectual contexts and practices. Even though this path has been cleared by previous expeditions into the borderlands of anthropology and literary studies, situating theory within historically and socially dynamic contexts of knowledge-making remains a difficult exercise in native anthropology.

It is a difficult kind of reflexivity because I think it is fair to say that paying close attention to the social contexts of theoretical articulation and reception is not how you or I are disposed to engage theoretical or philosophical expertise in our own everyday intellectual labors. In a professional academic context, both nominally 'conservative' and 'critical' intellectuals approach theoretical production with an equal respect for its sanctification relative to less formalized modes of epistemic production and exchange like classroom teaching, professional gossip, or even ethnographic analysis. This is because good ethnography (like good teaching and good gossip) is too corporeal, emotive, and dialogical to claim the qualities of pure ideation and categorical clarity with which a philosophical or theoretical register are typically valued.[3] Theoretical registers are distinguished from profane intellectual practices by their divergence from everyday norms such as disciplinary 'plain speech.' In their more elaborate analytical and referential structures, theoretical registers project the impression of a finer weave of distinctions, constitutive of more highly-crafted, artisanal modes of knowledge-making. In this texture and architecture of distinctions, following Durkheim and Bourdieu, theory anchors *mana* (abstract social value) that is apparently emblematic of what is truly sacred and 'intellectual.'

In academic practice, the sacralization of theoretical languages and labors has many consequences. Beneath the collegiality of citation, for example, a subtle economy of expertise and 'genius' emerges when we invoke theorists like Marx, Durkheim, Weber, or more recently, Foucault, Habermas, or Bourdieu for their insights into a given research problem we are also seeking to illuminate. To validate or to substantiate our own analytical labors, we may slip in an evidential clause like 'following Durkheim and Bourdieu' or 'as Marx has shown...' In doing so, we accomplish two things: First, we position these figures as a class of transcendental interlocutors with whom we may imagine ourselves in 'trans-contextual' dialogue free of historical specificity or social relativity, exchanging insights into productively indeterminate categories like Structure, Agency, and Practice. Second, by de-contextualizing (and thus sanctifying) these works as part of a timeless canon of pure theoretical expertise, we reciprocally sacralize ourselves through the contact of citation. We are thus much more rarely inclined to offer or to encounter a sentence like, 'The social and historical contexts of Foucault's own intellectual subjectivity predisposed him to utilize power-knowledge as a model for modern subjectivity,' although this kind of ethnographic impulse to locate contextual symbolic, classificatory, and interpretive orders would seem natural enough when applied to other classes of non-expert, non-intellectual informants. To argue that the character of Foucault's intellectual labor was somehow beholden to his social context would profane him, rob us of our claim to his transcendental 'genius,' and, by extension, eventually call into question the legitimacy of our own vocational claim to produce objective or trans-contextual knowledge. Yet, to my mind, freeing our theoretical interlocutors from the same critical contextual lens routinely applied to our ethnographic informants seems intellectually prejudicial and partial, not to mention ethically unsatisfactory. What is exciting about the ethnography of elite registers of intellectual expression is the possibility of systematically profaning this cult of theoretical genius which has retained its habitual integrity in social-scientific discourse and practice despite other recent modes of reflexive and confessional intervention.

The first step on this path, as this essay's historical case study illuminates, is to challenge the intuitive oppositionality of ideational 'theory' and material-social 'practice.' The Prenzlauer Berg case vividly demonstrates what is otherwise often held opaque in academic as well as in other professional intellectual contexts: that the epistemic sophistication and trans-contextuality we perceive in specialized registers like theory are not natural qualities but

rather the phenomenological end-product of sociolinguistic processes of ideologization and distinction within which we are also continuously engaged (see Schieffelin, Woolard & Kroskrity 1998 and Kroskrity 2000). Indeed, like any specialized linguistic register, theory has polymorphous communicative potential—it only acquires the impression of being an ideationally superior register when human actors cultivate it as a context-free order of knowledge and then mask their own labors behind the apparently incontrovertible 'naturalness' of its typifying forms. The seemingly 'finished' textual products of theory are thus inseparable from their social contexts of articulation, interpretation, and citation.

This is not to say that theory can and does not also perform the 'functions' that are commonsensically attributed to it. In everyday intellectual practice, theories do provide analytical codes capable of cross-referencing diverse objects of research interest. In this sense, theoretical registers are like 'trade languages' (or, in a limited sense, 'pidgins') that allow specialists to speak to one another, to create intimations of collegial disciplinary 'sameness' across the intricate divisions of academic labor. But, again like any linguistic register, theoretical languages should be viewed in the complexity of their contextual conditions and pragmatic applications. For example, theory may be utilized performatively, in Austin's sense, to create indexical and normative distinctions between selves and others in communicative situations (1962), to insinuate hierarchical distinctions between more and less 'sophisticated' interlocutors, and to demonstrate, in Goffman's terms, one's ability to 'stage' mantles of cosmopolitanness or being, generally, 'in the know' (1959:17–76). Of course, deploying theory has its potential risks and reversals as well. Like any exclusive status register, theory's virtues are in the eyes of the belonger—displaying 'too much' theory is as bad or worse according to some interlocutors as displaying 'too little' theory. The farther a professional intellectual departs from disciplinary conventions of 'plain speech' the more he or she is apt to be regarded as elitist, too-clever-by-half, or devoted to the intellectual equivalent of conspicuous consumption.

The Prenzlauer Berg case also demonstrates a less intuitive permutation of theoretical expertise in intellectual practice. Post-structuralist theory in the Prenzlauer Berg became a charter for everyday creative practices of representation and interpretation. But it was not only engaged as a status-laden analytical tool, rather it was embraced as a revolutionary critical insight into the nature of language that was believed capable (when enacted through dissident creative practices) of disrupting the GDR state's hegemony over public

language and public culture. Post-structuralist theory was thus engaged in the Prenzlauer Berg as a communicative code that could effect a truly onto-logical renewal of human culture providing that its ideational messages were explored through a fundamental shift in the way one experienced the rela-tionship of language to life. Theory was consciously hybridized with prac-tice in the Prenzlauer Berg in order to undermine the platitudinal imagina-tion of a regime compulsively focused on controlling all public semiosis.

What is compelling about the Prenzlauer Berg case from an academic van-tage point is the apparent unlikelihood of post-structuralism's transplanta-tion as a language of everyday dissent and performance in East Berlin. Through its conscious application as a critical theory of state-socialist cultural pro-duction and through its vernacularization as a specialized register of artistic community, theory emerges more clearly a text-in-context than it would had it remained ensconced in the academic routines and privileges that insulate theory (as a sacred and status-ful mode of intellectual labor) against ethno-graphic contextualization and inquiry. The irony of lost familiarity we may feel when encountering post-structuralist theory 'in the street,' as it were, is a valuable medium for distancing ourselves from, and for objectifying the char-acter of, our own habitus of theoretical expression and exchange.

The Prenzlauer Berg Scene and the GDR

The Prenzlauer Berg district of Berlin was, in its heyday, one of the most densely populated quarters in all of Europe. As Berlin's industrial proletariat boomed in the 19th century, more and more five- and six-story blocks of flats were built in the Prenzlauer Berg to house them. The district's topos is amazingly dense, a street map giving no sense of the labyrinths of concaten-ated courtyards and rear buildings hidden behind every street façade. Like all Berlin, the Prenzlauer Berg's infrastructure suffered heavily from bomb-ing during the Second World War, and, for a combination of aesthetic and practical reasons, the GDR state which inherited the Prenzlauer Berg after 1949 never fully rebuilt it. Although the contemporary visitor to the Prenz-lauer Berg will discover a trendy neighborhood capitalizing on the romantic chic of its crumbling buildings, the GDR-era Prenzlauer Berg seemed more ominous and withdrawn to visitors and to agents of the state alike. In the di-lapidated and disintegrating structures of the neighborhood, a vibrant coun-ter-culture, or set of interlocking counter-cultures, thrived in the 1970s and 1980s. Like the plants and even trees that grew on the roofs and in the rubble of its buildings—artists, musicians, performers, and writers from all over the

GDR set roots in the Prenzlauer Berg to enjoy the relative anonymity and creative autonomy afforded by the neighborhood's architectural, spatial, and social marginalization from the state's ideal vision of Berlin.

There was no single, unified 'Prenzlauer Berg Scene'—by at least one contemporary account there were several 'Scenes' in the district (Dahn 1987:209–221) and, in truth, there were similar bohemian enclaves in other GDR urban centers (Kaiser & Petzold 1997). Each 'Scene' had its own preferred places for performance and gathering and its own 'revolting style' (Hebdige 1979: 106) aimed at subverting the state-crafted narratives of ideal socialist citizenry. In the Prenzlauer Berg, Punks, Hippies, and Peaceniks composed loosely-constituted and -interactive youth movements that simultaneously shared the space of the neighborhood with an older working-class population. As the poet, Rainer Schedlinski, later recalled, 'Yes, I mean, here in the Prenzlauer Berg it wasn't a Bohemia. There weren't only artists; there was a perfectly normal social structure. There were alcoholics, asocial types, also some who made a lot of money dealing in automobiles, and barkeepers. Yet, in spite of that, it was a group that was united by one thing: namely, you could live here with the smallest amount of social control. It was by no means only painters and poets who isolated themselves here' (in von Hallberg 1996:269).

What became known in West German literary circles as *the* Prenzlauer Berg Scene, however, was a group of artists, writers, and performers who, from the mid 1970s until the late 1980s, lived and worked in the neighborhood, including among the better known, Sascha Anderson, Peter Böthig, Stefan Döring, Elke Erb, Thomas Florschuetz, Durs Grünbein, Egmont Hesse, Uwe Kolbe, Frank Lanzendörfer, Klaus Michael, Bert Papenfuß-Gorek, A.R. Penck, Lutz Rathenow, Rainer Schedlinski, Cornelia Schleime, and Ulrich Zieger. The Scene became best known in the West for its *Zeitschriften*, samizdat periodicals with titles like *Der Kaiser ist nackt* (The Emperor's New Clothes), *Schaden* (damage), and *Ariadnefabrik* (Ariadne factory) that were typically hand-pressed or photocopied and produced from a pastiche of found materials. Containing art, literature, and criticism, they evaded state censorship through small production runs, usually of less than two hundred copies each (Michael 1992). These copies were circulated among friends and colleagues in the Scene and not rarely ended their lives smuggled across the Wall into the hands of western art collectors specializing in 'dissident art,' consumers whose own expectations inevitably impacted the creative process in the Scene (Meyer-Gosau 1990).[4] Although there were some thirty of these *Zeitschriften* produced for varying lengths of time in the 1980s (see Michael & Wohlfahrt

1992:407–413), their collections scarcely testify to the vast, informal productivity of the Scene. Writing, painting, and performance were practices virtually uninterrupted by other demands.[5] Readings, exhibitions, and 'happenings' were commonplace, well attended and discussed.

On the other end of the intellectual black market in the Prenzlauer Berg were the slender volumes of post-structuralist theory published by the Merve Verlag in West Berlin. Texts by Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, and Jean-François Lyotard were denied sanctioned state publication in the GDR[6] and instead had to be smuggled across the Wall by friends (Cohen 1993). These texts were read widely and covertly in the Scene. The artists were acutely aware of the difficulty of coming into possession of the volumes and thus those who had good enough contacts to obtain and to circulate them gained a significant degree of prestige in the Scene. Although it is difficult retrospectively to reconstruct precisely how the texts came to influence the Scene's conception of itself, it would certainly be a mistake to suggest that it was the texts themselves that catalyzed the modes of linguistic and cultural criticism that came to be associated with the Prenzlauer Berg. There were likewise ongoing exchanges between some members of the Scene and western intellectuals which mediated these textual exchanges. The broader point is that the analytical vocabularies of post-structuralist theory were resonant in East Berlin not solely on the basis of their analytical sophistication, rather because the texts were recognized to offer an accredited cosmopolitan language with which to articulate an alienation from the state's public language and public culture that was already deeply and widely felt among the GDR youth.

The ruling party of the GDR, the SED, held the production of a homogeneous and harmonious public culture to be an essential aspect of its legitimacy to govern on behalf of the German *Volk* (Boyer 2000:196–201). It thus developed a complex apparatus of ideological *Lenkung* (guidance) to monitor and calibrate public cultural production in the GDR mass media in accordance with party hermeneutics. Thus, the GDR mass media were less concerned with representing life in the GDR as it actually was but rather with projecting a vision of how life in the GDR was supposed to be such that citizens could utilize these images to orient their everyday actions. The homogeneous public cultural vision of ideal social life in the GDR (where every production plan was exceeded by ten percent, where all citizens were completely satisfied with the regency of the SED, where there was no crime or corruption, and so on) which was broadcast to the citizens of the GDR through state- and party-controlled mass media conduits became increasingly absurd in the 1970s and

1980s as the GDR suffered one economic, social, and financial crisis after another (see Dennis 1993:16-9). Even as the SED tried compulsively to bind its citizens to its preferred interpretation of everyday life, 'meaning' literally exploded beyond its control: Looking out any window, one became acutely aware of the growing gap between the experiential reality of life in the GDR and the party's interpretation and publicization of that reality. The poet Bert Papenfuß-Gorek is reported to have explained that he became a writer because 'We went to school every morning in the bus, and read the newspaper, and started laughing as soon as we saw the headlines' (in von Hallberg 1996:270). This tension between material and symbolic economies in the GDR, more than anything else, according to poet and *Zeitschrift* editor Rainer Schedlinski, is what empowered the Scene's poetic and critical investigations into linguistic and political structures of life under state-socialism: 'The linguistic situation that was predominant here [in the GDR] was extreme: extremely normalized and meaningless, senseless and involuntarily comical. When you develop a sense for this involuntary comicality, then it is an ideal country in which to play games with words' (in von Hallberg 1996:270). Both Papenfuß-Gorek and Schedlinski claimed their interest in exploring linguistic structures through poetry arose because the disjunctures and rifts in the state-sponsored economy of public representation had already sensitized them to the tension between signs and meanings within a political apparatus that was oriented to the perfection of a mass cultural economy. Post-structuralism provided a register that helped to integrate a diversity of alienating experiences under a common language of analysis and critique.

Playing 'games with words' is an apt description of the creative practice of the Scene, whose members set into deconstructing and reconstituting the legitimated codes of socialist linguistic and cultural order with not a small amount of humor. But underlying the creative life of the group was a *Gegenkultur* (counter-culture) ethic that was taken very seriously as a kind of cultural guerilla warfare against the state's directed economy of cultural production. The Prenzlauer Berg historian and writer Klaus Michael, writing pseudonymously as Michael Thulin, described the cardinal points of the Scene's agenda as follows:

> Against the uni-dimensionality of the predominant discourse we set the emancipation of the senses and a sensorial emancipation. Against the empty rhetoric of talk we offer a revolt of materiality.
>
> Against the pretense of linguistic continuity we create a poetry of errors and a continuous disruption of language.

> Against the everyday language of power we demonstrate the shattering of its inventory of symbols and the obsolescence of its general concepts.
>
> Against the forbidden and taboo realities fostered by the prevailing thinking we mobilize the excluded real with aggression, humor, individuality, and sensuality.
>
> Against the authoritarian establishment and its classifications of consciousness we offer the anonymity of collective work (Thulin 1990a:237).

Michael's manifesto exposes the centrality of language in the Scene's work and identity. Allowing 'the excluded real' to speak was a common motif in the Scene's discourse on itself, symbolizing the intellectuals' desire to dismantle the state's 'everyday language of power' and its 'empty rhetoric of talk' in favor of allowing signs to freely express the degraded reality of life in the GDR so embarrassing to the state. Michael continued on to describe the GDR state as a Baudrillardian twilight power, 'A machine which simulates reality where there is no real: a language without message, a land without landscape, a signifier without signified.' (Thulin 1990a:235). The fundamental conflict in the GDR was often explained by the Scene as indebted to the state's dictatorial effort to functionalize all public language and public culture to its own ideology and political mission. The state's effort to produce a seamless public language for a socialist 'reality' which perceptually did not exist created a cultural crisis which demanded the reconstitution of 'natural' semiotic relationships. The Prenzlauer Bergers consistently impugned the arbitrary and empty signifiers of the state and saw their own work as a means to redeem language and culture by disrupting the state's economy of representation and publicizing glimpses of a healthier, more hybrid economy. This was to be accomplished by exposing the fictions of 'linguistic continuity,' the limitations of linguistic order, and by continuous probing play into the structures and potentials of language. This would, in the Prenzlauer Berg's ideal vision of itself, reclaim hermeneutic power from the state, empower the real rather than suppress it, and enlighten the citizen-addressee rather than mislead him or her.

According to poet and Scene impresario, Sascha Anderson, post-structuralist theory did neither initiate the artists' alienation from the state's public cultural production nor create their urge to disrupt the state's linguistic dogma and doxa. Instead, post-structuralist theory arrived fortuitously to offer the Scene a means of reflecting upon itself, of honing its wild productivity into a more deliberate and focused critical tool: 'The east was hell-bent on production. Whether it was effective or not didn't matter; they produced like maniacs. The artist's ethos is satisfied by production. That's something really fatal. Those little books from Merve Verlag, the essays by Baudrillard, Lyotard,

Foucault, and Barthes began to introduce a critical perspective on the scene' (in von Hallberg 1996:264). Rainer Schedlinski and Andreas Koziol's journal, *Ariadnefabrik*, was founded in 1986 intentionally as a platform for popularizing French theory in the Prenzlauer Berg. Schedlinski explained in a talk that *Ariadnefabrik* was developed to explore the possibilities of a counter-public sphere (*Gegenöffentlichkeit*) that would embrace a diversity of creative practices. In this sense, he described his contributors as 'literary desperados' (1990:204) who fought against the state's monopolization of the public sphere and thus of cultural production. The desperados' primary weapon was sharpened theoretical attention to the structures of language and semiosis themselves, which allowed them, according to Schedlinski, to seek a renewal of creative expression beyond the 'ideological-enlightened-idealized conception of the public sphere' (1990:204).

What the literary desperados of the Prenzlauer Berg did not attempt was to develop a language of popular critique with resonance outside the Scene. They produced obsessively, but for a restricted circle already 'in the know.' They did not develop a dialogue with the non-artistic community of the Prenzlauer Berg, they organized no demonstrations, they never spoke publicly against human rights or environmental abuses, and they never openly criticized the party or its exercises of state power. In fairness, no faction of the GDR's nominally 'critical' intelligentsia undertook such a program until shortly before 1989, in part because after 1976 the SED rigorously pursued a policy of detaining or forcibly expatriating critical voices as *feindlich-negative Kräfte* (negative enemy forces). Since the West German state was ready to accept and in some cases to ransom GDR dissidents, the East German state never made a policy of attempting to enter into dialogue with its detractors (see Jarausch 1994:17–8, 35–9). Unlike certain intellectual factions in Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia, 'dissidence' in the GDR adopted either very convivial or very highly-coded forms until the 1989 revolution.

The arcane nature of the Scene's language play was therefore efficacious for insulating them from more direct repression by the state. Since they composed no 'plain speech' criticism of the party or of their exercise of state power, their subtle disruptions of state 'master narratives' could be tolerated since the state found in them no immanent potential of wider resonance. Artists in the Scene congratulated themselves for exploiting a loophole in the state's economy of representation to create a *Freiraum* (free space) for criticism where the state was unwilling to pursue them. At the same time, the post-structuralist language of dissent seems to have sacrificed the Scene's political poten-

tial, although, indeed, its members avowed little interest in broader appeal (see Hesse & Thulin 1992).

Theory in Practice I:
Subverting State-Crafted Public Language from Within

While researching her book on the Prenzlauer Berg, the writer Daniela Dahn had an invitation to a 'happening' (*Aktion*) entitled 'Broadcaster-Receiver' pressed into her hand at a bar. Following the invitation's directions, she shortly arrived at an unheated studio in a former factory building filled with materials commemorating the West German conceptual artist Josef Beuys's '7,000 Oaks' action.[7] A man stood up and announced to the crowd:

> 'Very honored attendees! We welcome you warmly to our future collective work. We hope to start a conversation with you. We are still awaiting Joseph Beuys who is making every effort to be here this evening.'
>
> Beuys's efforts would be without success, but the artist didn't know that yet. He grabbed a ping-pong ball and a racket and began to play against the wall on a small riser. With only occasional pauses, this sports-star kept going for almost an hour. The visitors watched him nonplussed. Finally came the fairy-tale question of the emperor's clothes:
>
> What does this nonsense mean?
>
> With this, the sweat-soaked artist had attained his first goal: irritation.
>
> 'Up until this moment I was the broadcaster and you were the receivers; now I am happy to see that you are also beginning to broadcast. Because it is important that we all break out of this model in which one party is always broadcasting and the others only receive.' (Dahn 1987:234; see also Blume 1992:146–49).

Dahn's anecdote captures well the spirit of everyday intellectual practice in the Prenzlauer Berg Scene. Both writings and performances sought to intensify parodic and ironic attention upon, and thus to effect the irritation of, semiotic codes and communicative norms. Their intellectual works were resonant variously with Foucault's writings on the co-elaboration of power and knowledge in modern subjectivity (1979, 1980), with Baudrillard's theory of semiocentered hyperreality overtaking material reality (1983), with Lyotard's analysis of the postmodern undermining of the master narratives of modern knowledge (1984), and with Deleuze and Guattari's image of a network of heterogeneously productive 'rhizomes' circling the arborescent 'trees' of symbolic order (1987:3-25).[8] In each of the post-structuralists, the Scene read plangent confirmation that a 'postmodern' critical space had developed within western society from which to subvert the dominant semiosocial norms of

modernity, replacing the latter's emphasis on pure symbolic orders and teleologies with process, play, and indeterminacy. In the context of the GDR in the 1970s and 1980s, post-structuralism offered a wonderful trove of analogies to criticize the absurdity of the state's socialist-realist ideology that language meant collectively precisely what agents of the state coded into it. Peter Böthig, writing on the literary agenda of the *Zeitschrift Schaden* cited Baudrillard approvingly on the seductive powers of arbitrary, heterogeneous, and inchoate semiosis. Böthig went on to explain that *Schaden* initiated 'semiotic battles' which were principally oriented to fighting over 'words and images, symbolic forms, and … about the organizational forms of the public sphere' all of which demonstrated how the younger generation were developing defense mechanisms against the 'ideological socialization from above' (1990:144).

The arts of these battles were diverse in the Scene, but all eschewed a language of clear political expression or resistance. Post-structuralist theory allowed the Prenzlauer Bergers to codify their intuition that it was futile to enter into debate, however fierce, with the regime in its own language of clarity and determinacy. For, this language of clear political expression was itself the problem, an arborescent form which could only be successfully opposed through decentered rhizomatic actions that focused on transformation and hybridization. The Prenzlauer Bergers sought to expose and to transcend the state's obsession with linguistic determinacy through a kind of grassroots struggle with semiosocial order. In loose affiliation with one another, each artist in the Scene sought to produce a distinctive style of disruptive engagement with accredited forms of public representation. In concert, these styles were taken to demonstrate the irreducible reality of linguistic multiplicity and heterogeneity.

Among some of the more distinctive styles, Bert Papenfuß-Gorek and his collaborators produced collages of poetry, cipher, and image, that explored semiotic order at the level of icons, phonemes, and morphemes. The photographer Thomas Florschuetz produced haunting images of parts of the body in motion, so strongly backlit that they appeared to hover disjoint in midair. His photographs thematize the corruption of the body's morphology as an indirect means of commenting upon the corruption of symbolic order as a whole. The artist and poet Cornelia Schleime painted over state-produced postcards, occupying their staid portraits with haunting and fantastical figures. Sascha Anderson wrote rambling labyrinthine texts blending poetry and criticism which circuitously unfolded his belief in postmodernism as an ethic for transcending traditional relations of power. The following excerpt from his celebration of the photography of Florschuetz is representative:

in the photography of Thomas Florschuetz, the center does not exist. this point of departure, as a sentence in the mode that we are usually accustomed to look at images — that is, sedately — seems false. since i live with the certainty that, under these local conditions, a spoken knife between the ribs goes farther then an actual one, this text deals with the formulation of the center in the sentence: in the photography of Thomas Florschuetz the center does not exist. which doesn't mean, that it remains without effect. which doesn't mean stumbling around the being of apparition. the center of a labyrinth is inscrutable when the mode of seeking is planned. in the architecture of a labyrinth, the center likewise does not exist (Anderson 1992:108).

Anderson's writings occupy the extreme end of the Scene's self-referential and esoteric stylistics. Yet many of his themes in this essay are representative: the belief in the felicitous advantage of 'spoken knives' over actual ones in the context of the GDR, the powerful tropes of labyrinths and quests to escape modern fictions of centered-ness in language and thought. Many of the other writers in the Scene utilized similar literary techniques for distancing themselves from systematizing and stabilizing semantic and referential features of language ranging from the decomposition of orthography and sentence structure to painting over their writing in such a way that phrases became obscured. Some writers' works approached the generic standards of academic criticism with highly-theorized musings on the Scene's potential to transcend the corrupting semiotics of the state which insisted on trying to dictate symbolic order over empirical reality rather than allowing signs 'to speak for themselves' (Thulin 1990b, for example). Others wove theoretical citations into confessional narratives or, like Anderson, into disjointed reflections on the interstices of theory and practice in the Scene. In most cases, the Prenzlauer Bergers succeeded in making their works at once productively indeterminate and hopelessly arcane to the uninitiated.

The poet Hans J. Schulze described his vocation as an effort to identify the thinnest points in the state-socialist 'kettle of time' and to break through it by 'thinking in imbalances' (1990:40). Bert Papenfuß-Gorek put it more plainly that, 'I don't see myself as someone who only experiments with language. This is instead my entire life' (Wolf 1990:21). Alongside its written products, photography, theater, music, other 'happenings' all revolved around the enactment of post-structuralism as a mode of creative living. Critical play within and around linguistic structures indeed became something like the ethos of everyday life. By making language play the basis of its everyday practices of social and creative exchange, the Scene felt it was salvaging language

from its stasis under state-socialism. As such, even highly-theorized language play was intuited to have definite transformative and redemptive capabilities.

In this sense, however limited their audience, the Scene felt it was contributing to the restoration of everyday culture in the GDR. They noted that the material reality of the GDR had long been silenced by a state frustrated that the 'real world' was stubbornly not achieving its utopian aspirations. The fantastic symbolic order the state produced to overlay its material failures had already made language a caricature of itself. Post-structuralism, as the Prenzlauer Bergers saw it, was like a shock-treatment that would push the GDR over the edge. It would return to empirical reality the signifcatory powers silenced by state ventriloquization. As in Rüdiger Rosenthal's ironic poem, 'quote,' post-structuralism marked a populist uprising of reality against the quixotic bromides of state discourse:

> those who write down reality, twist heads on their necks
> that's just what I want / nothing but platitudes
> in the weapon's list of the revolution / german youth, you are no
> anvil, you are the hammer / the original quote is meaningless
> yes marx was right, once, but not today / the smart people
> all say / sitting in cozy chairs absent the horse and the windmills
> fencing with words against poor housewives whose strong coffee
> gives them the shits—hand that paper here, sancho panza
> (in Michael & Wohlfahrt 1992:132).

Theory in Practice II: Insulating a *Freiraum* for Cultural Redemption

As noted above, the lexical exclusivity of post-structuralist theory was double-edged for the Scene. On the one hand, its focus on destabilizing linguistic norms of 'plain speech' and its resulting complexity of discourse were among the qualities the artists and writers most greatly prized in post-structuralism. The perceived epistemic sophistication of post-structuralism further aided its evolution as the argot that unified disparate artists into a self-identifying 'Scene' by rapidly distinguishing between speakers and non-speakers in multivariate communicative situations.[9] On the other hand, the expert register of post-structuralist language greatly restricted the potential reach of the 'alternate public sphere' the Scene was attempting to cultivate. As Klaus Michael wrote shortly before the collapse of the SED regime, the 'aesthetic exclusivity' of the *Zeitschriften* 'became a hurdle, such that one had to pause, before one dove in' (Hesse & Thulin 1992:320). This, according to Michael, created a 'feed-back public' for the Scene's work who were less consumers than pro-

ducers themselves: 'The danger of this praxis is that communication is being restricted to a foreseeable circle' (p. 321). Yet Michael offered no agenda for how to resolve this dilemma other than to wait for the collapse of the GDR order which, he argued, itself set up and maintained the linguistic barriers that made the communicative interventions of the *Zeitschriften* possible and necessary in the first place (p. 322).

In general, the Prenzlauer Bergers were not disconcerted by their lack of popular resonance—it was taken as a sign that their rhizomatic agenda was successfully incomprehensible to the language of the state and its socialized citizenry. Peter Böthig avowed the necessity of 'not allowing oneself to be forced into the role of the critic within the [state's] order.' Rather, the Scene sought to be 'indeterminate in its referential relationships and untranslatable into the binary logic of the state ... which thus confuses the machines and institutions (the institution of literature as well)' (1990:143).[10] Members of the Scene thus took unintelligibility as a badge of honor, confirming their transcendence of everyday languages of power. Some described the Prenzlauer Berg in ironic but also self-congratulatory terms as a *Kulturschutzgebiet* (literally, an 'Endangered Culture Area,' Koziol & Schedlinski 1990:7), a cultural sanctuary in the state-socialist wilderness, sealed and protected by the complexity of its theoretical language, yet open to those enlightened enough to seek cultural redemption in a radical restructuring of life and language. The writer Egmont Hesse, for example, likened his work as editor of *schaden* to Werner Herzog's film, *Fitzcarraldo*, where the title character seeks to build an opera in Amazonia in order to bring *Kultur* to the most savage reaches of the Earth (Hesse & Thulin 1992:317). For the Prenzlauer Bergers, the socialist state represented the quintessence of cultural barbarism and the GDR's citizenry were like innocent savages held in stupefied ignorance by the state.

In their imagination of themselves as the defenders of a bright island of *Kultur* in a sea of popular ignorance and duplicitous representation one should not only see an idiosyncratic intellectual chauvinism. *Kultur* has long been a classic shifter of German intellectual identity, a referentially-complex deictic assigned to differentiate what is intellectually and spiritually 'German' from its social and material environs in a multiplicity of communicative settings. Norbert Elias has described, for example, how the critical intelligentsia of the late 18th century rallied around the 'we-ideal' of *Kultur* to indexically counter-distinguish themselves from both the francophone German aristocracy and their commercially-minded bourgeois brethren (1996:327, 1994:3–28). In linking their everyday creative works to a horizon of cultural redemp-

tion, the Prenzlauer Berg Scene bespoke an expiation of intellectual tradition in the GDR, a reparation of intellectual identity from the state's effort to make every intellectual, in Stalin's terms, 'an engineer of the soul.' Thus, despite their francophile mystique, in the best tradition of the *Volk der Dichter und Denker* (people of poets and thinkers), the Prenzlauer Berg Scene wished to de-functionalize intellectual practice and to re-establish a positive sense of cultural 'German-ness' through the revitalized pursuit of art-for-art's-sake.

The lexical exclusivity of post-structuralism provided an optimal linguistic shield for this project, protecting their work from being recognized as a threat to the state's industry of cultural production. The artists knew well that the state zealously defended their monopoly on public cultural production. It was relatively common knowledge in the Prenzlauer Berg before 1989 that all non-official literary production was closely monitored by the GDR's Ministry of State Security (known colloquially as the 'Stasi') for signs that it was incubating the interests of the western class-enemy. However, the complexity of the Scene's theoretical discourse seemed largely opaque to the Stasi agents who periodically called in various artists to their office for 'conversations' about their work (see Böthig & Michael 1993). The Stasi appeared to find the work of the Prenzlauer Berg Scene curious and unsettling but ultimately judged it to be unthreatening.

Members of the Scene congratulated themselves that the state was unable to recognize their cover project of cultural redemption for what they truly believed it to be. Their *Freiraum* of 'authentic' *Kultur* appeared to the state as a haven of useless theoretical abstraction rather than as a competitor public sphere. In this, post-structuralism offered an admirable linguistic vehicle that made no concession to the transparency of meaning and purpose the state demanded from its own cultural labors. But the actual engagement of the Stasi with the Prenzlauer Berg scene, the complexity and conviviality of which only became clear after 1989, called the critical ethics of the literary desperados and the genuineness of their *Freiraum* into question.

Theory in Practice III: Exclusive Registers and State Power

On December 29, 1991, the archives of the Stasi were officially opened to the German public. For months beforehand rumors and accusations had already been circulating about the secret lives of well-known GDR figures that would be exposed, some publicized by individuals who had received leaks from sources inside the ad hoc civil rights' committee charged with safeguarding the Stasi files. In October 1991, the songwriter and poet Wolf Biermann[11]

insinuated during his acceptance speech for the Georg Büchner literary prize that at least one of the Prenzlauer Berg Scene's most active figures was a long-serving *Inoffizieller Mitarbeiter* (IM, or, informant) of the GDR Ministry for State Security. As more evidence became public over the next weeks and months it appeared incontrovertible that both Sascha Anderson, the somewhat self-appointed figurehead of the Scene and Rainer Schedlinski, co-editor of *Ariadnefabrik* and a frequent contributor to many other *Zeitschriften*, were IM. Like most IM, they served as undercover operatives for the Stasi and were paid covertly to make contacts or maintain friendships with suspected *feindlich-negative* (enemy-negative) persons, to gather information about them, and to produce occasional reports about these individuals' activities. In the Prenzlauer Berg's case, the Stasi were particularly interested in the writers' political reliability, in the possible threats their works might pose to the state's public culture, and in their contacts with publishers and other intellectual movements in West Germany.[12]

Anderson, whose importance as an organizer and supporter of the Scene made him the primary focus of accusation, at first denied the charges until, under the burden of mounting evidence, he eventually lapsed into an uneasy, defensive silence (see Kramer 1992; von Hallberg 1996). Schedlinski actually sought to publicly defend his work as an IM as a covert means of gaining the structural freedom to promote the counterculture and to defend it from more ruthless invasions (1992; cf. Michael 1993:169). In the debate which flourished surrounding their exposure in the feuilleton sections of many (West) German national papers, the duo's former artistic and literary collaborators in the Scene gravitated towards two poles in responding to the news of their involvement with the Stasi. The majority condemned them for having violated, in the poet Uwe Kolbe's terms, the one unforgivable 'taboo' of GDR society by collaborating with the Stasi (1991:318; also Böthig & Michael 1993). A minority reserved judgment waiting for more evidence, an explanation from Anderson, or urged that Anderson and Schedlinski not be transformed into sacrificial victims to appease the guilt which many felt for their actions and inactions during the GDR period (e.g., Matthies 1992).

Yet, meanwhile, outside the Prenzlauer Berg network, Anderson's and Schedlinski's status as IM was rapidly being utilized to discredit the Scene as a whole. Following in the wake of the 1990 savaging of East German writer Christa Wolf's continuing support for a 'third way' of humanitarian socialism,[143] the West German literary establishment seized upon the Anderson case as further proof that there had been no genuine 'dissident literature' in

the GDR, and argued fervently that all literary production in the GDR had been intimately associated with, and profaned by, state power. In the words of one critic, Anderson had 'destroy[ed] the last belief in a genuine, intact GDR-artistry. Even the subversive literature was literature of the Stasi—just like the hundred kilometers of files in Berlin' (Schirrmacher 1991).

Anderson's open avowal of post-structuralist theory played no small role in this debate and was widely interpreted as having been part and parcel of his complicity with the state security apparatus. The 'amorality' which had formerly given him his trademark 'cool' (Faktor 1993:104; Kramer 1992:49) became, in the rewriting of Prenzlauer Berg history, a sinister presage of the moral relativism which led him to become a Stasi accomplice. Some critics went so far as to argue that Anderson's guilty conscience had infected the formal structures of his texts (Corino 1991; Radisch 1992). His interest in 'schizophrenic' poetry (Anderson 1988) as well as his literary play with shifting subject positions and fluid identities was reinterpreted as evidence of his divided consciousness and loyalties (Böthig 1997:137–143).

Many in the West German literary establishment concluded that either post-structuralist theory had corrupted Anderson or that post-structuralist theory was the theory of corrupt intellectuals. To understand why French theory was so rapidly maligned as an artificial and dangerous influence upon the democratic ethos of German intellectual life, one must recall that this was a moment of intense, introspective nationalism among the German intelligentsia. The unification of the two Cold War German states was widely taken to be of enormous symbolic importance for the future of German national culture, portending the 'return' of national wholeness deferred as payment for the Nazis' crimes. The unification of the two Germanys in 1990 marked a new phase of post-war reconstruction that would test once and for all whether Germans had really 'worked through' their national history or whether they still possessed collective traits such as 'prepolitical crutches of nationality and community of fate' (Habermas 1992:97) or a 'dangerous self-pitying mentality' (Grass 1992:59) that would condemn them and the rest of Europe to future uncertainty.

The character of German identity was much debated in the German public sphere in the early 1990s. And, post-structuralist theory had the unhappy fate of coming under critical scrutiny at precisely the time that many intellectuals in both eastern and western Germany were seeking to articulate the moral and ethical substance of a new national intellectual who would reject the obedient intellectual attitude that condemned Germany's last national incarna-

tion (see Boyer 1994:55–8). Thus, hyperbolic readings of post-structuralism as little more than a *soi-disant* intellectual's license for puerile hedonism (Biermann 1992a, 1992b) as well as the more sanguine interpretations that post-structuralism encouraged political docility became a felicitous means of indexically distancing the national intellectual mainstream from marginal impurities of state power and for galvanizing their sense of their moral commitment to such cosmopolitan virtues such as 'democracy' and, ironically, 'tolerance.'

At the same time, some of what the western critics had to say about the conviviality of literary production and state power in the GDR was undeniably true. The GDR, a state for whom as Zygmunt Bauman has observed of socialist regimes more generally, the printed word held a 'well-nigh magical power,' (1987:172) was intimately involved in the production of literature, including the cultivation of dissident literature that respected certain thematic boundaries (see Darnton 1991:202–217; Wichner & Wiesner 1991).[14] The GDR's Ministry of Culture actively negotiated forms of dissident literature which the party leadership found tolerable. Thus, writers well-known to the West before 1989 as 'dissidents,' writers like Stefan Heym, Heiner Müller, and Christa Wolf, maintained close, albeit ironic, relationships with communist party leaders who at times personally protected favored works.

It seems natural, even as an American, to ask whether the complicity of two of the Scene's most active figures soiled its vaunted project of cultural redemption. The question is begged: Did Anderson and Schedlinski manipulate the Stasi or vice-versa? Despite the accusations of betrayal by his former colleagues, reading Anderson's IM reports suggests that although he related volumes of potentially damaging material about his friends and colleagues, Anderson also penned 'strategy documents' that sought to portray the Scene and its artists as unthreatening to the state and its legitimate industry of cultural production (see excerpts in Böthig 1997:268–282). Furthermore, Anderson's and Schedlinski's status as IM almost certainly allowed them greater flexibility in the black market of texts between East and West Berlin.[15] Anderson set up contacts with western publishers for himself and his friends in full knowledge of the Stasi. These exchanges were tolerated perhaps in part because of the testimony of Anderson's strategy documents that he and his friends had no political agenda. There were more disconcerting gestures, however. According to Schedlinski, the Stasi rewarded him with 300 Marks every time he published an issue of *Ariadnefabrik* (Papenfuß-Gorek 1993:184).

The Stasi's and the state's motivation in their toleration and occasional cultivation of the Prenzlauer Berg Scene remains unclear. What is clear is

that the state delegated the Stasi the role of monitoring the Scene's cultural production and, if possible, co-opting it for the state's purposes. Beyond this, questions abound. Did the Stasi regard the lexical exclusivity of post-structuralism as a relatively safe form of dissidence from the perspective of maintaining the cultural and political status quo in the GDR? Did the Stasi conclude that a journal like *Ariadnefabrik*, regardless of theoretical orientation, would be a beneficial means of keeping dissident writing sufficiently visible to state power so long as it was in the hands of a trusted operative? Or, were the Stasi simply not able to recognize *Ariadnefabrik* for what the artists believed it to be— a Trojan horse undermining the state's public culture at the level of language itself?

Asked why he thought the Stasi had tolerated the Scene to such a great extent, the writer Jan Faktor reflected on the idea of controlled dissidence:

> They [the Stasi] let it all happen, let their people— their informers— do everything, because this produced an illusion of security by showing all the others what sort of activities were possible. Basically the Stasi kept a lid on things: that was their influence, and that was basically their clear intention. The Stasi tactics were not to interfere, not to arrest people, not to put pressure on all the people. The Stasi actually prevented the scene from radicalizing itself. Fundamentally, that actually quieted the whole thing down, and we were left to do our own thing, which from a production point of view was very pleasant. You didn't have to bother with courts and police, and you didn't have to defend friends or organize campaigns in their support, because nothing of importance happened. So the Stasi tactics were really fairly good— from the Stasi's point of view, I mean, of course (in von Hallberg 1996:315).

Faktor's analysis suggests a rationale for why the Prenzlauer Berg Scene was strategically tolerated by the GDR state and its agents. The SED recognized that defusing the politicization of intellectual movements could be accomplished more effectively by defining the Scene's conditions of creative possibility than through direct repression. The Scene's creativity and productivity was accepted, even subtly promoted, so long as it honored a de facto arrangement to speak above and beyond the remainder of GDR society. In this more remote sense, post-structuralism served the functional interest of the state by providing a connoisseurial language of dissent, a *Freiraum* with no communicative potential to expand itself beyond the dilapidated outlines of the neighborhood and the networks of its artistic community. The Stasi, for their part, monitored the Scene and read its samizdat journals but, as Faktor insightfully argues, they eventually determined that letting the artists pursue

their esoteric interpretive and representational practices would give them a sufficient creative space so as not to seek a more intense or intelligible public conflict with the state. In retrospect, it seems somewhat absurd to argue that the GDR state had the least interest in the messages or 'content' of post-structuralist theory; like the Scene itself, the state found post-structuralism an opportune vehicle through which to achieve its cultural agenda. Even so, the rumor still circulates in Berlin today that the Stasi actively supplied post-structuralist texts to the Prenzlauer Berg Scene because they knew its messages would guarantee an introspective docile dissidence of little concrete threat to the SED's legitimacy to govern the GDR. Whatever else we may think of the Prenzlauer Berg Scene, post-structuralism never seemed quite the same story in Germany again.

Conclusion: The Political Economy of Critical Theory

In a roundabout way, the Stasi 'revelations' of 1991 and the ensuing public assault on the political limitations of theory-for-theory's-sake brought the Scene's engagement of post-structuralism back upon familiar territory for me. Anyone who remembers the debates over cultural studies in the American academy in the first half of the 1990s will note the interesting harmonies in how the politics of critical theory were thematized in both the German and American contexts. Proponents of cultural studies were likewise celebrated in some communities of debate for radical political interventions against the mass cultural industries and reviled in other circles for apolitical theoretical dilletantism.

I admit that as an undergraduate in Brown University's Center for Modern Culture and Media at that time, I had mixed feelings about post-structuralism's political potential. In particular, I was troubled by a disjuncture I felt between the intellectual electricity that surrounded critical-theoretical language within the community of the initiates and the absence of acknowledgment of how rarefied and exclusionary this nominally 'revolutionary' discourse was.[16] Its speakers were by no means disingenuous— they *felt* a revolutionary distinctiveness in their theoretical discourse — but they often failed to articulate how its lexical exclusivity created an elite community of distinction predicated on a complex hierarchy of intellectual labors. This hierarchy continues to appear to me contrary at a metapragmatic level to the progressive political message its speakers believed the content/ message of the theory to be conveying. This is because the phenomenological intuition of trans-contextual power which is embraced in critical discourse is provided by pre-

cisely the carefully-crafted violations of 'plain speech' linguistic and analytical norms that render it equivalent to a foreign language for non-expert interlocutors. I am reminded of one former East German journalist who told me what she disliked most about western, 'quality' journalism was that its language consistently sought to speak above the heads of its readership and to demonstrate how clever it was: 'it's like a fancy shop where they only buzz you in if they like the look of you.' Critical theories-in-practice represent more than collections of decontextualized messages—they also cultivate communitarian horizons, spheres of social belonging that rebuff and impoverish non-speakers as a precise correlation of empowering and distinguishing speakers.

If a parable must offer a moral, then I believe this is the lesson of the Prenzlauer Berg for any politically-committed social science. In the move to break free of everyday languages of power, of conservative social norms and practices, of the status quo, one is urged to theoretically 'rise above' these quotidian banalities and to situate them in their appropriate context. This soaring deictic is the critical gesture *par excellence*—'from above' one invests oneself with the hermeneutic power to objectify, to contextualize, and, thus, to determine a legitimate, critical interpretation of some feature of one's social milieu. But, the process of achieving this privileged circumspection creates a dilemma for the politically-committed professional intellectual. On the one side, the revolutionary trans-contextual power of critical theory is directly linked to the apperception of the complexity of its epistemic forms. On the other side, the complexification of epistemic forms embraces an economy of expertise that cultivates normative and moral distinctions between 'informed' knowing experts and naïve practitioners. In applying critical theory to, for example, the social inequities of a capitalist material economy, one utilizes a structure of epistemic inequity to 'criticize' a structure of material inequity.

'Critical theory'—whatever it may be in a given context—reflects the galvanization of social purpose and intellectual subjectivity for factions of knowledge-makers who experience themselves on the margins of accredited epistemic production, much as post-structuralism did in the 1970s and 1980s in the Prenzlauer Berg. But it was not in East Berlin alone that the linguistic functions that vouchsafe a sense of critical disjuncture and novelty in intellectual discourse were precisely those that reproduce a hierarchy of expert epistemic labors, thus limiting the potential of elite theoretical language to become a mobilizing vernacular. Although theory itself appears to be an intrinsically sophisticated textual form that is resistant to any popular 'simplification,' it is in fact the division of expert intellectual labors that it masks

which are resistant to the flattening of its architecture of distinctions and hierarchies of expertise. Like what Marx once called the *camera obscura* of ideology (Marx 1978:154), we tend to intuitively understand our relational social experience as an ordained-from-above 'natural' experience. Thus, in our experience as experts in an economy of expertise, critical theories appear to possess natural qualities of complexity, analytical power, and revolutionary social impact, even if, as in the Prenzlauer Berg case, their lexical exclusivity renders them unknowable to the vast majority of society.

This question of the self-limiting politics of critical theory has concerning corollaries in our immediate intellectual contexts. The conditions of communicative exclusivity which the Stasi felt compelled to engineer in the Prenzlauer Berg have, for example, developed even more effectively, with no direct orchestration, in American higher education. It is perhaps not surprising that critical theory has become a more-or-less institutionalized form of connoisseurship in many western universities, supported as they are by institutional and disciplinary economies of expertise and, beyond this, by a social economy of cultural production that promotes the phenomenology of semiotic complexity as a means of anchoring abstract social value (cf. Bourdieu 1984, 1988). But, as we coast from citation to citation, as new geniuses like Bruno Latour and Slavoj Zizek are 'discovered' and incorporated into economies of cultural criticism for their 'intellectual highs,' the magnification of critical theorization oriented more to the liquidity of expert knowledge and expert status than to the organization of social transformation seems a growing danger.

In conclusion, I wish to share several questions that have already unsettled this author. In this phase of global capitalism, this 'New Economy' that is increasingly predicating its expansion on the capitalization of semiotic and epistemic forms, where will the new critics of knowledge specialization come from? How will cultural critics be able to transcend the caste consciousness of their position as expert knowledge-specialists in knowledge-economies in order to criticize the entire system upon which their professional privileges and identities are predicated? And if they are so bold, what language will they speak? Can critical theory transcend its eminently commodifiable character (Graham 2000:152) and become both a progressive and a critical vernacular or will it be, by its very division of labor between those who are or are not 'in the know,' condemned to remain a medium of elite identification and social reproduction? These are questions that deserve a great deal of careful consideration if politically-committed social science is to evolve as a progressive force in contemporary public culture. I hope that this parable on the social

life of post-structuralism may help in some small way to open the doors of critical theory's own 'fancy shops' to a less discreet and charming clientele. Without such an intervention, I fear the sociolinguistic and political conventions that maintain and reproduce theoretical languages as elite registers will condemn critical theory to duplicating in intellectual divisions of labor much of what it finds objectionable in other social and material divisions of labor.

Acknowledgments

Notes

1. It is not my intention to defend the currency of this term 'post-structuralism' as a means of drawing meaningful associations between the diverse body of texts it alleges to describe. I utilize the term principally because it is a familiar enough rubric for a western academic readership to denote those ruminations on economies of language, signification, knowledge, and power produced in the 1960s and 1970s by Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, and Jean-François Lyotard among others. '*Poststrukturell*' and '*postmodern*' were also the preferred terms utilized by members of the Scene to denote the authors and texts in question (see, for example, Schedlinski 1990).

2. The intention of this paper is to serve as a provocation toward further ethnographic inquiry into theoretical practices. The case study this essay offers was not itself based upon ethnographic fieldwork but is rather a historical reconstruction based upon original texts and first-hand accounts, secondary sociological and literary-historical literature, and the authors' ethnographic fieldwork and historical research on post-1989 transformations in eastern German public culture. This essay should therefore be read as historical ethnography oriented to opening new lines of anthropological inquiry into the social contexts and practices of expert knowledge-making.

3. By 'pure ideation' I mean the experience of theory as being context-independent (like mathematical knowledge, for example) due to the intrinsic sophistication of its logical-rational structure.

4. The Scene was also popularized by three anthologies of Prenzlauer Berg material published in West Germany in the late 1980s, thereby securing their status as the 'new generation' of GDR dissident writers (Anderson & Erb 1985; Hesse 1988; Kolbe, Trolle, and Wagner 1988). Invitations for some of the contributors to give readings in the West followed, which, in turn, helped some of the Prenzlauer Berg writers eventually gain tolerant recognition by the state-sponsored culture industry in the GDR.

5. Many of the central figures in the Scene worked only occasionally or spuriously, at times living off friends, family, or stipends from more established writers. The cost of living in the GDR was very low, and lower still in the Prenzlauer Berg where squatting in abandoned buildings was common (see Kaiser & Petzold 1997:60–66 for more detail on gray-market economic practices in the GDR artistic underground).

6. The GDR publishing industry was a key element in the state's directed economy of cultural production. The GDR's Ministry of Culture, which exercised censorial control over the country's licensed presses, was suspicious of any heterodox Marxian theory, especially any theory critical of traditional material realism of the 1950s and 1960s. Thus, works of the Frankfurt School, for example, were denied publication license on the same grounds that non-Marxian theorists like Freud or post-Marxian theorists like Foucault were deemed unpublishable. They were all seen to be corrupted apologists for the bourgeoisie whose circulation in the GDR would aid the interests of the western 'class-enemy' by polluting the consciousness of its citizens.

7. As part of a larger work entitled, *Stadtverwaldung* (a play on the term *Stadtverwaltung*, or, city administration, where the word '*Wald*' denotes 'forest') Beuys arranged to have 7,000 oak saplings planted in and around the city of Kassel over a period of five years (1982–1987). Each sapling was accompanied by a small basalt column. As the trees grew, the ratio of the organic height of the tree to the static height of the column was said to symbolize a transformation of proportion in favor of the living (see Groener & Kandler 1987).

8. How these theorists 'influenced' the Scene is a question that must be treated carefully. Some members of the Scene engaged the post-structuralist canon more assiduously than others. I use the word 'resonated' to draw attention to the energized creative dialectic between the 'messages' of post-structuralist theory and the disparate performative and representational actions that the artists evolved from them.

9. This involves a process of linguistic ideologization that Irvine and Gal have termed 'iconicization' (2000:37) where certain linguistic features come to be associated with, or, are taken to represent iconically, certain typifying features of a social group. In the Prenzlauer Berg case, the lexical complexity of post-structuralist discourse was locally assumed to be indicative of the intellectual and cultural superiority of its speakers. This allegedly foundational linguistic distinction then became a typifying token of identity around which its speakers could elaborate an entire cosmology of social traits and self/other distinctions.

10. Böthig later reflected on why the thematizations of Foucault, Deleuze, and Guattari of the relationship of language to power had been so critical for the Scene: 'The primary attraction was the possibilities they opened for thinking about power relationships and cultural phenomena beyond the ever-less-attractive Marxian models. But there was also a political and social background to the reception of French thinkers. Their model of motion and activity could be set against the encrusted, reproducing structures of a society opposed to any dynamic form of change in order to open a space for working creativity that did not allow itself to be trapped in this spiritually-vacant conflictual schema' (1997:89).

11. Biermann was himself the center of perhaps the greatest literary scandal in GDR history. Popular in both East and West Germany, Biermann was a convinced so-

cialist who became increasingly critical of the SED regime for bankrupting actual-existing socialism. Given an exit visa for a concert in Köln in 1976, the SED revoked his citizenship while abroad, thus exiling him in the West. Biermann's forced expatriation unleashed an unprecedented wave of protests and emigrations among the GDR literary intelligentsia. David Bathrick writes, 'the Biermann episode may indeed be seen as a fundamental turning point in the struggle for civil rights in the GDR: for many, it provided evidence for the impossibility of working within the parameters of party reform' (1995:28).

12. Anderson's case illuminates the problems of utilizing the Stasi archives to reconstruct historical fact. Anderson's own IM file was never recovered, possibly having been sold on the black market in the time between the collapse of the SED regime in 1989 and the time when the archives were officially opened to the public. Enough information existed in other files to establish his identity with relative certainty; and, yet, the Stasi were known to occasionally fabricate files for blackmail purposes. Given the inherent uncertainties involved in taking the state security files at face value, many East Germans resent West Germans' utilization of the Stasi files as the final word on complicity in the GDR. Most of my informants hastened to note (1) that in a society where state power was pervasive it was difficult to be a specialist let alone a professional without some dialogue with agents of the state and (2) that IM activity assumed many forms from the pernicious to the relatively innocuous. 'West Germans,' one friend told me, 'are routinely unable or unwilling to see the shades of gray in GDR society.'

13. See Deiritz and Krauss (1991) for more detail on the Christa Wolf debate which included the first West German salvos against the ethical turpitude of East German intellectuals and the first questions about East German intellectuals' moral fitness to participate in the unified German public sphere.

14. Perhaps the most important of these thematic prohibitions was system-wide critique of either the SED or of the GDR. One could portray individual failures of socialism, including occasionally even the foibles of individual members of the party elite, but any systemic critique of socialism as an ideal was strictly forbidden. The vast majority of 'dissident' literature in the GDR thus gently thematized the limits or failures of actual-existing socialism while nevertheless claiming to fervently support the same ideal horizon of socialism which the party was working to actualize.

15. Both were granted, for example, the rare privilege of being able to travel occasionally to the West undoubtedly because the Stasi had vouched for their political reliability.

16. It is telling that I recall some of my professors and fellow students at Brown routinely referring to critical theory as 'high theory.'

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