

## INTRODUCTION

### TRAVELLING THEORY

*New Formations* explores new ideas about culture and politics and reappraises existing theories and practices. This is too modest an aim for some people, it seems: the *New Statesman's* reviewer denounced a supposed abandonment of politics in our first issue. If that means we have abandoned a self-regarding and self-deceiving nostalgia for the good-old, bad-old certainties of post-'68, when politics were 'politics' and theory had all the answers, that's fine by us. But the charge raises a more serious question: what *is* the 'political space' within which a cultural journal of the left now has to operate?

The outlook is gloomy enough. In Britain, third-term Thatcherism has entered the cultural phase of its crusade to change the soul of the nation. The Labour Party dithers about closing *New Socialist*, its journal of theory and discussion. In Italy, the Communists - who have consistently attempted to integrate a cultural strategy into a left political programme - also suffer a disappointing electoral defeat. The cartelisation and globalisation of cultural markets and information orders continue apace. In these circumstances, is it still possible to formulate a cultural or theoretical politics which sounds neither rhetorically hollow nor disabblingly pessimistic? If it is, an apposite starting point might be Edward Said's image of 'travelling theory' in the essay of that title in *The World, the Text and the Critic*. His argument is that theories have no fixed political meaning, but take on different implications depending on where, when and how they are deployed.

How does theory travel? One way, which Said himself doesn't deal with, is literally through the movement of people. In recounting a number of journeys in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, for example, Jacques Ranciere suggests that travel (- the often bemused encounter with new ideas, new cultures, new classes - is an unconsidered feature of the intellectual dynamic of modernity in the West. This process continues. Peter Hulme reflects on a recent research trip he made to the Caribbean. Bill Schwarz dissects the current vogue for journalistic reports from revolutionary fronts, packaged for home consumption. At the opposite extreme from this latter sub-genre of travel writing, which threatens to reduce political analysis to tourism, there is an emerging style of critical writing which takes as its starting point a very different experience of the movement of people - that of enforced displacement or diaspora. Such writing questions the values and traditions of metropolitan intellectualism which most 'travel writing' is based upon. Kobena Mercer's article in this issue is a contribution of this kind of reorientation.

In his essay, Said focuses not on the movement of people, but on the circulation of theory as such. Taking Lukacs's ideas as an example, he asks 'whether by virtue of having moved from one place and time to another an idea or a theory gains or loses in strength, and whether a theory in one historical

period and national culture becomes altogether different for another period or situation.' Today it would be interesting to ask this of a remarkably mobile body of theory - that associated with Bakhtin. Although effectively silenced in its original time and place, this has been taken up in a bewildering variety of ways: there's Bakhtin the anti-marxist Christian dissident, Bakhtin the marxist cultural materialist, Bakhtin the theorist of heterogeneity, Bakhtin the prophet of the anti-statist belly-laugh, Bakhtin the medievalist and Bakhtin the modernist. This pervasiveness - and perhaps also this malleability - is evident in the different take-up of his ideas in the articles here by Julia Kristeva and David Edgar.

Kristeva was, of course, a key figure in introducing Bakhtin into western academic discourse, and the celebration of *jouissance* and the semiotic chora in her early work echoes Bakhtin's ideas about the carnivalesque, the multiaccentuality of language and the centrifugal aspects of culture. Since then, Kristeva has herself moved on. She now writes more as a practising analyst than as a literary theorist. What remains from Bakhtin in her work on melancholy is a sense of the tension between centripetal and centrifugal forces not only in culture but also in the psyche. Displacing the old social/psychic binarism, she suggests a way of conceptualising the splitting of the subject which neither assumes nor produces 'the wreck of all identity'. Kristeva gives full weight to the abysmal and the abject, but also insists on the importance of authority, love and order. The continuing importance of her work for a politics of the subject is this recognition of *both* the precariousness of identity *and* its necessity.

David Edgar, a politically committed playwright and a self-confessed child of the '60s, sees in Bakhtin's notion of carnival a theatrical strategy which might recapture - or create - something of the joyous libertarian populism now associated with that time. His article thus reveals another means by which theory travels - not under its own name, but stowed away in the artefacts circulating within the cultural market-place.

Said welcomes the mobility of travelling theories because they can unblock intellectual and cultural formations. But, he cautions, they can also be a trap. They can become dogma: 'they are insidious in that their original provenance - their history of adversarial, oppositional derivation - dulls the critical consciousness, convincing it that a once insurgent theory is still insurgent, lively, responsive to history.' (The obverse danger is that they can become part of a theoretical travelogue, a dedicated following of intellectual fashion.)

So how can *New Formations* avoid dogmatism and stay responsive? We publish articles in a variety of registers. We invite cultural practitioners to think aloud about their work, and we publish pieces not because they toe a particular line but because they present challenging and provocative arguments. That is not to say that anything goes, but to recognize that new alternatives are produced in the negotiation between theoretical discourses and those of the cultural market-place, the state-funded arts sector, political parties and journalism. It is to this political space that *New Formations* addresses itself, rather than to 'politics' as shibboleth or gesture. Our business is neither a 'politics of the text' nor consolidating 'cultural studies' as an academic discipline. Rather, our aim is to keep theory *moving*.