

# The Limits of Theory: Idealism, Distinction and Critical Pedagogy in Chicago Anthropology

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“I think questioning a structure from within is very necessary, but we don’t need to know much about history to know the difficulties it produces.” —email from Bernard Dubbeld, 19 Oct 2005.

“Systems” is the name of the first class you take in graduate school, if you’re in anthropology at the University of Chicago, although the official, bureaucratic title is “The Development of Social and Cultural Theory, Parts 1 and 2.” The class is in the genre of an “intro grad theory class,” like those taught in many departments, and our version is something like a hit parade: greatest hits of Western philosophy and anthropology, 413 A.D. to present. People say it’s a rite of passage. Like so many other classes I’ve taken, its victories are somewhat unplanned and its pleasures are often on the sly; its results are not always what was desired. Education is an unpredictable business. Yes, the course resonates afterwards in our social and intellectual life—it is

among other things responsible for creating the sense of a “cohort” in my year’s class—but its resonances decay unevenly, sometimes amplifying themselves in little cavities of retrospective concern, like for instance this essay.

Why devote a critical essay to a single course in graduate school, a single course in a single department, a single course that is in no clear way representative of the discipline? In part because the very idea that the course is unusual plays a definite role in my department’s efforts to reproduce its own intellectual distinction, to nourish its own image of its own prestige by staying true to a fairly recently invented tradition. Making everyone read Hegel for a day, regardless of how much or little they comprehend, is one way for the department to produce a fleeting image of internal intellectual coherence, and simultaneously, to differentiate itself from other anthropologists, from other anthropologies, from other departments implicitly fantasized as “less theoretical.” So I write about this course in part to trace the emergence of intellectual hierarchy within our discipline, and to show how this hierarchy is collectively mythicized. This hierarchy, I’ll show, does not function in the abstract; it fixates on “theory,” which becomes its productively enigmatic prestige-object, at once seductive and opaque.

In the front hall of our building, Haskell Hall, there is a totem pole that someone got from the Northwest Coast—but it is a decoy. Theory is the real totem pole in the Chicago anthropology department, a “lexical totem of social belonging” in Dominic Boyer’s terms (2005a:60), or perhaps we should call it a lexical totem of *intellectual distinction*. But what does “theory” mean, what does it do, what kind of world does it give us to inhabit? What is the relation between theory per se and all the incoherent modes of social judgment and distinction that happen in a classroom?

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Or the relation between theory in a classroom and theory as a node in a broader disciplinary system of distinction? Here in thinking about these questions, I want to look at Systems as a social and cultural system, and that system as a moment in the reproduction of larger institutional and intellectual worlds. As a methodological note, I would only add here that I don't think of this system as neat and clean and straightforwardly functional, but rather as reflexive and self-contradictory, a system of refractions and condensations and mystifications that work mostly at the level of the *practical unconscious* implicit in our ordinary life (cf. Freud 1999, Bourdieu 1977).

It seems to me that we have an obligation as academics not to exempt our own social institutions from the critical scrutiny we employ elsewhere; in this essay, I concentrate on laying analytical grounds for more informed institutional change, aiming for what Pierre Bourdieu would have called the "reasoned utopianism" of a sociologically informed politics (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:197). I begin by describing the complex critical conjuncture in which this essay finds itself. I then give a short general summary of the course. I then turn to consider theoretical practice in Systems, arguing that it produced an enclosed idealist space of conceptual circulation. I follow this with a more direct examination of the classroom production of distinction, in the incoherence of its emergence from ordinary life. Then I go on to analyze the circulating *distinction fantasies* that are embodied by grades in Systems and rumors about Systems. Finally, I comment on what we might do, practically, about this system of theory-mediated distinction. Let me only remind the reader in advance that this essay does not aspire to be *ethnographic*; it is merely a theoretically informed meditation on my personal experience, and

on the experience of my friends and classmates and teachers, since experience is always at least in part collective.

### **A recursive, ambivalent critical situation**

I am not the first to see Systems in a critical light. Indeed, the course is something of a community of critics in a department of critics—though these critical stances are always partial, produced by local institutional contexts and constrained by their own exclusions and blindnesses. In such already-critical circumstances, as the literary critic Barbara Johnson has described a different discursive context, one feels condemned to an almost compulsive repetition, where “no analysis—including this one—can intervene without transforming and repeating other elements in the sequence” (1977:457). And I would add that this sheer critical repetitiveness is itself a sign that what is at work in Systems is a system of scholastic reproduction. As I pause here to recount something of the origin of this essay, I can only hope that the reader will take this account not as an exercise in narcissistic autobiography but as an argument *for the centrality of the personal* in critical accounts of academic reality. If an essay like this one logically must account for its own process of production and thus for the relation between its *context* and its *object of analysis*, then in this case, such an account involves a bit of personal history.

On one level, the essay is simply a result of my own experience in the class, which I found troubling. In Systems in fall 2005 and winter 2006 I was full of ambivalence, by which I don’t mean a grand oscillation between love and hate but rather a mundane set of mixed feelings about the social situation, a combination of inarticulate attractions, growing attachments and negative reactions. I liked my classmates, who seemed brilliant,

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and I was happy reading philosophy, but it was hard at first to be in a new city and a new institution. In an early email to my aunt, I wrote, “I’m swamped with reading for school. It must be between five hundred and a thousand pages a week. Insane... It’s a shift from my easy life in Boston, for real. This is the second week of class — the first week was somewhat traumatic, but I think everything is mostly fine now” (Oct. 5, 2005). *Everything is mostly fine* would be a good general description too: ordinary life went on in Systems punctuated by episodes of happiness, intellectual excitement, social effervescence, desolation, nostalgia, embarrassment, self-doubt, and any number of other unstable sensations, more or less structurally caused and collectively circulated.

After the class had ended I still felt anxious for various reasons, and I found I wanted to write about the experience. This urge to write, I note in hindsight, had its own structural conditions, ones particular to my biography. In college a few years earlier, I had become close to several professors interested in anthropological research on universities and academic knowledge—such that for them, if anything, reflexivity was something of a local norm. My own research began with an ethnographic study of literary theory classrooms (Thorkelson 2008), and by the time I came to Systems, I was a major fan of Pierre Bourdieu’s critical sociology of academic worlds. Though I never aimed to make a research project out of my life, a certain amount of institutional self-consciousness came naturally. But at first this had little scope for local expression, and it was almost sheer accident that I later discovered a seminar in the English department, a seminar on “ordinariness” in the lineage following Michel de Certeau, a seminar where there was space to write about Systems, momentarily distant from my own department.<sup>i</sup>

The writing was slow and deliberate and almost cathartic, the kind of writing where you get wrapped up in your thoughts and repetitiously polish the prose, and it stretched through my spare time across months of the spring in 2007. After I had finished writing, I went to talk to a retired anthropology professor, George Stocking. He suggested that I get a bunch of graduate students to write *together* about graduate school: if it were a collective project, he thought, it would seem less like a “theorization of [my own] personal experience.”

I decided to do that (which was the origin of this essay collection); but around then I also decided I ought to get comments on my essay from one of my Systems teachers, Danilyn Rutherford. Systems was two quarters long, and the year I entered, Danilyn—“You can call me that!” she said early on—was the first woman in department history to teach the first term of the course solo. As the first term Systems teacher, her task was to initiate new cohorts into the department, and to create an initial intellectual context for their work. The course had an intimidating reputation, and during the spring beforehand, when she was deciding whether to take on the task, she consulted with a number of graduate students from different cohorts about how things might be improved. “Several of them brought up questions of gender,” Danilyn later told me, “and its relation to power dynamics in the classroom. We also talked about the various syllabuses that had been used—which readings they found exciting, how the amount of reading could be reduced.” Though I don’t know the details of these early conversations, Danilyn went on to approach the course as an experimental, critical project of her own. “I’ve worked harder on this course than I have on any other course ever; I’ve worked since June,” she told us early on in the fall.

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This critical project of Danilyn's, I later came to understand, constituted the context for my own critical reactions to the course. But I must admit that in the beginning, being new to the department, I didn't spontaneously perceive Danilyn's departures from the past. How could I have? Rather, I experienced the classroom as an already-sedimented social world, in much the same way that foreigners typically perceive social worlds as more settled than they really are. And I was predisposed by Bourdieu's work (e.g., 1988) to produce depersonalized, sociocentric works of criticism—though, because I was writing about my own department, depersonalization proved impossible. Certainly, Danilyn's reaction to my original, sociocentric draft of this essay was deeply personal, and no less ambivalent than I had felt earlier in writing it. We had a pair of tough conversations, mutually upsetting, where we talked about the style of the essay, about its seeming to Danilyn to be *ad hominem*, about whether we could work together pedagogically in some way (finally, no), about its main practical suggestion (abolishing grades), about the problem of my being a male critic of a class taught by a female teacher. I said I hadn't *meant* it to be taken personally and would try to reword the text. Later, I commented that other readers hadn't responded so personally, but Danilyn pointed out that "you implicated me, not them, in perpetrating aspects of the course that I had tried to counter."

After mulling over these tense interactions for some time, I had to conclude that Bourdieuan critique, which focuses on how collective social and mental structures are reproduced, is not something that *works* always and everywhere. A livable, viable critical project has to be negotiated anew when it begins in a new context; criticality, it turns out, does not look the same everywhere you look for it. And in the context of Systems, deeply

invested *personal* relations turned out to be the medium of the negotiation of critique. These personal relations of *implication* and mutual vulnerability and overinvestment in the social situation, entirely ignored in my first drafts of this paper, constitute the situation in which this essay is written.<sup>ii</sup> This thus cannot be an objectifying critique that dissects a defenseless object of analysis, but a project born out of critical confrontation with another critical subject. This essay originates not only in my particular personal experience and institutional trajectory but also in a very particular space of critical conflict. Here I hope to honor that personal dimension while still trying to push the critique one step past the realm of comfort.

Danilyn was right to say, as she eventually did, that I had implicated her in “perpetrating aspects of the course [she] had tried to counter.” Indeed, I had felt from the beginning that the good intentions of Danilyn’s critical project were never entirely realized.<sup>iii</sup> In the last analysis, I will argue, this has little to do with anyone’s individual actions or aspirations and everything to do with the structural functions of the course, which are not easily overcome by a single will. But in fairness, I do want to sketch out her pedagogical project. She began, as I will describe later, by giving us her critique of the way that theory becomes entwined with the production of status. Though I did not realize this at first, her critique is extremely similar to my own critique of distinction, developed throughout this essay. However, her practical implementation of her critique was embodied by a very particular type of *pedagogical form*, one which, I fear, tended to work against the critical spirit it was meant to embody. This pedagogical form was itself elaborated in a metapedagogical discourse that she presented the first day of class. I quote here



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from the prepared text, which she kindly provided me (all emphasis mine).

Danilyn had begun by talking about anthropology's place in a "broader academic ecology," where it was, she said, a "feminized, marginalized field." Commenting then on anthropologists' ingrown proclivities for theoretical pretensions of grandeur and "high theory" (which I will come back to), she turned to our classroom pedagogy:

We are starting a conversation, and we know it; we don't have to pretend to remember things about what's been said already; *we can begin afresh. My method—having you inhabit the voices of the authors you read, rather than critiquing their work from the outside—is meant to help us work against terror* [the terror, she had already said, of performative, status-laden invocations of strange theoretical terms]... By *forcing yourself* to situate yourself within the logical framework erected by these writers, you may find yourself getting a far better sense of the ingredients that have gone into contemporary anthropological perspectives. You may also get a better sense of the limits and gaps in these perspectives. Above all, *you will be gaining habits of mind critical to this profession...* [Which is all meant to help] *fighting fear*. This gets us to *the question of ethics—how do I expect you to act?*" [emphasis added]

Her pedagogical project was hence entwined with her broader critical perspective on anthropology at large, with her hopes of making theory into a less frightful status symbol, with her desire to institute a new form of critical engagement that some might call *immanent critique*, "*inhabit[ing]* the voices of the authors... rather than critiquing their work *from the outside*." But this project was

also marked by a more traditional voice of teacherly authority, the voice that views itself as responsible for *instituting the social order of the classroom*, the teacherly voice that serves implicitly as a metacommentary on its own high place in the local hierarchy. When Danilyn spoke of our intellectual engagement with the texts, she spoke in the register of command. In saying, “*My method – having you inhabit the voices of the authors... By forcing yourself to situate yourself...*” she framed our practice as the enactment of a compulsion given by the teacher.

Hence, when she turned to spell out the details of her vision of classroom practice, *ethics* turned into a synonym for *officially dictated rules of comportment*: less a theory of ethical virtue than a statement on “how... *I expect you to act.*” She commented on our classroom discussion, for example, by saying, “*I want you to treat all the parties involved generously—not only the dead or absent ones, but the living ones as well. I will not condone terror. Your grade for class participation will be based not on what you know, but what you are able to learn and teach. To get full marks, you need to be sure you are always using monkey wrenches [her term for arcane theoretical terms] as tools, not flags [of status]—or even worse weapons [for hurting others].*”

Here classroom life is presented, yes, as a space broken free from the more obvious academic status games. And yet this space also appears shot through with surveillance and professorial judgment; it is a space where students are requested to produce comportment that *satisfies the professor's desires*. The performative effect of this discourse is to reveal the professor as the one *who is authorized to produce classroom hierarchy*, endowed with the official right to evaluate the students, to classify them with marks and grades, to rank them on a scale, to dictate their ethics, to calibrate the boundaries of the sayable. Danilyn later called this moment a

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“discussion” of ethics, but I would classify it as more like a professorial monologue (Thorkelson 2008:178), received by the students in silence. I remember thinking that while I very much *liked* the egalitarian project of foregrounding ethics and undermining status games in academic life, the traditional form of presentation sent a dramatically contrary message.

And yet there was also a striking moment, a bit farther along in this discourse, where Danilyn undermined her voice of authority and cast doubt on the very possibility of traditional pedagogy. “Let’s stop being scared,” she exhorted us after listing her ethical rules “—but let’s also stop thinking that there is such a thing as a life without risk. There certainly is no such thing as learning without anxiety. If you are learning, you are unlearning. There is also no such thing as teaching without anxiety”—she continued—“Part of your role is to be a screen onto which students project the new, as yet unknown ‘truths’ they are reaching for. One can never be adequate to the task, but the role is necessary; learning involves the presumption that there is an Other who knows, in the flesh or living in the library among the books. The most edifying teaching experiences are not always the most comfortable ones – they are those in which teachers learn from students what the students think they are learning from them.”

By this theory of pedagogy, the classroom is a radically nonlinear space, constituted by mystification and the retroactive recognition of unplanned learning. It is structured by the students’ fantasy of an authoritative, knowledgeable teacher, an “Other who knows,” *to which an actually existing teacher can never be equal*. By this theory of pedagogy, the classroom is rife with the anxieties of one’s educational fantasies breaking down, is eroded by constant waves of “unlearning.” By this theory of

communication, transparent knowledge transfer between professor and student is itself theoretically impossible, because students inevitably think they're learning something other than what their teacher had planned.

It may indeed turn out that this essay only repeats this mutual incomprehension, turning out to be a symptom of the very system it attempts to diagnose. At any rate, I do feel I have learned a lot from this project about the dangers of premature critical closure. If in earlier drafts I outright overlooked the commonalities between Danilyn's critical project and my own, now my aim is to emphasize the relationship between our critical projects and their institutional situations. I have no quarrel with the project of reducing conspicuous theoretical consumption and fighting anxiety, but I do want to show that its practical realization requires something more than an initial statement of ethical principles, one which, uttered unilaterally by the professor, tends to entrench the traditional power relations of the classroom. Indeed, I would argue that the realization of any critical project in such an overdetermined scene of social reproduction requires recognizing, among other things, that our personal relations—and even our personal will to critique—are ultimately *products* of just this system. In such institutional environs, one can hope to realize one's critical intentions only by dissolving one's fantasies of individual critical agency. I now turn, thus, to look directly at Systems as a social system.

### **Systems in its bare facts and ideological functions**

On one level, the course is just a course like any other. It has a reading list and a set of assignments, a time and a place. To give a sense of its ordinariness, let me begin now with some mundane

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facts. The course was divided between “formal classes” on Tuesdays and Thursdays, three hours long, and “informal seminars” on Wednesday nights, merely two hours long. The seminars, in the first quarter of the course, were ostensibly student-organized discussions, though this discussion was firmly structured by the professor’s assignment of students into three groups. One group would prepare a statement on the readings, another group prepared a response, and discussion commenced. Then the second quarter, they did away with the seminars, replacing them with a couple of TA-led evening discussions. In general, the “formal classes” were the place where we discussed our Canon; the evening seminars dealt with a variety of more recent scholarly literature.<sup>iv</sup>

The course was medium-large for a seminar, having twenty-two students: 9 male, 13 female; 5 archaeologists, 17 sociocultural anthropologists. Perhaps two thirds were U.S. citizens, the rest from Canada, South Africa, Asia, Europe. Two professors, two TAs: one each per quarter, two quarters total. Ninety-five required texts; about 130 hours of class altogether, in twenty weeks. Some weeks eight hours; others, only six. The written work was light: four short essays, plus daily summaries of the required readings. But the reading was overwhelming sometimes.

In the fall, in our series of “formal” classes, we began with St. Augustine. Next day Pascal, Montaigne, Aquinas. Then Hobbes. Machiavelli. Locke. Hume. Adam Smith. Rousseau. Kant. Herder. Durkheim. Weber. Hegel. Marx. Darwin. Nietzsche. Kierkegaard. Freud. Boas. Saussure. Peirce. Bits of contemporary literature came into this series: Marshall Sahlins (from our department), Talal Asad, Rachel Fulton (a historian of medieval Christianity from our university), Samuel Weber (a literary theorist), Richard Parmentier (a semiotician). In the “informal” series, interspersed

with these canonical names, were Ian Hacking, a story from the New Yorker, the film *Magnolia*, Michel-Rolph Trouillot (also from our department), Bartolomé de las Casas, Walter Benjamin, Agamben, Derrida, Michael Warner, Danielle Allen (then our Dean of Humanities), Annette Weiner, William Pietz, Peter Stallybrass. Then winter break for a few weeks. Then in the winter quarter we read Durkheim again, Mauss, Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown (who taught in our department in the 1930s), Evans-Pritchard, Lévi-Strauss, Boas again, Geertz (who was briefly in our department, in the '70s), Bourdieu, Leach, Jean and John Comaroff (still at our department), Sidney Mintz, Marshall Sahlins (again), Fredrik Barth, Gregory Bateson, James Clifford, Talal Asad (again), Edward Said, Marilyn Strathern. Two evening seminars, in the second term, dealt with Bruno Latour and Fernando Coronil.

I give you this list not simply to be exhaustive but to suggest that in a real sense this set of names *was* the course, *was* the terrain of our intellectual world. Now, there is a practical logic here: it is definitely strategically useful for academics to be acquainted with the big names of the Western canon, and Systems offers students the considerable academic capital inherent in having read Kant, or Marx, or any of the rest of them. In teaching Systems, the department makes a strategic investment on behalf of its students (though not one without its opportunity costs). But, I emphasize, this academic capital only has value insofar as these names have become canonical reference points for academic discourse. In other words, *any strategy presupposes a certain world* in which it will be effective, and this set of names is strategically useful precisely because it constitutes an intellectual cosmos whose value is construed as a pre-existing social fact. And whatever its historical significance, this canon sets very

narrow intellectual horizons for the present. There were a few women writers, a few non-European writers, but precious few. “The guys we’re reading—always guys!—are going to be strange to many of you,” Danilyn told us early on; and one of the few African-American students later described the course as “all white, all the time.” This was only barely hyperbole.<sup>v</sup>

What brings this intellectual world into existence? To begin with, why is the course called “Systems”? The historical answer is that it is a relic of an earlier era in departmental curriculum. Starting around 1962, the required core courses—then covering all five subfields of anthropology—were divided into “historical” and “systematic” sequences. The latter was titled “Systematic analysis in anthropology,” organized around Talcott Parsons’ distinctions between the cultural system, the social system, and the personality system (Stocking 1979). In 1969, further departmental debate, catalyzed by the Vietnam War, led to the abolition of the majority of core requirements. The current Systems course is all that’s left of a common departmental curriculum—and even it varies considerably as different professors take turns teaching it.

But it’s not mere historical inertia, or respect for tradition, that keeps the nickname “Systems” in circulation. On the contrary, “Systems” is an ideological emblem with an ongoing ritual function in departmental life. “System,” or we might say systematicity, the structured ordering of thought, has long been a privileged intellectual symbol and value. In a periodic table of intellectual virtues, we would find it in a family of categories like structure, rigor, logic, comprehensiveness, wholeness, totality, and so forth. The term “Systems” may be derived from Parsonian sociology, but Parsons acted strategically in choosing to use a word with such moral connotations among scholars. And in

Systems, the name does the ideological work of affiliating intellectual virtue with departmental identity. Systems is a rite of emplacement, reproducing departmental identity and reputation at home, if not abroad. And in creating local identities, it serves conversely to separate those who experience it from those who will never undertake it (Bourdieu 1991). I turn now to sketch the forms of theoretical practice that held center stage in this scene of identity-formation.

### **The idealism of theory, text and history**

Theory in systems began with a critique of theory; Danilyn described contemporary theoretical life as follows.

Everyone wants to be hip. Everyone wants to be in the right camp. You used to have to fight your advisors if you wanted to mention someone like Derrida in a paper or discussion; this is no longer the case. Now, we all feel we need to authorize claims by appealing to “high theory,” whatever that is, for fear of not appearing smart. (I would argue that the very word “theory” is problematic; although there are places where people like Foucault talk abstractly about what they are up to, “high theory” always involves the analysis of an empirical object, like a text.) And if we’re in the audience and don’t quite get the picture or the relevance of the authorities marshalled, we are afraid we’ll look stupid if we ask.

Although anthropologists’ theoretical practices no doubt *vary* across contexts and departments more than this somewhat condensed description allows, we have here a rich description of the changing *phenomenology of theoretical dominance* in our discipline.



Theoretical belonging, on this view, has become normative: *theory* is permanently entwined with *status*; *status* is entwined with *smartness*, which therefore is also normative (see Williams 2004). This theoretical belonging has also become polarized; it is split into camps and dominated by “high theory.”<sup>vi</sup> And the normative quality of this theoretical belonging is enforced not only by a positive *desire to belong* but a negative *fear of looking stupid* before others. Importantly, although this description is of course voiced by a single particular anthropologist, it invokes the abstract viewpoint of what G. H. Mead called the “Generalized Other” (Dodds et al. 1997), the generalized disciplinary perspective of anthropologists at large. In short, Danilyn conjures a view of our discipline’s theoretical practice as a scene of the massive imposition of social norms, of the structural production of negative feelings (fear, stupidity), and of the circulation of disciplinary distinction (being in the right camp).

Now, the pedagogical purpose of this gloss on theory in present-day anthropology was to lay the grounds for an alternative theoretical practice. Danilyn’s view, she said in response to an earlier draft of this essay, was that theory ought to elucidate the “ways in which we can make explicit the deep seated assumptions that shape our analysis of social life,” but that “this other level—the level of distinction—interferes with clear, honest, and generous thought about our practices... One thinks one is being ‘theoretical’ to be clear, but one appears to be doing it to be ‘cool.’” In short, Danilyn proposed a critique of theory as a pernicious, obfuscating system of distinction, levied in the name of a search for a more *clear, honest, generous* way of understanding our research practice as anthropologists. Let me be clear: I share this desire. But the risk here, it seems to me, is that in wanting to rid theoretical practice of its negative dynamics of status and

dominance, theory's conflictual social dynamics might wind up eclipsed by a strictly intellectual, ideational concern with analytic presuppositions. Of course, Danilyn was nothing if not aware of the social dynamics of theoretical discussion. But *awareness* of idealist social dynamics does not necessarily bring them to a halt; as I now want to show, our theoretical practice *itself* reproduced theory as an idealist, self-contained, almost free-floating world of ideas. My purpose in so doing is not to reject a critique of theoretical practice, but rather to show the *tenacity* of the idealist theoretical habits that *circumscribe* any critique of theory—including Danilyn's and my own.

For lack of other materials here, I will proceed by examining an excerpt from a class discussion. It is reconstructed from my notebook, and I do not assert that this is an entirely satisfying representation of classroom discourse; much of the fine linguistic detail has vanished. I hope we can examine this as typical and even symptomatic of Systems' classroom conversations.

Danilyn began by asking us, Why are we reading Darwin and Nietzsche together? [That is, why read *The Descent of Man* and *The Genealogy of Morals* on the same day?] Jonathan suggested that it was because they were both anti-Christian and controversial, as well as being anti-teleological — such that for them, there's no meaning in history. Diane observed that they both see humans as animals. Paul pointed out that you can read their teleologies backwards, but not forwards. That is, for Darwin, progress is not assured (see p. 165, I wrote). Cassandra argued that history has an end, and if it doesn't, it should. Danilyn pithily summarized Darwin's evolutionary imperative: You gotta live to have sex, and you gotta make others want to have sex with you. Jonathan pointed out that

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sexual and natural selection don't aim at an end — rather, they're reactions to immanent forces and proximate circumstances.

Then we had a more general discussion of morality, its origins and its functions. Cassandra pointed out that morality serves the cause of survival. Diane remarked that society is taken for granted in Darwin, unlike in Hobbes or Locke. But the question remained, what is the *mechanism* of morality/sociality? (Interpretation, see p.77, I wrote down.) Danilyn asked us: is it *liberating* that history is meaningless? Diane said yes, it's liberating that there's no telos. Cassandra argued no, saying that if *we* don't make the law — *that's* not liberating [I take this to mean that it's not liberating to believe that humans have no power to make history].<sup>vii</sup>

One can read this discussion, in all its inconclusiveness and tentativeness, in all its hesitations and imprecisions, as a moment in a slow process of intellectual self-formation and subjectivation, an experimental moment in which students are learning to think together in public, responding to each other's ideas more or less comprehensively, trying to construct some notion of the common conceptual structure underlying the two texts in question. I would observe that the kind of knowledge produced here is not likely to be directly *instrumentally necessary* to most contemporary anthropological research projects; the knowledge made in this classroom discussion has an ephemeral status, not marked with the 'novelty' crucial to legitimate academic knowledge. Most anthropologists don't specialize in the conceptual relations between Nietzsche and Darwin, as relevant

as that might be to contemporary debates, say, on “biopower” and the relation between life and politics.

In fact, what makes this an intriguing form of knowledge production is that, rather than producing *positive, durable, fully legitimate and vetted knowledge*, this moment seems more oriented towards producing a durable *capacity to produce knowledge*. We might view the pedagogy here as oriented towards producing “habits of mind,” intellectual and interpersonal *skills* of knowledge production. The scholarly claims made here, after all, are often not fully substantiated in their content, nor always completely expert in their form. Even more importantly still, the *audience* of these claims was essentially limited to the classroom, while scholarly knowledge claims are typically addressed to larger publics of various types. Indeed, these claims were often forgotten once uttered, as if the production of an utterance mattered more than the length of its resonance. The knowledge produced here could be called *potential* knowledge: here we were producing claims that *might have been knowledge*, thus attempting to produce knowledge producers through a kind of instrumentally justified pedagogical solipsism. The point, that is, was less to make any particular claim, or arrive at any final result, than to get used to inhabiting an intellectual space. As Robert Scholes has observed, quoting Erving Goffman, graduate school is largely a “practicing,” done out of the mode of effective, practical life (Scholes 1985:9–10). “This is a training exercise, and you will never see anything I say here in print,” Danilyn told us—though later she would note wryly on my essay: “Not entirely true.”

It seems to me that the *reproductive, skill-building, potential-centered* qualities of this scene yield a tightly enclosed discursive situation which, if anything, is especially congenial to theoretical idealism. Let us, however, examine theoretical practice more

closely. The discussion is, at one level, fundamentally epistemically “open” and unfinalizable (Bakhtin 1986:76f): there is no point at which a *definitive theoretical conclusion* is ever reached. Rather, while different students make different “points” in relation to Darwin, or Nietzsche; their remarks never “add up” to a definitive statement on the texts, or even on the questions posed by the professor.

After all, there is neither a mechanism nor an institutional incentive to reach theoretical consensus, or to constitute a durable intellectual collectivity. Indeed, the very voicing of theory implies a definite form of intellectual *individualization* that precludes anyone making a cumulative, final, collective judgment on the matter. The theorists themselves are carefully identified as they are discussed: in remarks like, “for Darwin, progress is not assured,” or “society is taken for granted in Darwin,” one can speak about Darwin without exactly speaking for him, but nonetheless by making a tacit claim to be representing his argument. And in responding to a question like “is it liberating that history is meaningless?” students are requested to channel their personal concerns into the confines of a commentary on the theoretical canon, tacitly learning to intertwine their own voices with the voices of their scholarly predecessors. Moreover, as intimated earlier, these voicings of theory take place in a genre of comparison and evaluation, placing Darwin and Nietzsche in an emerging semiotic space of scholarly positions. Darwin and Nietzsche are, for instance, alike in being “anti-Christian” and “anti-teleological,” but unlike other theorists in this respect. In this compartmentalized space of theory, there appears to be a tacit system of private intellectual property, such that Darwin is treated as the inalienable proprietor of “his” views.

In hopes of showing the semiotic texture of idealism more clearly, consider a brief diagram of the discussion's lexical field, of the texture of its characteristic vocabulary.

Figure 1. Rough Lexical Field Diagram<sup>viii</sup>



Now *just what kind of cosmos is represented here?* If we agree that language is a form of “practical consciousness,” as Marx put it (1978:158), then just what kind of world does this diagram show consciousness of? In this discussion, the theoretical terms in question, “meaning” and “history,” “morality” and “sociality,” “Hobbes” and “Locke,” are *naturalized* and treated as *unproblematic* by the participants. Whatever the material referents of such terms as “history” and “sociality” may be, here they are treated as *real entities present to intellectual praxis*. Phenomenologically speaking, in discussions like these, *the conceptual is real*; the abstract is real. And this is the moment of *lived idealism*: the moment in which for practical purposes one becomes a realist about the realm of concepts, and inhabits a place where “immanent forces” and “sociality” and “teleology” and “history” linger as concretely as

four people walking down the sidewalk together. In this idealistic situation, abstractions are no longer recognized as abstractions—except maybe abstractly. Historical or empirical details, if there are any, are subsumed into the process of conceptual play. And the epistemic openness of the discussion, it becomes apparent, is only the product of a profound epistemic *closure*, in which conceptual abstraction is the valorized regime of classroom knowledge, while other ways of knowing are tacitly excluded.

This world of teleology and function, progress and reaction, is not the world of the historical narrative, nor of the ethnographic case, nor of anyone's everyday life (Le Guin 1989).<sup>ix</sup> In this rarified professional register, dates and places seldom appear; historical or political contexts are elided except at the broadest levels; and the historical determinants of intellectual life are nowhere to be found, nor are the original discursive fields of the texts in question. Certainly it is true, in Systems as in any class, that many conceptual frames overlap. The frame of theory mixes, for instance, with the frame of interpersonal interaction (with its calculations of status and smartness and phatic contact) and with the frame of one's private daydreams (the flies on the wall, the need for a nap or a drink). But the idealist realm of concepts, ideas, theories and arguments *always remained prior* to other modes of knowing, *excluding* for instance anything like a meticulous anti-theoretical empiricism, *domesticating* anything like a political or institutional analysis, and offering *occasion and justification* for discourses of classroom evaluation or casual sociability.

To be fair, there were moments in classroom discourse that gestured, for instance, towards a more historicist method. In the second quarter of the course, the professor often began by regaling us with biographical sketches of Malinowski, Mauss,

Radcliffe-Brown and the like. And in the first quarter Danilyn assigned occasional examples of historical research, such as Rachel Fulton's historical research on Christianity. Unfortunately, though, the fragments of biographical data and historical inquiry that we examined were seldom *put in action* in the course; biography all too easily became background material, while historical inquiry became something that we read without practicing, treated as one more textual object rather than as a mode of thinking. The colonial collusion of Evans-Pritchard did attract some collective interest, I remember; and I heard from some archaeology students that they tried to write more historically-oriented papers, but were criticized for doing so. The point is thus *not* that anyone explicitly denigrated historical understanding, or even that there were no examples available of historical analysis, but that *historical understanding was marginalized by the very form of our syllabus and discussion*, which ultimately foregrounded primary texts and conceptual content rather than historical context or determination.<sup>x</sup>

This is not surprising, for the historical strategy of the course was to bring the past forward into the present, placing it at the foundation of our professional formation as anthropologists. The chronology of the syllabus was (approximately) aligned with the historical sequence of the assigned texts, such that the course drew a historical arrow from the western philosophical pantheon all the way down to present-day anthropological practice. The pedagogy thus functioned as an institutionalized metacommentary on our place in intellectual history. Whether or not we agreed with these earlier thinkers, whether they were our revered ancestors or merely an ignominious set of precursors, Systems set us in relation to them, initiated us into theory's particular historical realm.



Dominic Boyer has argued that the theoretical realm is “transhistorical,” that in doing theory we obscure the historical origins of authors like Foucault or Marx, and treat them as if they were not products of context but rather “a class of transcendental interlocutors,” sanctified and contagiously sacred (2001:209–212). It seems to me, though, that theoryland, so to speak, is not so much timeless as the bearer of its own intricate mode of sacred history in which the grit of institutional context is ground away (cf. Boyer 2005a:241f, 2005b:248f). For although the “transhistorical,” decontextualizing strategy is very much present (as when we hear people say “Foucault argues...” in the present tense, as if Foucault were alive), we can also distance ourselves from theorists who are passé, or reach back into the “past” of theory, as the Systems teachers did, to revive the dead. Contemporary intellectual practice embodies a rich set of historical, temporal strategies. Still, this remains a deeply hierarchical and individualized historical space. Like the “heroic,” monarchical mode of history Marshall Sahlins has described in Polynesia, intellectual or theoretical history is intrinsically centered on “persons of authority”—theorist-heroes like Sahlins himself—who embody and concentrate social relations in theoretical space (1985:47). Distinction, we find again, is already *internal* to the theoretical world, whose idealism, if anything, only serves to *narrow the criteria of social distinction* around specifically scholastic qualities—the novelty of an argument, the brilliance of a concept, the usefulness of a distinction, the eloquence of a turn of phrase.

What still strikes me as curious about the pedagogical scene in question is that *theory* can work as a powerful force without necessarily being a well-defined object. In Ortner’s famous essay on the topic (1984), “theory” is only implicitly defined, through a

list of various “theoretical” schools like symbolic anthropology, cultural ecology, political economy, and structural Marxism. In Systems, theory was never explicitly defined either. We did get the sense from Danilyn’s introductory comments that “high theory” is that which is decoupled from any empirical object, and even as we were informed that theory itself is a misnomer, is problematic, because even when “people like Foucault talk abstractly,” their work “always involves the analysis of an empirical object, like a text.” Theory, apparently, makes status claims possible by virtue of a transcendental flight from the empirical, even as this flight is always *illusory*, constitutively misrecognized.<sup>xi</sup> As I suggested above, theory thus remains an enigmatic, untotalizable object, one which spawns confusion and ignorance as much as knowledge. It works in much the same way that Danilyn described Christian doctrines of a God at once historical and ahistorical: “the idea is arguably unfathomable, but the effort to fathom it proliferates ideas.”<sup>xii</sup>

Theory, I have argued, is a distinction totem, a prestige object. It captivates us: we flourish in the narrowness of its conceptual intricacies. Theory is multiply intertwined with distinction: it sustains classroom economies of distinction and grids of conceptual discrimination even as it plays a role in larger disciplinary systems of prestige, where certain activities and people and places are marked *as theoretical* (Boyer 2001:209–211). And it can permeate our disciplinary world in this way because theory is not only a system of distinction and ideas but equally is a *mode of perception*, making theoretical adepts *see* things in the world that others don’t spontaneously perceive, endowing concepts with tangibility. The theoretical sensorium, we might call it: it functions as a mode of being and perceiving *even in spite of any consensus on theoretical particulars or even on the nature of theory in*

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*general*. If I have not given a rigorous definition of theory here in this essay, that is because, paradoxically, theory flourishes in the absence of a rigorous self-concept.

Earlier I cited Don Brenneis's observation that "theory" is a polysemic term, one which, he argues, may "[open] up a kind of semantic space for innovation" (2008:156). But as is tacitly apparent in his argument, theory is not only a *sign* but equally a system for the *production of signs* (see Figure 1 above). Indeed, theory designates and constitutes a *lifeworld* of its own for a privileged group of scholars. We ought, thus, to see theory as simultaneously *process* and *product*, as simultaneously a *discrete object* (codifiable, objectifiable) and a *context* in which a whole way of life takes place. And theoretical forms of distinction are perhaps especially potent because they emerge from just this junction between theory as object (of desire, of loathing) and theory as context. Theory is an *enigmatic* prestige object because it is at once something *there*, something one can discuss concretely, but is also a key *structuring principle* of disciplinary life, intangible and inscrutable to analysis. If, as I said earlier, it is a "strategic investment" for anthropology students at Chicago to be acquainted with the Western canon, then this is because that canon is a reservoir of intellectual distinction equally ready to consume or to be consumed.

### **Ordinary spaces of social difference and disintegration**

Still, theory is not the only foundation for social distinction and differentiation in the theory classroom. If we are to examine the *political unconscious* of Systems, its never fully explicit processes of interpellation and exclusion that orbited unsteadily around our theory talk, then here I want to discuss in more detail the

organization of difference in architecture and classroom space, in the ephemera of nods and glances, scarves and hats, gossip and rumor. Sometimes, we will see, this difference was organized hierarchically, becoming Distinction at the interpersonal or departmental or disciplinary levels, an instrument of what Bourdieu called *symbolic violence*. But I want to emphasize that symbolic violence was sometimes gentle, and classroom difference contingent and fleeting, less the instrument of permanent structural inequality than a rippling swell of ordinary life. Distinction in our classroom was not always obvious in the way that racial boundaries are written bluntly onto urban space in Chicago; at times it was rather inconclusive, even precarious.

So let's start with a moment of ordinariness, a moment not obviously significant, a grey day in Haskell Hall: January 17th, 2006, to be precise. That day, in Systems, I was seated near the end of the table. It is a long, brown, skinny table, in a vaguely rectangular room with a high ceiling. Its windows looked east into wreaths of leafless wintery trees. The view was obscured by scaffolding that occasionally roared with the noise of power tools, drowning out our discussions. Farther east were the facades of Gothic buildings. The university is built of grey stones the color of ashtrays, clustered in a thicket of courtyards and towers like a graveyard pretending to be a castle, moated by broad, empty parks that separate us from poor neighborhoods. The buildings are etched with the names of dead donors and presidents, just as most of the authors we read were dead themselves.

In the room, the table was ringed by chairs around the walls. The head of the table stood just beside a low stage cluttered with a blackboard and a TV and spare chairs in a stack, while the wall opposite the windows was occupied by a vast and incongruous photograph of a sunny forest. That day we discussed E.E. Evans-

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Pritchard's *The Nuer*, heard a bit of the history of the Manchester School of social anthropology and of British and French colonial rule, argued over the Nuer's purported lack of government and their relation to their ecological circumstances, the distinction between politics and lineage, and the concepts of function and social structure. I had come to class pondering a minor point about "EP," as the professor (by then no longer Danilyn) called him. In my summary of the day's readings, I'd put it like so:

EP defined social structure as the relations between groups of persons. The most interesting thing about it is his concept of structural tension in segmented societies: one is a member of a group in virtue of one's non-membership in other groups of the same kind (136). One is a member of a larger group like a tribe, and yet is not a member of it because one is a member of a sub-group that defines itself against other sub-groups. The analysis is interesting because it does not simply write off differences in behavior as products of difference in context, but posits a contradictory structure that explains the contextually varying behavior.

The professor had a slightly different opinion of what was novel about *The Nuer*, and I vividly remember leaning forward in my chair, trying to explain what I thought, and hearing myself utter a collage of obscure, confusing polysyllables. Looking up the table, towards the courteously quiet faces of my classmates, I had the sense that they were puzzled and were simply waiting for me to finish speaking. (If the above quote baffles you, then your reaction is the same as my classmates'!) I was near the professor, whose end of the room was always slightly dim, farther from the

daylight in the windows. Eventually I managed to persuade her of some technicality and fell silent.

The light, the organization of chairs, the size of the table: these things became socially significant in curious ways. In terms of official classroom activity, verbal exchange took priority over other modes of social interaction, such as corporeal or visual ones (Boyer 2005b). The physical environment was pushed to the background, becoming a focus of attention only when it distracted from classroom talk, as when we heard the construction noise I mentioned. One could almost say that the defining feature of our material environment was its irrelevance to classroom praxis: so long as it didn't interfere, it was forgotten by official discourse.

Yet even the most trivial material objects were socially functional, down to the arrangement of chairs in the room. There were those who congregated near the professor, who always sat at the head in a supremely traditional gesture of authority, while there were others who tended towards the far end of the table, where one guy insisted that the foot of the table was "his." "Hey! You took my seat!" he'd say, grinning, to any trespassers. The TA sat at the professor's side, although otherwise the chairs adjacent to the professor were the last to be filled. Some students migrated around the room from one day to the next; some tended to face the window, others usually faced inward; water bottles, takeout lunches, cast-off coats, and eddies of paper and books cluttered the table; our chairs were crammed perilously close together. Towards the foot of the table, a thicket of laptops grew up, and a few miscreants chatted with each other on IM, complaining of boredom and frustration. There weren't quite enough chairs for everyone around the table, so two or three people often sat against the walls. Their marginal physical location corresponded,

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to some extent, to a marginal social location; outliers often had a bit of trouble acquiring turns at talk, sometimes being called on by their classmates who noticed them raising their hands. Partly, of course, students sat there because they had come late to class and wanted to sit down unobtrusively. But there was a tendency, too, for one or two students who were somewhat socially marginalized to choose these more secluded seats, in a faint spatial echo of the social hierarchy.

These contingent arrangements flourished in an otherwise formal setting. In fact, the ritual structure of the classroom was rife with boundaries both spatial and temporal. The doors, to begin with, had a special significance. The teachers generally wanted them kept closed. This was not necessarily to keep out the noise, for there is next to no traffic in the halls of Haskell. Rather, the closed door worked symbolically, figuring the physically enclosed classroom as an icon of the closed social space of our discussions. The course was not held in just any classroom, by the way, but rather in the architectural center of the Department's official life, its "seminar room" on the top floor of the building. To get there one has to climb three flights of stairs, arriving normally out of breath in a space whose departmental centrality was amplified by its spatial inaccessibility, in the way that ritual space is traditionally inaccessible to outsiders. And the social barriers echoed the physical ones — enrollment in the course was carefully restricted to first-year Ph.D. students. The individuality of these Ph.D. students was reinforced even by the furniture; each person had their own, separate, unpadded chair; there were no benches or couches. The furniture was thus adapted to the formal character of the space, in which each person had a place of her own.

Time, too, was divided and tightly constrained. Class began and ended with a liminal period of sociability. Students entered the room one after another, some oddly early, others chronically late; conversation was casual, aimed primarily at phatic communion. As the teacher came and class began, students' voices fell silent. Official class time was always managed, although not always very efficiently; class ended only when the professor officially had the last word. "Next time, we'll discuss Marx..." she might announce. Afterwards, sociability resumed; plans were made to get together later or to meet at the bar (on Thursdays), or else people just left quietly after collecting their things. The class was divided and subdivided into days, topics, themes, pedagogical projects, and assignments to be completed. In short, time was orchestrated so that periods of formality were intertwined with periods of informality. The beginning and the end of Systems were marked with social gatherings furnished with ample food and drink: these were casual social occasions with a profound ritual purpose. Time was never permitted to become an undifferentiated mass.

Even the people were bounded. Indeed, it may be the people who were bounded and individualized above all. In part this worked through body decoration and clothing: hats and scarves, headbands and shawls, flashes of bright color and black fabric, stripes and collars, chic or shaggy haircuts, eyeliner, loose T-shirts, fleece jackets. In part this was an emergent outcome of everyday interaction. We divided ourselves in arguments over political engagement, the difficulty of the coursework, the merits of the authors we read, even the place of love in social theory. I felt and still feel, for instance, that love was not very theoretically important; and yet this is one of those differences that didn't function as a durable ground of distinction.



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But I can't pretend that only inessential differences divided us. In fact, *we were socially differentiated when we entered and we remained socially differentiated when we departed*. Systems does not homogenize its students: its effects vary as the students vary. Social differentiation occurs within the course, partly guided by the professor, partly initiated by the students themselves, partly "spontaneously," though this spontaneity is always structured. To be frank, a good deal of this social differentiation involved the usual set of pervasive social differences: native language, educational background, race, social class both real and aspirational, gender, sexual orientation, political position, conversational style, nationality, even emotional stability. Take a case in which in which social integration and differentiation surged up around language and nationality, making difference emerge from the contingent happenings of everyday life:

One day, apparently unable to make out the words that someone was saying, an American student made a polite request that was remembered long afterward.

"Could all the people with accents please speak up?" she asked.

*But everyone has an accent!* was the gist of the immediate group response. *You can't say that; how rude*, people seemed to think in unison. A sudden sense of collective disbelief and disapproval, almost scandal, filled the room.

This collective disapproval served to display collective moral norms in silhouette against the ground of the transgressive remark. Social differentiation, here, was a spontaneous and collective practice. That is, the initial remark mobilized linguistic difference (some have an accent, others don't), while the

response was based on moral differentiation (the specifically anthropological principle that ethnocentric statements should be castigated). We can see that these principles of difference did not appear from the void; rather, they drew on obviously broad cultural repertoires, reminding us that, as Sahlins has put it, “an event is not just a happening in the world: it is a *relation* between a certain happening and a given symbolic system” (1985:153).

In short, the event of Systems served, occasionally, yes, to create certain solidarities, but equally *to make us acquainted with the symbolic system that organized our differences from each other*. A cohort, in a way weirdly suited to such a strangely militaristic term of social belonging (it originally designated a tenth of a Roman legion), is not a solidified group that fights in unison but rather a space of differentiation, even conflict, in which people learn to become different from each other in the moment of their collective encounter. My cohort, at least, was fairly close-knit for its first year or so, with a lot of collective gatherings, parties and visits to the bar; but it has, over the past five years, increasingly fragmented into smaller friend groups, couples, angry ex-roommates and private solitudes.

Indeed, the greatest degree of social integration may reside at the level of collective acquiescence to bureaucratic domination, that is, the institutionalized rules that govern ordinary life in the classroom. One might say, even, that the intellectual power of the professor pales in comparison to her bureaucratic power: no one is, or can be, compelled to accept all her *ideas*, all her theories, all her readings, but all are compelled to minimally conform to the bureaucratic order. For what, in the last analysis, do the students of Systems have in common? What is genuinely universal is having completed the official requirements, having written a certain number of essays on certain topics, having been present in

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class, and so on. Systems is at once a form of *bureaucratic standardization* accompanied by an organized *intellectual differentiation*. The production of distinction, we might therefore conclude, always in part demands the production of commonality. And distinction in Systems is thus both spontaneously emergent *and* predicated on homogenizing the students within bureaucratic systems of classification.

### **Distinction as fantasy**

But bureaucratic systems of classification can themselves become fantasy spaces of distinction. While the previous section dealt with difference as it emerged in ordinary life, drifted incoherently, and occasionally sedimented into durable distinction, here I want to treat two particular discourses in which distinction is not an incoherent sediment but the object of elaborately organized fantasy and anxiety. Distinction after all is not only an external, unconscious social order; rather there are times when it erupts into consciousness as the object of explicit formalization and narration. Consider for instance grades in Systems, which concretized anxiety from within, and rumors about Systems, which narrated anxieties from without. In both cases, we will observe the fantasy of social order being *clearer* than it actually is, of difference being *neater* than it is, of hierarchy and distinction more coherently codified than they ever actually were.

Each student in Systems was regularly given grades; this mundane practice, as one might guess, in fact embodied tacit logics of distinction. Let me start, however, with the logistics of grading. Each essay was graded (normally between B- and A+, I think); there were two essays per term, and each one was evaluated both by the professor and by the TA. Each student was

also assigned a participation grade, which at times made the bureaucratic ranking of the student body become peculiarly concrete. In the first quarter of Systems, in order to establish an “objective” basis for participation grades, the TA held a clipboard on her lap and marked each student’s comment with a check beside her name. Participation was materialized in a check mark; students were evaluated by tally. Long comments did seem to be recorded, but short interjections seemed to go unremarked. One could never be sure what counted, in the eyes of the TA, as a substantive “contribution,” and I don’t think people were ever told explicitly what their participation grade *was*. At any rate, the essay and participation grades were summed together into a final term grade according to a 60%/40% formula. Essay grades, moreover, were supplemented with qualitative, written comments, and we had occasional conferences with the teacher and the TA about our progress.

On the empirical level of social effect, what did these grades accomplish? They must have been relevant loosely to one’s developing reputation, and specifically to the first year’s annual review.<sup>xiii</sup> And they served to establish communication with students, working as a feedback mechanism that could threaten semiotic sanctions or offer semiotic rewards. The very giving of grades is, in effect, a mechanism for establishing hierarchy between faculty who grade and students who are graded. And at the limit, grades indicate continued belonging in the department: if one’s grades were sufficiently dismal, one could be asked to leave the doctoral program. That hasn’t happened to anyone I know, though; and a common story circulates, particularly among faculty, that grades aren’t that important, being irrelevant by the time one finds a job.

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Social fact and long-term outcome, however, do not necessarily set the contours of the fantasies that arise from a situation. The particular paradox in this case is that the *future irrelevance* of grades did little to obstruct them from working as potent *anxiety vessels in the present*. And this anxiety, I believe, was a symptom of distinction fantasies that, for students, center around *rank*. On one level grades served as a bureaucratic instrument of *standardization*, insofar as everyone was graded, but more importantly here, they served as an instrument of social *differentiation*, insofar as everyone's grades were different, some higher than others. Student anxieties hence seemed to derive as much from *how one compared to others* as from one's own marks. "Stop trying to see other people's grades!" I remember a Systems classmate saying to me once as I craned my neck to read the TA's clipboard. "I'm only trying to see my own!" I answered nervously, as if in response to my classmate's anxieties *that I would know too much about the data of comparative prestige and accomplishment*, I was claiming that I was only anxious about my own personal circumstance, and that that need not bother anyone. But these two anxieties are really one: an anxiety of rank that arises in moments where people fantasize the multiply differentiated social world *as if it were ordered along a unilinear scale of status*. To grade and be graded is to participate for a moment in a simplified image of the intellectual world where anxieties of social indeterminacy are replaced by the pleasures and anxieties of a newly explicit (if ultimately ephemeral) hierarchy.

But the moment of grading does more ideological work than activating momentary fantasies of a quasi-objective social ranking. It also (as hinted earlier) serves to inscribe the teachers as *official agents of regulated distinction*, and the professorial act of grading seems to presuppose certain ideologies of merit that add up to a

concealed fantasy about how authorized, codified distinction should work. Grades, after all, presuppose a regime of value (codified, quantified), a judging actor (the teacher), an object of evaluation (the student) and a ground of evaluation (the student's *activity*). This schema is not as neutral as it may appear: it embodies, above all, an *individualizing* fantasy, in which the individual becomes progressively entrenched as the basic unit of evaluation. As if the individual after all was the basic unit to which social interaction could be reduced, in an illusion of freedom that individuals "can triumph over their contexts through sheer force of will" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992:10).

And it is not only the students but also their actions that are again and again atomized by bureaucratic procedure: when each utterance is individually tallied, classroom practice is tacitly represented not as mutual interaction but as a disintegrated array of separately evaluable acts. As if grades embodied the fantasy that social life could be carved into small pieces and dealt with separately. But only certain pieces of social life count in the moment of judgment: grades equally propagate an ideological logocentrism, in which the interactional work of the audience vanishes and speech is privileged over listening, writing over reading, transmission over reception, activity over passivity. And this moment of judgment is equally one in which our myriad social values were reduced to a letter, in which the English alphabet became a unilinear and quantitative scale of worth, as if projecting a fantasy that the value of scholarly labor or of scholars could be reduced to a one-dimensional, impersonal scale. As if in sum the grade embodied a bureaucrat's fantasy of distinction in which distinction is a well-defined entity, presupposing a bureaucratically conditioned social world (Stehr

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1994:103) suitable for atomization, individualization, and ongoing quantitative assessment.

Not that anyone ever articulates this ideological complex as such. But it is thus all the more curious that the ideological presuppositions of grading, if I have articulated them correctly, clash both with actors' beliefs about value and with the less coherent, less absolutist system of distinction that actually happens in the ordinary life of the classroom. As if grading were a fantastic moment in which bureaucratic fantasies of distinction were enacted but not examined. Indeed, the fantasy of distinction's workings that grades embody is one which remains *fantastic* precisely because it is never wholly *realized*.

A similar analysis applies, it seems to me, when we step back to examine Systems as a whole, as an embodiment of interdepartmental hierarchy seen from afar, where a class becomes a symbol of departmental distinction writ large. I should say that the tales I'll mention are not ones that I sought out; I crossed paths with them effortlessly, in the way that everyone is occasionally confronted with the disturbing, unwanted spectacle of others' views of them.

Walking with my sister Cait on a hot day down the street in another city halfway across the country from Chicago, in late June 2006, a guy almost walked by us without looking. "Carl!" said Cait. He didn't turn. "Carl!" she half shouted. He turned, curly-haired and taller than either of us, and we started talking. He knew I went to the University of Chicago, but what department was I in again, he asked eventually? Anthropology. "Oh!..." he responded, "isn't that where there's some terrible class, some impossible class where half the class drops out afterwards?" Yeah, yeah, I told him, I just took that class, but no one has dropped out yet my year, which seemed to disappoint

him. But I asked myself later: isn't it odd that Carl, who's not an anthropologist and not from Chicago, had even heard of the course?

I wrote to ask again what he'd heard. He replied that "First-year graduate students in anthro go through an impossible regimen, including especially this class taught by some famous professor who is not very nice and drives his students really hard. In the end, a fixed number actually makes it—that is, there is a quota and if you do poorly relative to the other students you're cut. Something like that."

Here the distinction of Systems is seen as residing in its outrageousness, in the voracity of its processes of social exclusion and the ruthlessness of its social sorting, where terror and impossibility are the marks of notability. In this system of distinction, fame is linked to masculinity (note that the famous professor has "his" students), and masculinity seems to be linked to cruelty, to being "not very nice," to "driving" the students like a ruthless shepherd with a flock. Here the bounds of "making it" are fixed by quota, where the bounds of success are clear-cut: either you make it out of this dismal experience or you don't. Here the department finds its source of distinction not in the intellectual but in the corporeal, in its students' sheer will to survive their experience. Again, this is a fantasy of a world where distinction is simple.

Later that year, in a coffeeshop, a friend told me a story. His mother was a teacher, and a fetishist for schools. While he was in high school, his mother had volunteered in a thrift store. She found herself talking to the mother of a student at the University of Chicago, someone who was taking the intro course in anthropology. Do you know, they have to read something like *thousands of pages per week*? Wow, isn't that amazing, my friend's



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mom responded. When my friend decided to apply to the department himself, all his old friends said: “Are you crazy? They go through hell!”

Here the tenuous origins of the rumor do nothing to diminish its emotional significance. Here departmental distinction centers less on the personal cruelty of the professor, more on the collective suffering of the students. But as in the “impossible regimen” in the prior tale, hyperbole seems to be the dominant rhetorical figure here. And hyperbole is a puzzling rhetoric of distinction: it almost seems that the outsider’s response to my department’s fantasies of its excellence was a set of equally doubtful fantasies of its abjection. As if local distinction fantasies appeared to others in inverted form, like light reflecting endlessly between two mirrors. As if departmental distinction could become an autonomous process, constantly inverting and yet reproducing itself.

In 2007, I got an email from a just-accepted prospective student in my department:

“[T]hough I am very interested in the program and very excited to be admitted, I’ve heard some negative accounts of Chicago’s anthropology program from a number of its former graduate students and faculty and from people who’ve collaborated with its faculty, and I would like to get a more balanced perspective from someone who’s currently a student there. More specifically, I hear that the department encourages an intensely competitive atmosphere amongst the graduate students by pitting them against each other to compete for research funds. I also hear that there’s a 75% dropout rate for anthropology graduate students and that some of the students have “needed therapy” in order to cope

with the stress of the program. I've also been told of "constant [political] in-fighting" in the department. Can you tell me whether your experiences are at all in line with these rumors?" (I responded that this was not my experience.)

Here we see that rumors constitute something more than narratives that circulate for their entertainment value. They were also, at least for this person, considered a form of genuine *knowledge* about the department that needed to be carefully weighed against the reports of my personal experience. We see here a longing to resolve the conflict between the official self-image of the department, which claims (on our website) that we have "a long and proud tradition of scholarly excellence and leadership in the discipline," and the treacherous world of unofficial rumors like the ones quoted above.<sup>xiv</sup> But in this interim moment of writing, in the absence of such a resolution, there is a rhetoric of ambivalence and uncertainty: "*though* I am very interested..."; "I am very excited [*but*]... I've heard some negative accounts." In the end, the rumors of trauma, therapy, competition, stress and withdrawal seemed to have won out: this student didn't come to our department, a reminder that distinction narratives sometimes have very material outcomes.

But finally, there is also a more subtle version of this outsider's view, one which explicitly tries to diagnose departmental distinction *as a social process*. In 2006, a visiting professor from Arizona, Susan Philips, had written to me that:

In contrast to my own department, there is much more graduate student ongoing explicit verbalized talk about hierarchy in the department, what it means to be in/at 'CHICAGO', i.e. a real ongoingly transmitted but also

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transforming, as in changing over time, tradition of mythmaking that your own personal project can be seen as part of (reflexive in this respect). [May 5, 2006]

And Jessica Falcone, another contributor to this collection, commented on a draft of this essay as follows:

The mythologizing of the epic theory class at Chicago is something that you seem to buy into to some extent and are reinforcing to some extent, so you may want to address how these narratives affect(ed) you specifically. Are you rearticulating the mythos even as you critique? I have only ever heard about the class from chicagoites who seem bent on spreading the myth, and convincing me that any version elsewhere is surely second-rate. I have often thought that many of my Chicago friends spend an awful lot of time protesting the superiority of their department and that class.” [April 27, 2007]

In Philips’s comment, we get an important hint: that the production of distinction varies significantly across departments. What is distinctive about the Chicago department, in her view, is not the details of its myths; it is the sheer extent of its mythmaking traditions, fueled by the grad students’ intense, reflexive attention to “what it means to be in/at ‘CHICAGO’.” Interestingly, this attention to the meaning of CHICAGO is supposed to consist particularly in a special focus *on hierarchy* in the department (and insofar as this essay is largely about hierarchy, the diagnosis may indeed be well-founded). It almost seems as if *the department’s distinction is based, ironically, on its own*

*anxiety about distinction.* As if the department had specialized in the mythologization of its own ambivalence.

In Falcone's comments, less ambivalence is apparent. Rather, her experience was one of "chicagoites... protesting the superiority of their department," in a seemingly straightforward effort to realize their distinction by claiming it and getting outsiders to recognize it. Myth and epic become immediate tools of hierarchy, instruments of theory's grandiosity — and yet ones whose pretentious claims of superiority can be seen through, can be deflated and seen for what they are. As if the false epics and idols of distinction were the result of the process of mythologization itself.

For Philips and Falcone, then, reflexivity can itself become a local marker of distinction—one which this essay, in spite of my intentions, may well tacitly invoke. But on reflection, we see here that this image of reflexive distinction is only one among many possible outsider views of my department. As we have seen, others see corporeal survival, or collective abjection, or professorial cruelty, or sheer pretentiousness as the key foci of distinction-making. There is something disturbing about many of these narratives, which imply that departmental distinction is fixated on suffering or illusion. And yet these external perceptions of distinguished suffering correspond only precariously to the forms of distinction that emerge in the daily life of Systems, or in the department more generally. Internal forms of distinction, as I hope to have shown above, are more subtle, more ambivalent, more overlapping than their external representations. But they are no less pervasive for all that.

### **Distinction, reflexivity, pedagogy**

It would be impossible to be *against distinction* in general—especially when the very existence of our discipline and hence our livelihoods depend on it. But the particular system of distinction that Systems reproduces is nevertheless problematic, in its white western and masculine canon, its sometimes terribly anxious students, its idealist approach to theory and concepts, its strange fantasies of rank and merit. What gets lost and deformed when students are cast into the grips of a sanctified theoreticism that masks its social conditions of possibility by retreating into the life of the mind? As Jeffrey Williams has commented, the “life of the mind... presents insularity by definition as a condition of appropriate and gratifying professional engagement” (1996:132). What worries me, let me reiterate, is not theory per se, but is rather this insularity, this sanctification, this distinction that enraptures us too readily and at too high a price.

Theory and its attendant tendrils of distinction form a sensorium that numbs as well as reveals. In viewing the high-status Euro-American theoretical canon from the confines of our enclosed pedagogical situation, we separate theory too completely from practice. In reading a theoretical canon *as theory*, as *ideas*, we overlook at least momentarily the *visceral reality* of the political stakes implicit in Marx or Hobbes or Herder, not to mention the politics of our own intellectual *disengagements* with our institutional surroundings. To be socialized as an expert in theory is not to be equally attentive to everything, but to cultivate the virtues of selective consciousness, that is, the virtues of *ignoring* phenomena extraneous to one’s theoretical attentions.<sup>xv</sup> And yet when theory is our departmental prestige object, how can one teach without theorizing distinction? How can one teach theory without

theorizing theory's entanglement in its institutional circumstances, past and present?<sup>xvi</sup>

It seems to me that what we need, in Systems and perhaps more broadly in anthropology, is a far more *reflexive pedagogy of theory*. I grant that something like “theory” is a useful and necessary tool in anthropological work, and that moments of lived idealism can be intellectually productive. But theory at Chicago and particularly in Systems becomes something more than that: an object of intense attachment for faculty and students alike, an inwardly-directed structure of distinction and recognition that can interpellate anthropologists *as theoretical workers*. A reflexive pedagogy in Systems would have to be more than just an instrumental discussion of what is pedagogically practical and desirable, because *what is at stake is precisely the symbolic system that makes things practical and desirable*. A single individual's critical intervention is never sufficient, because such critique is always subsumed by the symbolic system of its enunciation. Hence, a reflexive pedagogy would need to be collective — not to mention anti-hierarchical, because reflexivity falls into contradiction when it becomes, for instance, a newly privileged pedagogical discourse that comes from the top down. One might hope that, as Danilyn did, teachers would begin their classes by opening a space for a discourse on theory and status, but students equally need to *take* the opportunity to participate in classroom reflexivity and to wield pedagogical authority. And one would like to imagine teachers learning to set the stage for such a collective pedagogy, led not by the teacher, not by a succession of student discussion facilitators who have little pedagogical agency, but *by the group*. As other case studies in reflexive pedagogy indicate, this kind of collective agency does not come about without struggle and long effort (Elvemo et. al. 1997; cf. Gardner et al. 1987).

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One would like to imagine that this would equally lead to a new form of theoretical practice, one better attuned to the risks of sanctification through insularity, better aware of the processes of canonization that yield a narrow and stratified view of Western intellectual history, better able to grasp the political and historical production of theory and hence to avoid reproducing it as a deracinated set of ideas and concepts. One would like to imagine a course better oriented towards broader publics from the start, rather than one in which intellectual disengagement with the broader world was justified in the name of an instrumentally necessary skill-building “exercise.” The idea of a pedagogical exercise too easily functions as an *alibi* for the tacit institutionalization of tolerated insularity. One might thus imagine a theory course that encouraged students to be reflexive about theory, to analyze their own pedagogical situation as itself a potentially improvable social system, and to create new social relations and contexts that might lead to different ways of working with ideas in the world. If my experience of Systems was at all representative, there are real nodes of alienation and distance from theory, of resistance to classroom modes of distinction, of individual misunderstandings and incomprehensions that are symptomatic of fractures in the social system. One might imagine that a more reflexive pedagogy could more openly work through these alienations.

But it is not my aim here to dictate a better pedagogy, only to suggest a social process by which a better pedagogy might be achieved, one whose outcomes would be emergent and therefore impossible to predict. My more concrete aim is more modest and critical: to articulate some of the oft-unspoken systems of value and distinction that encircle theory at Chicago. Ironically, I think it is an institutionally limited, modest critical stance about theory

that serves to *preclude* a more far-reaching project of reflexive self-examination and reform. I noted above that I was ambivalent about Systems, that Danilyn criticized distinction while reenacting it, that our system of distinction embodied a clashing system of values that can be hard to live with. I have come to suspect that a theoreticist ambivalence is our local mode of professional reproduction: by practicing high theory while being partially critical about it, my department can maintain high status and reproduce its presumptive distinction while still appearing sensitive to theory's problems.

There is much in our academic worlds that remains unconscious, or only furtively conscious, or ineffective even if it is conscious. Of course, there is little reason to think that greater consciousness will always yield better results. But it seems to me that a broader and more reflexive discourse on our discipline and its social machinations, one cast across ranks and institutions, might at least produce an intellectual lifeworld that one might less ambivalently want to inhabit. "I love my discipline," said Danilyn on our first day of Systems, "but I am also often appalled by anthropology in its current form," she added as she began to articulate her critical project. I hope at least that, for Danilyn and I, this critical project has strengthened our theoretical mastery of the social system that masters us, of the processes that reproduce our discipline in its current form. Perhaps this project can serve others as an example of critical possibilities and their limits in anthropological education.

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### **Endnotes**

i. This disciplinary distance strikes me as a sociologically interesting precondition for writing critically about one's institutional situation.

ii. It seems to me that teachers in particular tend to overinvest in their classrooms; an important aim of this essay is to show that actually the classroom is a social space that teachers only partly, precariously control, and that it is therefore not only psychologically perilous but also in fact analytically mistaken for teachers to take total responsibility for what happens in their classrooms. The classroom space far exceeds the personal pedagogical project of any teacher.

iii. This said, her departures from other versions of Systems may be dramatic; not having been there, I can't say.

iv. Danilyn reminds me that she intended the Wednesday seminars to serve as more contemporary metacommentaries on the regular

readings; I am not sure in practice how well these disparate sets of readings were integrated in our discussion.

v. Danilyn elaborates that she too found the gender and racial dynamics of the readings problematic, but adds that her point was “that we need to develop an ability to read closely to fully gauge and follow all these threads” of the authors’ problematic historical entanglements.

vi. The historical referent of “high theory,” I emphasize in passing, is the interdisciplinary, loosely “postmodern” field of intellectual production that began, in the United States, in literary studies in the late 1960s and was later imported into anthropology and other humanities. Within this field, foreign intellectuals like Derrida, Foucault, Zizek, or Agamben have been famous across a range of disciplines. The best critical reflections on this development of “theory” come from literary studies: see for instance Williams 2002 or Herman 2003; for partial social-scientific analyses see Lamont 1987 and Boyer 2001.

vii. Other than Danilyn’s, all names here are pseudonyms.

viii. This diagram was generated with Wordle (<http://www.wordle.net>).

ix. What I mean is not that words like “progress” or “telos” are entirely inapplicable outside academia, but rather that non-academic situations are typically not constituted through the exchange of these floating scholastic concepts in the same way that our classroom was.

x. Ben White points out that even more historical modes of inquiry are still deeply text-centered, and that even a historicist pedagogy would equally entail a textualist focus; while this is true, I do feel that it would take a major collective shift to treat theory as a historical product rather than as a system of concepts. Of course, there is a pedagogical advantage to reading these texts as theory rather than as historical documents: a purely internal reading requires no background knowledge. Since most classroom participants, in my experience, are not experts in the relevant historical contexts (philosophy in early modern Europe, early colonial anthropology, etc), a true historical

analysis would be logistically difficult to perform, for lack of relevant expertise.

xi. This very abstraction and lack of empirical specificity makes it possible for anthropologists who work on totally different things to communicate with each other in theoretical terms. Theory can serve as a much-needed, cross-specialty metalanguage in a discipline (Boyer 2003).

xii. And in *Systems*, I should point out, theory was semantically undetermined and unfathomable (in the sense of uncodified), but even in this indefinite semantic state it nonetheless functioned as a metadiscursive category that brought a kind of practical unity to a disparate set of texts. We treated texts as theory that in fact derived from various earlier discursive formations in which, presumably, “theory” did not exist in its current professionalized form.

xiii. Each student has a yearly conference with the Director of Graduate Studies about their progress in the program.

xiv. The well-known linguist Deborah Tannen has even written an article on academic agonism that takes our department, circa 1960, as a prime example of “training ground for professional life... in the sense of withstanding verbal attack” (2002:1663). She adds, though, that she’s “told by colleagues that Chicago’s Monday seminars are no longer characterized by vicious verbal attack, although the tradition of tough questioning continues” (1663n7).

xv. Dominic Boyer has argued that theory, among other things, constitutively elides its immediate context of production and the corporeality of its producer (2005b); at moments he has advocated a multiattentional approach to social theory.

xvi. I am influenced here by Williams’ proposals to “teach the university” (2008).

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