

Literary Theory: A Historical Survey

Part 2: Foundations

Lecture 4: Positivism

- 1) Historical Background
- 2) Positivistic Approaches to Literature
- 3) Positivism in the 20th Century
- 4) Coda: New Materialisms

1) Historical Background

- Positivism emerged in the first half of the 19th century against the background of fundamental social change (feudal and agrarian → industrial and capitalist society) (stratificatory → functional differentiation)
- social tensions, hopes and fears went hand in hand with the rise and increasing success of the natural sciences which resulted in accelerated technological development
→ social criticism + belief in progress
- 'positif, -ve' (French):
 - the real (vs. the imagined)
 - the useful (vs. the meaningless)
 - certainty (vs. uncertainty)
 - the constructive (vs. the destructive)

Auguste Comte (1798-1857),

French mathematician and philosopher, founder of positivism and sociology

- 1822 *Prospectus des travaux scientifique nécessaires pour réorganises la société*
 '*Plan of Necessary Scientific Works for Reorganizing Society*' (influence of Henri de Saint-Simon, the social reformer)
- 1830-42 *Lectures Cours des philosophie positive* (6 vols)
- 1844 *Discours sur l'esprit positive*
- 1851-1854 *Système de politique positive* (4 vols)

Theory:

- strictly anti-metaphysical orientation in the tradition of the European enlightenment (French encyclopaedists/Diderot)
- observation and examination of given facts
- classification according to the principle of similarity/resemblance in order to find out and establish the 'unchangeable laws' of the world (motto: 'see to foresee'); reliance on causality principle
- inductive and deductive dimensions, scientific monism

Fundamental Laws:

• The Law of the Three Stages of World History/ Intellectual Development:

- 1) the theological (fictional) stage: (fetishism → polytheism → monotheism; explanations in terms of gods and spirits)
- 2) the metaphysical (abstract) stage (the decline of religion ↔ the rise of philosophy, explanations in terms of essences, final causes; and other abstractions)
- 3) the scientific (positive) stage (anti-metaphysical awareness of the limitations of human knowledge which can only be relative to varying social and historical situations; explanations in terms of laws based on observable relations between phenomena)

• The Encyclopedic Law of the Classification of the Sciences:

[mathematics	(abstraction without observation → a tool of calculation and estimation)]	simple and abstract principles
astronomy	(purely visual observation)	↓
physics	(+ experiments)	complex and
chemistry	(+ classification)	concrete and
biology	(+ comparison)	increasingly
sociology	(+ historical method ≈ sum total!)	human phenomena

→ a philosophy of history based on the history of the human mind

→ political dimension:

Comte envisioned a hierarchical model of society in which spiritual authority resides with an elite of sociologists while secular authority resides with bankers and businessmen (vs. democracy)

2) Positivistic Approaches to Literature

- art as a social and historical fact
- causal relationship between art and society (determinism)
 - artistic creations can and should be explained without drawing upon such fuzzy concepts as 'genius', 'creative freedom' etc. (anti-hermeneutical stance)

Fields of Interest:

1) How does the literary work come into being?

basic model:	society → author → work
e.g. Hippolyte Taine (1828-93):	race/milieu/moment
Wilhelm Scherer (1841-86):	das Erlernte/Eererbte/Erlebte

Classic Study:

John Livingston Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu: A Study in the Ways of the Imagination*
(1927)

biographical facts → the poet's mind → poems
(‘raw materials’) (‘elements of beauty’)

Problem: status and accessibility of ‘facts’!

2) How does the text mirror reality?

→ content, fictional worlds

Problem: literary texts do not necessarily mirror reality, they might as well distort it, especially for the sake of idealization and compensation

3) What features does the text as an object have?

- examining the text, comparison, classification
- critical editions, establishing authorship

Problem: meaning emerges from *interpretation* of ‘objective facts’ (↔ hermeneutics)

3) Positivism in the 20th Century

Positivism in Literary Studies Today:

- widely accepted without further reflection in schools, encyclopedias, traditional scholarship etc. as the 'normal' way of dealing with literature
- a strange fusion of biographical approaches and hermeneutics results in a wide-spread fixation on the notion of authorial intention ('What the author really meant is ...')
- the positivistic belief in the facticity of textual features seems to underlie many projects in computer philology and the digital humanities
- positive aspects: de-mystification of literature; inauguration of a sociology of literature; good applicability in the teaching of literature

Problems:

- scope of enquiry is frequently narrowed to author biography ('Biographismus')
- scope of enquiry frequently narrowed to content level of texts
- neglect of the 'literariness' of literature
- epistemological naivety
(Do 'raw facts' 'exist' in an uninterpreted state? How is 'objectivity' possible?)
→ negative connotations of the terms 'positivist' and 'positivistic')

20th Century Extensions of the Positivistic Programme:

1) Neopositivism (E. Mach, M. Schlick, O. Neurath, R. Carnap)

- also called logical positivism or logical empiricism
- doubts about the possibility of objective knowledge
- appropriate hypotheses and meaningful constructions
- strict application of logic and scientific language use shall guarantee the appropriateness and purity of thought processes
- the principle of empirical or logical verification

2) 'Kritischer Rationalismus' (K. Popper, H. Albert)

- rejection of induction and verification as basis of science
- knowledge emerges not from the perception and observation of facts, but from problems and suggested solutions
- science is not certain knowledge, but a series of 'conjectures and refutations' approaching, though never reaching, a definitive truth
- the principle of verification has to be replaced by the principle of falsification

4) Coda: New Materialisms

- a reworking of older materialist traditions, contemporary theoretical debates and advances in scientific knowledge to address pressing ethical and political challenges
- a posthumanist conception of matter as lively or exhibiting agency
- a reengagement with both the material realities of everyday life and broader geopolitical and socioeconomic structures
- contemporary economic, environmental, geopolitical, and technological developments demand new accounts of nature, agency, and social and political relationships; modes of inquiry that privilege consciousness and subjectivity are not up to the task

(cf. Coole/Frost 2010, blurb)

It is true that over the past three decades or so theorists have radicalized the way they understand subjectivity, discovering its efficacy in discovering even the most apparently natural phenomena while insisting on its embeddedness in dense networks of power that outrun its control and constitute its willfulness. Yet it is on subjectivity that their gaze has focused. Our motivation in editing this book has been a conviction that it is now time to subject objectivity and material reality to a similar radical reappraisal.

(Coole/Frost 2010, 2)

Influential titles in the field:

Barad, Karen, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham/London: Duke UP, 2007.

Gratton, Peter, *Speculative Realism: Problems and Prospects*. London: Bloomsbury, 2014.

Latour, Bruno, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005.

Morton, Timothy, *Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality*. Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2013.

Bibliography Lecture 4:

Bode, Christoph, *Lyrik und Methode. Propädeutische Arbeit mit Gedichten*. Berlin: CVK, 1983: 16-49.

Coole, Diana, and Samantha Frost, eds., *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*. Durham/London: Duke UP, 2010.

<http://www.edstephan.org/Sociology/302/comte/comte.html>