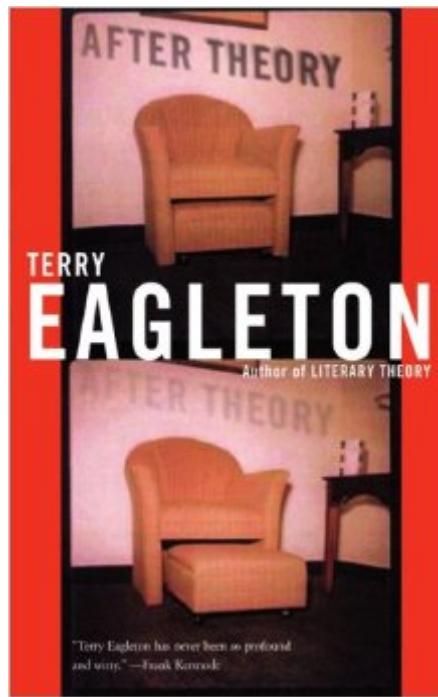


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After Theory



Synopsis

As heralded everywhere from NPR to the pages of the New York Times Magazine, a new era is underway in our colleges and universities: after a lengthy tenure, the dominance of postmodern theory has come to an end. In this timely and topical book, the legendary Terry Eagleton ("one of [our] best-known public intellectuals."-Boston Globe) traces the rise and fall of these ideas from the 1960s through the 1990s, candidly assessing the resultant gains and losses. What's needed now, After Theory argues, is a return to the big questions and grand narratives. Today's global politics demand we pay attention to a range of topics that have gone ignored by the academy and public alike, from fundamentalism to objectivity, religion to ethics. Fresh, provocative, and consistently engaging, Eagleton's latest salvo will challenge everyone looking to better grasp the state of the world.

Book Information

Paperback: 231 pages

Publisher: Basic Books (December 1, 2004)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0465017746

ISBN-13: 978-0465017744

Product Dimensions: 5 x 0.6 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 11.5 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.3 out of 5 starsÂ See all reviewsÂ (20 customer reviews)

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Customer Reviews

Terry Eagleton's After Theory was hailed as philosophically serious and important on arrival and is destined to be far more popular than anything he has written before. It's not the first book to be titled After Theory, but it is the first book to take on the pretensions of 'high theory', especially as articulated through postmodernism and cultural studies, explain its claims, evaluate them and offer alternative ideas and projects in plain language and with lots of excellent humour. With three or four stand alone one-liners on most pages and ideas concretized with examples from popular culture (as well as Aristotle, the Book of Isaiah, Shakespeare and Marx) and ordinary life, it is a rollicking good

read and a welcome corrective to the laborious Derridean obscurantism that some still mistake for wisdom. Eagleton is happy to concede that high theory has entrenched some useful if not original insights such as the ideas that human beings are about desire and fantasy as much as reason, that ordinary life is an important focus of critical attention and that seriousness and pleasure are not necessarily separate. But he also argues that it has a disabling tendency towards the valorisation of the experiences of elites and the disregard for the experiences of ordinary people. He is deeply skeptical about, say, an Indian academic moving between Oxford and Harvard who celebrates cosmopolitanism and hybridity as the vanguard of post-coloniality while saying nothing about the children sewing Nike shoes in Delhi. He is equally skeptical about academics who reject the idea of progress without rejecting dental anesthetics. And he shows that post-modern arguments are very easily deployed by overtly reactionary agendas.

This book has been somewhat mis-categorized by sellers as literary theory. Chapter 1 covers that ground admirably, and Eagleton's no-nonsense historical tour will be bracingly refreshing to anyone who has studied literature at university in the last twenty years. Of course, he doesn't quite toss out everything from structuralism to postmodernism, but he does probe their limits with his customary humour and flair and give a convincing explanation of the academic interest in pop culture that followed them. But all this is merely a prelude. Eagleton's real project here is the recovery of the intellectual Left which, since the 1970s, has been burrowing ever deeper into arcane academic specializations under the banner of "cultural theory", and simultaneously becoming ever more politically remote. As Eagleton puts it, Marxism is now just a mildly interesting way of talking about "Wuthering Heights". This won't do. By and large, cultural theory has been massively evasive on such central topics as Truth, Objectivity, Morality, Virtue and Evil, preferring to take a contingent, relativistic, culturally-informed non-view on the rare occasions when it got around to raising such issues at all rather than just shunning them in embarrassment at the prospect of having to stand for something. But the period when this was more or less acceptable may be coming to an end. The Left, he maintains, has a lot to offer in an age of resurgent far-right extremism - a malady afflicting both the West's enemies and its self-proclaimed defenders. Most of "After Theory" consists of an attempt to rehabilitate the Left - to lure it down from the ivory tower (if not smash its foundations) and to reapply it to those Big Questions.

I agree with those who find this book preaches to the converted. In this case, the radical (as opposed to the liberal) left. I remain skeptical of all such world-changing agendas, but if you're

needing a sharp rejoinder to the capitalist hegemony that permeates even this electronic screen you're reading, then this book's a sensible collection of somewhat scattered thoughts on the need for kindness, humility, and idealism. Getting back to the roots of Marx rather than Marxism, and the socialist imperative to assist what Eagleton updates to be "reciprocal self-realization", he argues that cultural theory must revive itself through an embrace of Aristotle's ethics of flourishing, and that freedom and autonomy can be achieved by attending to others' needs rather than our own, as capitalism demands. Of course, as with many works in both philosophy and critical theory, how this is to be practically accomplished cannot be found in these lively if self-congratulatory pages that take on the current Bush administration, the selfish and hypocritical psuedo-Christian contingent, and those pursuing profit so that, as Eagleton notes in an aside that seems to be more true each day, capitalism can appropriate our very senses. Even if this is more inspiration than information, Eagleton, by his use of exemplars as disparate as George Best, Lady Macbeth, Mick Jagger, the anawim of the book of Isaiah, and especially Lear on the heath makes his points engagingly and wittily. I noticed a strong anti-Americanism permeating nearly every page, especially as the book went on, but his postscript assures readers that he only means those in charge right now, not the rest of us presumably much better educated and more sensitively altruistic!

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