Just Theory offers an alternative history of critical theory in the context of the birth and transformation of the Western philosophical tradition. But rather than providing a summary survey, it situates the production of theoretical texts within the geopolitical economy of just two pivotal cultural turns: Cultural Turn 1 (roughly 450–350 BCE) looks at the Platonic revolution, during which a new philosophic, universalist, and literate discourse emerged from what had long been an oral culture; Cultural Turn 2 (roughly 1770–1870) investigates the Romantic revolution and its nineteenth-century aftermath up to the Paris Commune. While focusing on the quest for social justice, David B. Downing situates the two cultural turns within deep time: Cultural Turn 1 gave birth to the Western philosophical tradition during the Holocene; Cultural Turn 2 witnessed the beginnings of the shift to the Anthropocene when the Industrial Revolution and the fossil fuel age began to alter our complex biospheres and geospheres. As described in the epilogue, the aftereffects of Western metaphysics have dramatically shaped our twenty-first-century world, especially for teachers and scholars in English and the humanities.

David B. Downing is Distinguished University Professor of English at Indiana University of Pennsylvania.
Preface: What Is Just Theory?

Staff Editor: Bonny Graham
Manuscript Editor: Lee Erwin
Interior Design: Jenny Jensen Greenleaf
Cover Design: Pat Mayer
Cover Images: iStock.com/serts; Wellcome Images; Wikimedia Commons

NCTE Stock Number: 25304; eStock Number: 25328

©2019 by the National Council of Teachers of English.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission from the copyright holder. Printed in the United States of America.

It is the policy of NCTE in its journals and other publications to provide a forum for the open discussion of ideas concerning the content and the teaching of English and the language arts. Publicity accorded to any particular point of view does not imply endorsement by the Executive Committee, the Board of Directors, or the membership at large, except in announcements of policy, where such endorsement is clearly specified.

NCTE provides equal employment opportunity (EEO) to all staff members and applicants for employment without regard to race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, physical, mental or perceived handicap/disability, sexual orientation including gender identity or expression, ancestry, genetic information, marital status, military status, unfavorable discharge from military service, pregnancy, citizenship status, personal appearance, matriculation or political affiliation, or any other protected status under applicable federal, state, and local laws.

Every effort has been made to provide current URLs and email addresses, but because of the rapidly changing nature of the web, some sites and addresses may no longer be accessible.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Downing, David B., 1947- author.
Title: Just theory : an alternative history of the western tradition / David B. Downing, Indiana University of Pennsylvania.
Identifiers: LCCN 2018053942 (print) | LCCN 2019002400 (ebook) | ISBN 9780814125328 (ebook) | ISBN 9780814125304 ((pbk))
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2018053942
CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .......................................................... ix

PREFACE: WHAT IS JUST THEORY? ........................................... xiii

Cultural Turn 1. Inventing Western Metaphysics

1 Introduction: Framing the Common Good ....................... 3

2 Why Is Plato So Upset at the Poets, and What Is Western Metaphysics? ................................................................. 27

3 Reframing the Republic: From the Homeric to the Platonic Paideia ................................................................. 58

4 Finding Love (and Writing) in All the Wrong Places: Plato’s Pharmacy and the Double-Edged Sword of Literacy in the Phaedrus ......................................................... 85

5 Aristotle’s Natural Classification of Things: When Dialectic Trumps Rhetoric and Poetry Gets Rescued ...... 103

Cultural Turn 2. Rewriting Western Metaphysics: Aesthetics and Politics in the Age of Capital

6 Rewriting Western Metaphysics for a Revolutionary Age . 147

7 The Prelude to the Revolution: The Limits of Literary Freedom in a Market Society ................................................. 207

8 Women’s Rights, Class Wars, and the Master-Slave Dialectic: Signs of the Rising Countermovements ........ 238

9 The Struggle between Commumality and Hierarchy: Lessons of the Paris Commune for the Twenty-First Century ................................................................. 291

10 From God’s Great Chain to Nature’s Slow-Motion Evolution: Reframing Our Regulative Fictions .......... 321
## CONTENTS

Cultural Turn 3. Surviving the Sixth Extinction and Resolving the Crisis of Care

_Epilogue_ ...................................................... 355

_Notes_ .......................................................... 383
_Works Cited_ ................................................ 417
_Index_ ........................................................... 439
_Author_ .......................................................... 459
Preface: What Is *Just Theory*?

*Just Theory* offers an alternative history of critical theory in the context of the birth and transformation of the Western philosophical tradition. But rather than a summary survey, it situates the production of theoretical texts within the geopolitical economy of just two pivotal cultural turns. Especially in the fifth to fourth centuries BCE, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and their cohorts in Athens brought into being a whole new discourse called philosophy. From this bustling southern Mediterranean city, population nearly 300,000 at the time (although only about 40,000 males had the status of citizens), we can now trace forward a 2,500-year history of the aftereffects of what has been called Western metaphysics or European universalism as it migrated around the world. A new vocabulary of reason, logic, and dialectic came into being as a powerful cultural narrative. Twenty-two hundred years later, the founding discourse was significantly reworked so that in different manifestations it could serve both conservative and revolutionary agendas. What happened in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in northwestern Europe, particularly in France, Germany, and England, would transform the literary, social, cultural, political, and geophysical landscapes that emerged in the modern world. I refer to these two major cultural revolutions as “cultural turns.”

The other key feature of this book is that it focuses on the desire for universalism and the quest for social justice. Whereas most histories of criticism and theory focus on a survey of the history of ideas relatively independent of the geopolitical economy, *Just Theory* situates theoretical texts within their complex social histories. For that reason, I have completely abandoned the coverage model of trying to survey in chronological order the “hit parade” of canonized theorists over the entire history of Western
In contrast, I offer close readings of a smaller, select group of texts and authors, always situating the local details within the broader geopolitical economy. There are some obvious risks in this plan to combine the principles of close reading with the sweeping historical narrative. As Anna Tsing puts it, “big histories are always best told through insistent, if humble, details” (111). The real advantage of the framing structure is that it allows me to tell a story that leaves out so much. One of the advantages of theorizing is that by gaining some distance from the particulars, it generalizes, and in our complex worlds we need simplified frames with which to orient ourselves. On those grounds, I hope that my concentration on a few exemplary figures and events will compensate for my otherwise ruthless omission of so many other important writers and movements.

Finally, my focus on these two brief cultural turns situates them within deep time primarily because we are all caught within the transition to an entirely new geological epoch: we are bearing witness to the end of the 11,700-year-old Holocene epoch and the beginning of what many have been calling the Anthropocene. Cultural Turn 1 gave birth to the Western philosophical tradition during the Holocene; Cultural Turn 2 witnessed the beginnings of the shift to the Anthropocene when the Industrial Revolution and the fossil fuel age began to alter our complex biospheres and geospheres.

With increasing persistence, my graduate students in Literature and Criticism have been telling me that we should all be concerned about climate change. They have also repeatedly told me that what they most need to understand the ongoing impact of the Western tradition of philosophy and critical theory are, first, some long-term historical frames to contextualize their encounters with specific theoretical and literary texts; and, second, some detailed close readings linking the frames to the texts. In answer to their requests, I have tried to tell the story I have been teaching. Given my own professional interests in the connections between literature and composition, I also hope that many compositionists, rhetoricians, and linguists will be interested in this book.

I have also tried to interest teachers of graduate courses (and upper-division undergraduate courses) in the history of
Preface: What Is Just Theory?

criticism; and beyond that, faculty in English studies and comparative literature who seek a general overview of the history of the Western tradition. And beyond that, students and faculty in related humanities and social science fields: everything I argue for in this book about the concern for social justice addresses widely shared commitments. I have been aware during the writing process of tensions among these expanding audiences, but I think the overlaps are far greater than the distances. For all these reasons, I have made sure to use ordinary language throughout, translating any specialized terms accordingly. I have also tried to include sufficient detail from the texts I address so that a general reader can make sense of the story without necessarily having read all those sources. We only have so much time, and we inhabit a vulnerable world.

In the early twenty-first century, everyone on the planet is confronted with increasing socioeconomic inequality tied to life-threatening forms of climate change as democratic governments around the world sacrifice public responsibility for human resources to the economic logic of a private market economy. Because of these dramatic ecological changes, the “Anthropocene sweeps humankind into the turbulent flow of geohistory” (Davies 11) so that we are now “being plunged into deep time” (15), like it or not. We, therefore, need accessible historical overviews of the powerful Western justifications for the current global economy, especially as these forces have so altered the geohistory of the planet that they affect all human beings, although in dramatically different ways. In our age, geological history, political history, philosophical history, and literary history are all conjoined. Of course, they always have been, although for the past two hundred years the voices of dissent in the countermovements that objected to the exploitation of the natural world were often ignored or suppressed by the dominant powers. No longer is such suppression possible: the signs are all around us, and scientific knowledge of the history of the planet through carbon dating provides the comparative data. Just Theory contributes to this much bigger project through its selective attention to both the dominant cultural narratives in the West and the alternatives opened up by a few of the key countermovements. Although interdisciplinarity has now become a normal practice in most academic fields, my
strategy in this book still leads me into many social, political, and geophysical analyses ignored by most comprehensive surveys of literary and cultural theory.  

My general thesis is that the two cultural turns are not unrelated periods, but deeply interwoven sociohistorical contexts. Despite the historical mutations, Western metaphysics remains (too often in banefully reductive ways) a powerful discourse in our world because its binary hierarchies have become deeply enmeshed in the language, culture, and history of the West, which means it has now taken on global dimensions in our postcolonial geographies. Plato’s fear of the world of appearances reappears in the fear (or love) of simulacra and spectacle everywhere in our seemingly postmetaphysical world.

The two main sections of the book correspond to these two cultural turns: Cultural Turn 1 (roughly 450–350 BCE) focuses on the Platonic revolution whereby a new philosophic, universalist, and literate discourse emerged from what had long been an oral culture; Cultural Turn 2 (roughly 1770–1870) investigates the Romantic revolution and its nineteenth-century aftermath up to the remarkable two months of the Paris Commune. The Renaissance was certainly the rebirth of interest in the classical Greek writers; and the Enlightenment reinforced the Western philosophical investment in reason and science; but it was the ensuing Romantic period that altered the discourse irrevocably for modernity and altered the political economy by extracting energy sources from beneath the earth’s surface. Indeed, ethnocentric versions of Western metaphysics justified human mastery of nature as an objectified “resource” to be endlessly consumed by the wealthy European nations, regardless of the environmental consequences. Nonetheless some strains of what I have called radical Romanticism resisted identifying modernity with capitalism to the exclusion of alternative possibilities. So it is important in the twenty-first century to recover the origins of these countertraditions. The late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century concerns for alternative geopolitical economies, for mutuality, reciprocity, and social justice rather than endless competition, may now seem naive or merely wishful thinking, yet they were occurring at the very historical juncture when the fossil fuel age began. As Jeremy Davies argues, “the best conceptual repertoire
for ecology at the birth of the Anthropocene might overlap a
good deal with the vocabulary of democracy, devolution, and
egalitarianism” (200). Much of that vocabulary was rewritten
into the discourse of modernity during Cultural Turn 2. So if we
are to “guard against philosophically clumsy dualism” (204), we
have to understand where the history of those dualisms began in
Cultural Turn 1, and how they were rewritten in various ways
to both accommodate and resist the capitalist world system.

Indeed, a huge change has taken place in our assessment of
Romanticism, particularly after World War II. In the first half
of the twentieth century, the work of the Romantic writers was
often devalued as a kind of unruly excess, an emotional chaos
devoid of rational planning. Jacques Barzun argues that before
1943, when he wrote Romanticism and the Modern Ego, the
entire Romantic period “was held in particular detestation and
contempt: it was naïve, silly, wrongheaded, stupidly passionate,
criminally hopeful, and intolerably rhetorical” (Classic ix).4 The
origins of this contempt for the Romantics go at least as far back
as Matthew Arnold, who explicitly argued that the Romantics
lacked intellectual rigor and thoughtfulness, especially in their
support of the French Revolution.5 Ironically, Arnold adopted
some of the key doctrines of Romantic idealism, such as the high
valuation of art and literature, even while rejecting the more
radical strains of Romanticism tied to direct political engage-
ment. Arnold’s view of the separation of high culture from the
contaminations of “philistine” culture resonated deeply into the
twentieth century.6

More than ever, we may now need to reconsider these fun-
damental transformations in our cultural and political histories,
especially as they are so deeply affected by our collective responses
to the epochal changes in planetary history to which we are now
bearing witness. As Terry Eagleton explains, “[W]e ourselves are
post-Romantics, in the sense of being products of the epoch rather
than confidently posterior to it” (Literary Theory 18). Some of
the Romantic writers offered powerful ways of integrating art,
imagination, nature, culture, and politics. They participated in
the rebirth of democratic governments and the creation of the
distinctions between public and private domains as they struggled
for the revolutionary values of liberty, equality, and justice—vi-
tal political concepts that exceed any form of strictly economic language. Yet we live in an age when these crucial distinctions have virtually collapsed, as the private economy infiltrates all social spheres. In the twenty-first century, questions about social justice rarely intrude in the calculations of profit and loss, economic growth, and return on investment (ROI). Such neoliberal economic rationality only intensifies social inequalities and environmental damage, both of which are accompanied by the disturbing worldwide increase in authoritarian political regimes.

When in 1961 Barzun published a revised version of his book, now called *Classic, Romantic, and Modern*, he could argue even more insistently that “the tendency of historic Romanticism was away from authority and toward . . . the sovereignty of the people” (xv), or at least those people who previously had had no voice in social and political decisions affecting their lives. Among many other sociopolitical changes, the newly invigorated category of aesthetics sustained powerful but contentious relationships with the social, political, and economic forces. As we will see in Chapter 6, it was in 1790, at the beginning of Cultural Turn 2, that in *Critique of Judgment* Kant developed some of the most sophisticated philosophical arguments for the autonomy of literary art just as the French Revolution was in its early stages. Some of the nineteenth century’s most ardent advocates of political revolution were equally ardent about the need for aesthetic autonomy: they modified Kant’s influential ideas as they cheered the revolutionary ideals of freedom and equality even though Kant himself opposed revolution. So it was not always an easy compact: autonomy from sociohistorical contexts could disable the very political agendas being championed by the Romantic revolutionaries. The Romantic tendency to idealize the natural world in contradistinction from the human world of politics and economics could therefore defeat the critique of an economic system that we now know was contributing to massive ecological changes. Like many other critics, Barzun did not really see this two-sided tear in the fabric of Romantic discourse. The conflicts between the idealist and materialist visions have historically varied depending on the circumstances, but the tensions have not disappeared.

Any account of the history of theory will inevitably grapple with the struggle for the big picture, but global perspectives based
on deep time are hard to come by, particularly in the atomistic, fragmented, and specialized domains of academic and professional life. Critical theories can be packaged as isolated schools and methods relatively decontextualized from the geopolitical economy in which they were produced. Indeed, in the early twenty-first century, the powerfully marketed common sense of our age is that anything that does not improve an individual’s or firm’s competitive advantage in the marketplace is just theory, as in useless verbiage cluttering up the real business of being in the world. But there is no such thing as just theory—that is, so long as you understand the word *just* as a synonym for *only*, as in the belief that some set of ideas can be *only* theory, and have nothing to do with practice, the physical world, the political economy, or everyday living. The title of this book thus plays off a pun resonating both an ironic and a literal meaning of the word *just*: just meaning “only,” and just meaning “fair.” In the first sense, the book title is ironic because it is a distinctly false theory that the essence of pure theory can be divorced from history, politics, economics, and ecology; as if theory could be *only* itself, just *theory*. Indeed, such a metatheory of theories has been the goal for many who seek to “depoliticize” theory—as well as literature, art, economics, education, and, most important, climate change.

In contrast, what I have been calling *just theory* is a literal, non-ironic, evaluative term naming the good kind of theory that contributes to making the world a more just place. Just theory includes both the negative critique of oppressive hierarchies and the positive affirmation of life-sustaining possibilities. The twentieth-century philosopher Paul Ricoeur famously coined the phrase “hermeneutics of suspicion” to describe the kinds of interpretive work that could uncover the complicity of political oppression in virtually any discourse. But he also spoke about the dialectical necessity of its theoretical opposite, what he called the “hermeneutics of recovery,” and what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick called “reparative criticism.” Such theory often arrives as a reflective response to a problem or painful situation, with the aim of providing ideas about how to relieve unnecessary suffering and repair the damages wrought by historical cruelties. Especially since the global economic crisis of 2008, many people around the world have returned to basic questions about equality and justice.
In this second, literal sense, we need more just theory. But the truth is, I don’t know exactly what this is—in short, I don’t really know what “just theory” means. Fortunately, I’m not alone, because no one else does either, so the situation invites openness to multiple possibilities through dialogue and discussion.

Despite all the vast literature in philosophy, art, and theory trying to articulate justice in concrete representations, the desire for universal human justice exceeds all its particular renderings. As Curtis White puts it, “When we speak of justice, freedom, or creativity, we do not know entirely what we mean. These are not calculable concepts, and yet they are the entire force behind what we claim we want in the world” (Middle 188). For many people, justice is a deep, human desire for a different future. But however incalculable by economic or statistical metrics, what we can do is situate the desire for justice in the contexts of social injustice, and those can, indeed, be represented in many different media. Critical theory often begins with the effort to name and describe those contradictions and injustices from which so many suffer. Most forms of human suffering have something to do with the geopolitical economy.

Political economy is, of course, the term made most famous by Karl Marx, but the term itself actually emerged in the eighteenth century. It was then adopted by the nineteenth-century political economists such as Adam Smith, David Ricardo, Jeremy Bentham, and others, although the shared aim of most of these classical economists was to remove (or reduce) the political from the economic. The fulfillment of their aim was only recently realized; as Timothy Mitchell points out, “the economy,” as a noun naming a separate domain, rather than a process of efficiency, saving money by choosing wisely, only emerged in the 1940s and 1950s. Nevertheless, this desire for separating market economics from state politics began a long historical evolution even as state and capital became deeply enmeshed in Cultural Turn 2. Today, Western metaphysical dualism enables neoliberal economists to separate market analysis from the contested arenas of sociopolitical values so that government can now be organized exclusively by supposedly “universal,” scientific, and apolitical economic metrics. It becomes very difficult to find a contemporary public figure who would deny that, like any corporate
Preface: What Is Just Theory?

firm, all government policies should be orchestrated to serve the engines of economic growth through capital appreciation. From this perspective, global warming must be resolved by more free-market deregulation, even though it was the market system that accelerated the production of greenhouse gases.

Despite these ideological mystifications, healing these rifts in our critical histories calls for recovery as well as suspicion. Indeed, there can be no ultimate “material” history that has successfully avoided metaphysics. As David Harvey points out, Marx’s materialism is haunted throughout by the desires of metaphysics and the phantoms of objectivity. But as Harvey also reminds us: “If you think you can solve a serious environmental question like global warming without actually confronting the question of by whom and how the foundational value structure of our society is being determined, then you are kidding yourself” (Companion 21). Any effort to construct a just history of theory should therefore attempt to address the question of the “foundational value structure” of the Western tradition as it was produced and disseminated in the political economy of diverse geographical regions with a focus not just on epistemological problems, but also on how such knowledge pertains to questions of social justice and the possibilities for human flourishing even as we confront a warmer planet.

Of course, whatever people call “theory” tends to run in the direction of the thin, the abstract, and the general. After all, the etymological roots of the word theory are the Greek words theorein, which means “to look at,” which in turn comes from theoros, which means “spectator,” or one viewing the action from outside the field where the game is being played. But that is only part of the story of theory, since you can’t ever quite get out of the mode of production if you are going to produce theory. Any general theory that does not pay respectful attention to both the local and the nonlocal realities of any given context tends not to be very accurate, and thus not very useful, unless, that is, you are using the theory to deceive some other people, and that happens quite often. Indeed, these dialectical tensions between the general and the particular, the universal and the specific, objectivity and subjectivity, sameness and difference, text and context, the thin and the thick, theory and data, depth and surface, distant and
close reading, and suspicion and recovery characterize the modern version of the discourse that many people have called “Western metaphysics” or “European universalism.” We can get trapped in those binary discourses in some pretty troubling ways when “transcending history” or “attaining the universal” neglects the lives of those who don’t get to do the transcending.

Living in the twenty-first century, the question of what’s left for theory and the humanities that don’t operate according to the quantifiable logic of cost-effectiveness ratios becomes a real question. Why should we pay attention to a rhetoric and tradition that arose in ancient Greece out of a very different political economy? There are no easy answers here. But my premise is that the Western traditions have filtered down to us in so many powerful variations that some versions of the discourse live encoded within our own culturally produced identities, affecting our bodily, physical, and ecological realities such as global warming. In short, these “powerful cultural narratives” (Klein, This Changes 159) are deeply in us: or, perhaps more accurately, when speaking of “the founding myths of modern Western culture” (74), there are no clear boundaries between inside and outside.

As I often put it, humorously, to my students, we are still “sick” with Western metaphysics. But the diagnostic implication of that expression has a serious ring because it names a kind of ideological illness that often prevents us from seeing a different history or a different future than the one our dominant culture has cast for us. The influential twentieth-century critical theorist Theodor Adorno configured this condition in a slightly different register: normative social life in the twentieth century had for him precluded the possibility of human happiness because we all now lived “damaged life”—that’s from the subtitle of his book, Minima Moralia. Adorno argued that any hope for healing meant that philosophy had to become historical, attuned to a self-reflective analysis of the political economy and responsive to both the constructive and the destructive forces of the modern world. Despite the difficulty of his distinctive style, which might suggest a writer who has completely abstracted himself from real-world struggles, Adorno spent much of his life in exile from the horrors of the Holocaust arguing that critical theory could avoid the debilitating effects of a false belief in total indepen-
dence from the social domain, but only through a recognition that theory was immanent, emerging from within sociohistorical struggles, tainted and complicit with what it hoped to critique. His “negative dialectics” can seem rather grim, a kind of ultimate “hermeneutics of suspicion,” and his aesthetic theories have often been seen as a high-modernist retreat from the political world, but as Eagleton argues, there is another side of Adorno, deeply concerned with the hermeneutics of recovery and “the creation of a just life” (quoted in Eagleton, *Ideology* 350) because he is “implicated enough in the political struggles of his time to be able to see more than metaphysical delusion in such fundamental human values as solidarity, mutual affinity, peaceableness, fruitful communication, loving kindness—values without which not even the most exploitative social order would succeed in reproducing itself” (354). “A just life” requires the dialectical processes of healing and affirmation besides critique and negation.

The problem is that our times and spaces have become so big, international perspectives and interdisciplinary knowledge so complex, as to defeat our understanding of the forces that affect our lives. Before I begin the story itself, I, therefore, first need to elaborate two key assumptions organizing this two-part history of theory: first, the divergent social consequences of materialist and idealist strains of theory as they pertain to the struggle for a genuinely universalist discourse that also respects our vast ethnic and sociocultural differences; and second, the dialectical tensions between communality and hierarchy as they affect the possibilities for social justice. Finally, I will speak to the central issue raised by both the geographical and ideological meanings of “Western” theory.
Just Theory offers an alternative history of critical theory in the context of the birth and transformation of the Western philosophical tradition. But rather than providing a summary survey, it situates the production of theoretical texts within the geopolitical economy of just two pivotal cultural turns: Cultural Turn 1 (roughly 450–350 BCE) looks at the Platonic revolution, during which a new philosophic, universalist, and literate discourse emerged from what had long been an oral culture; Cultural Turn 2 (roughly 1770–1870) investigates the Romantic revolution and its nineteenth-century aftermath up to the Paris Commune. While focusing on the quest for social justice, David B. Downing situates the two cultural turns within deep time: Cultural Turn 1 gave birth to the Western philosophical tradition during the Holocene; Cultural Turn 2 witnessed the beginnings of the shift to the Anthropocene when the Industrial Revolution and the fossil fuel age began to alter our complex biospheres and geospheres. As described in the epilogue, the aftereffects of Western metaphysics have dramatically shaped our twenty-first-century world, especially for teachers and scholars in English and the humanities.

David B. Downing is Distinguished University Professor of English at Indiana University of Pennsylvania.