

# Reconfigurations

Critical Theory and General Economy

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## Preface

The essays comprising this study deal with transformations—reconfigurations—of critical theory associated by this study's argument with Georges Bataille's idea of general economy and the general economic dimensions of Jacques Derrida's discourse. These transformations, however, may be seen as beginning with Nietzsche. Coincidentally, they reach their culmination in the closing decade of this century (around 1990), as Nietzsche's works, which date to 1889, did at the close of the previous one. The critical theory of my title thus refers primarily to this conjunction, via the idea of general economy, of Nietzsche and theory in the wake of poststructuralism, most particularly in Bataille and Derrida. It does retain other possibilities as its frames of reference, some more immediate and others more mediated: critique in the Kantian or a post-Kantian sense; critical economies in Marx and Nietzsche; critical theory as understood by the Frankfurt School; or more recent critical economies (in addition to Derrida and deconstruction) in Heidegger, Lacan, Althusser, Deleuze, Foucault, Lyotard, and their extension in literary criticism and theory.

The developments at issue cannot be uniquely grounded in Nietzsche. First, such a unique grounding is impossible for general theoretical reasons because the reconfigurations these developments produce allow and indeed force us to suspend all unique or unconditional grounding. Second, such a grounding is also impossible for specific historical reasons since some of these developments precede Nietzsche or evolve along historico-theoretical trajectories that are different from those suggested by the present study, and thus mark different evolutionary and revolutionary points. Some of these alternative trajectories have been



explored in recent literature, variously engaging the major figures and themes discussed in this study, or else pursuing still different routes. Furthermore, the reconfigurations considered here depend on radical *rereadings* of Nietzsche, specifically on the French scene, beginning with Gilles Deleuze's *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (1962). Bataille's, Heidegger's, and several other thinkers' earlier encounters with Nietzsche were major forces on this scene as well; and the subsequent rereadings of Nietzsche often operate specifically against the background of their work. Nevertheless, Nietzsche remains a momentous, perhaps unique, revolutionary event in this history.

Nietzsche himself speaks in *Daybreak* [*Morgenröte*] of the "tremendous consequences [die ungeheuren Folgen]" of the new things—and the new reasons for old things—that he has discovered. Perhaps the most radical consequences as yet will be new transformations, the new possibilities of theory and the new constraints on theory, including impossibilities, that emerge as a result. In any development, revolutionary or evolutionary, there is a double economy of possibilities and constraints. Once *new* configurations become possible, some *old* configurations become impossible—theoretically, psychologically, or politically. The psychology and politics of such transformations are always complex since, depending on the conditions, some of us find the changes to be for the better, others for the worse. The very complexity of demarcations between the old and the new must be kept in mind. Nor do transformations always make things easier. In the case of theory, the most revolutionary transformations may well make things more difficult: they lead to more complex problems and questions, and the questions and problems that used to be difficult and complex become simple or even trivial as a result.

Nietzsche understood this process very well; indeed, the saying is attributed to him that, as science gets better, the questions become stranger. The very opposition between simple and complex itself becomes increasingly more problematic and demands reconfiguration, a process that will be considered in this study. By the same token, it is rarely *simply* a question of choice or of *simple* choice between things old and new, or complex and simple, or conversely, *simply* a question of necessity, whether theoretical or political, or both at once. Choices are possibilities, but they are never unconstrained; and often one is not given the possibility of a choice at all, so that, as Derrida points out, the very category of choice—and, one must add, the category of necessity—become trivial.

In great measure, the present study is an analysis of Derrida and of the relations—the affinities and the differences—between Nietzsche and Derrida, with Bataille as a key mediating figure. Bataille's work is crucial be-

cause it introduces and develops the matrix of the general economy—the economy that takes into account, or rather relates to, the irreducible loss in representation and meaning, but that cannot be *restricted* to an economy of loss only. This matrix constitutes the main theoretical instrument of the present study; and the question and the metaphor of economy constitute its major point of entry onto the poststructuralist scene. Equally importantly, the general economy offers an extraordinarily effective possibility of accounting for the textual practices of Nietzsche, Bataille, Derrida, and other practitioners of the plural or, as I shall call it, the complementary style.

The notion of the plural style was introduced by Derrida, via Nietzsche, in order to account for the simultaneous operation of a given text or group of texts inside and outside the register of philosophy. The plural style is necessitated by the general economy: it is always general economic, although one should not identify it with the general economy. I shall further extend the notion of plural style—and by implication the notion of general economy—so as to approach more multiple registers, most specifically of theory, although these notions are applicable to a great deal more than theory. This extension proceeds via complementarity as a model for a critical practice that can work out of a general economy.

The principle of complementarity is drawn from Niels Bohr's interpretation of quantum mechanics, where it is developed in order to account for the indeterminacy of quantum systems and to describe—simultaneously, but without classical synthesis—their conflicting aspects. The principle is expanded by this study so as mutually to enrich and develop both ideas—general economy and complementarity—within a comprehensive theoretical and historical framework. The resulting framework enables the book to consider and engage diverse discursive practices—literary, critical, theoretical, historical, and political—and to show how the general economy operates in and transforms the contemporary theoretical landscape.

Derrida's theoretical matrix and his style as plural style define themselves as general economic. I shall argue that Nietzsche's discourse also conforms to a general economy and is one of Bataille's main sources in this respect. By the same token, all three economies and styles are plural or, again, complementary. One must also rigorously differentiate between different general or restricted economies, even though, by definition and in opposition to restricted economies, there cannot be one single general economy, even in a given text: this is one of the reasons for the necessity of plural or complementary styles. But such styles are themselves different, as in Nietzsche, Bataille, and Derrida; and the practice of plural style, particularly in the extended sense of this analysis, is not confined to these figures.



This study concerns itself more with exploring the theoretical configurations and reconfigurations emerging in and resulting from the works at issue than with offering a reading or interpretation of them. 'Readings,' in various senses of this now very complex term, must inevitably be engaged, even assuming that one could finally separate theory and reading or theory and history or reading and history. All these, however, must always be engaged according to complementarity and general economy. There is always a difference in emphasis and in balance, or imbalance, of gains and losses in reading, theory, history, theory, or politics. But then, given the ineluctably general economy of the process, one can never fully calculate in advance, maintain, or ensure for the future one's balances or one's losses and gains.

The first chapter, "Exchanges, the Play of Forces, and General Economy," considers the significance of the matrix of the general economy and its place on the scene of poststructuralism or postmodernism. The chapter introduces complementarity by conjoining Bohr's idea, understood as a metaphorical model, with the general economy, and then uses this joint framework in its analytical mapping of the historical, theoretical, critical, and political features of the poststructuralist landscape, a landscape that is itself plural and complementary. The chapter also offers a discussion of a number of recent commentaries on the major figures and themes at issue.

Chapter 2 considers the relations among Kant, Bataille, and Derrida and, in this context, the *reconfiguration* of the relations between art and philosophy and of theoretical style in general. As I discuss in Chapter 1, the significance of Kant in recent theoretical discussions, particularly in relation to the thematics of economy, has been momentous. *The Critique of Judgement* has played a major role in the poststructuralist debate, particularly in the works of Deleuze, Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Paul de Man. Hegel's role was, of course, no less momentous, with respect both to the question of history and, more recently, to the question of aesthetics. Like Kant, Hegel shapes both modern intellectual history and the poststructuralist scene. Thus the poststructuralist scene also features a reconfiguration of Kant and Hegel, the juncture that had dominated modern, or let us say post-Hegelian, intellectual history. Along with Bataille's encounters with Nietzsche, his confrontation with Hegel has played an important role in recent theoretical discussions. The question of the general economy is a major product of this confrontation, proceeding through Marx and the Marxist readings of Hegel, specifically by Alexander Kojève. As I suggest in Chapter 2, however, the question of Kant may be of greater importance in Bataille than is immediately apparent.

In theoretical terms, Chapter 2 explores a multiple reconfiguration of philosophical, political, aesthetic, and artistic economies as restricted and as general systems. I conclude this analysis with a discussion of the question of plural style on the modern theoretico-political scene. Whether it aspires to be such or not, a theoretical style can never be *only* theoretical. Conversely, neither can there be an absolutely or unconditionally nontheoretical style, although the very denomination "theoretical" itself becomes stratified and problematized, both inside and outside any theoretical field, particularly in philosophy. In this context the question of plural style becomes extended and reconfigured quite differently from the figure of plural style introduced by Derrida. In Derrida, plural style refers to a simultaneous operation inside and outside the philosophical register, in order to enact a radical critique of philosophy, to make its concepts tremble. This economy of plural style is a part of the economy of the closure of philosophy introduced by Derrida. As I shall suggest, however, through an analysis of Nietzsche's and Bataille's styles in Chapter 2 and later in Chapter 4, this configuration of plural style and of closure may be further pluralized and extended in relation to the economy of transformation of a given closure or configuration of closures.

Proceeding by way of Nietzsche and deconstruction, Chapter 3 further explores the stylistic transformation of philosophical discourse. It also considers the poststructuralist reconfigurations of narrative and the theory of narrative. The question of narrative has been raised throughout the recent history of theory, indeed by many of the authors at issue in this study. This question has many important implications for modern literary and critical theory, and historical studies, reaching far beyond the thematics of narrative itself. The present analysis, however, is specifically concerned with the notion of play and with the relations between play and narrative. Emerging early in Nietzsche, the (general) economy of play anticipates and announces his massive theoretical revolution—a radical reconfiguration of interpretation and theory or, to use his own phrase, a "reevaluation of all values."

Chapter 4 considers the significance of Nietzsche in relation both to the reconfigurations of theory at issue in this book and to Derrida and deconstruction. This analysis proceeds by engaging both certain historico-political concerns of theory and the question of art and aesthetics. The division of the chapter reflects the different degrees of emphasis in each area. As I have previously noted, however, these issues necessarily interpenetrate each other and must often be engaged simultaneously. The chapter concludes with an analysis of the questions of closure and of interminable analysis, and the difference between Nietzsche and Derrida along



these lines. Throughout, however, it considers more general relations between philosophy and other forms or economies, restricted and general, of theoretical practice. In many ways, this analysis is the theoretical center of this study.

The first three chapters constitute the first part of the project, describing the major transformations of theory. The second part deals with the major consequences and implications of these transformations, first in relation to the question of theory in Chapter 5, and then to the question of history in Chapter 6. The background configurations of Chapter 6 are the recent Marxist conceptions of history, specifically those of Louis Althusser and Fredric Jameson, juxtaposed to what may be seen as a deconstructive, or postdeconstructive, economy—a general economy—of history. The reconfiguration that emerges as a result is thus a general economy of history, together with the new shapes of historical, critical, and theoretical projects that such a general economy suggests and demands.

The last chapter deals, via Nietzsche, Heidegger, Bataille, and Derrida, with the question of science and technology, specifically with respect to the various concepts and metaphors of economy that emerge in this context. The more general problematic of science and technology in the post-structuralist context is also considered, such as the questions and metaphors of undecidability (via Kurt Gödel's incompleteness theorem, on the one hand, and deconstruction, on the other), Niels Bohr's theory of complementarity, and the question of matter. By way of theoretical or experimental findings and the metaphorical models that these findings offer, modern science and technology are crucial to all the texts considered in this study, beginning with Kant and Hegel, and continuing through Nietzsche, Heidegger, Bataille, and Derrida.

Thus, proceeding via Nietzsche, Freud, Bataille, and Derrida—all thinkers of the unconscious—the book begins with the Kantian problematic of taste and ends with the Hegelian problematic of history and Heidegger's question concerning technology. This, in a way, is a logical progression in a study that is also an exploration of the relations between consciousness and the unconscious in the practice of theory and the new technologies of theoretical style.