Debates in the Digital Humanities

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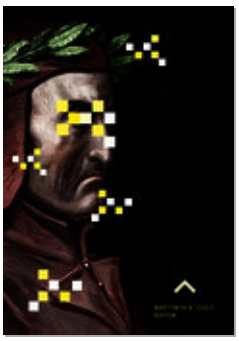

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Has Critical Theory Run Out of Time for Data-Driven Scholarship?

GARY HALL

Certainly, something that is particularly noticeable about many instances of this turn to data-driven scholarship—especially after decades when the humanities have been heavily marked by a variety of critical theories (Marxist, psychoanalytic, postcolonialist, post-Marxist)—is just how difficult they find it to understand computing and the digital as much *more* than tools, techniques, and resources and thus how naive and lacking in meaningful critique they often are (Liu; Higgen). Of course, this (at times explicit) repudiation of criticality could be viewed as part of what makes certain aspects of the digital humanities so intriguing at the moment. From this perspective, exponents of the computational turn are precisely *not* making what I have elsewhere characterized as the antipolitical gesture of conforming to accepted (and often moralistic) conceptions of politics that have been decided in advance, including those that see it only in terms of power, ideology, race, gender, class, sexuality, ecology, affect, and so forth (Hall, *Digitize*). Refusing to "go through the motions of a critical avant-garde," to borrow the words of Bruno Latour, they are responding to what is perceived as a fundamentally new cultural situation and the challenge it represents to our traditional methods of studying culture by avoiding such conventional gestures and experimenting with the development of fresh methods and approaches for the humanities instead.[1]

In a series of posts on his *Found History* blog, Tom Scheinfeldt, managing director at the Center for History and New Media at George Mason University, positions such scholarship very much in terms of a shift from a concern with theory and ideology to a concern with methodology:

> I believe . . . we are entering a new phase of scholarship that will be dominated not by ideas, but once again by organizing activities, both in terms of organizing knowledge and organizing ourselves and our work . . . as a digital historian, I traffic much less in new theories than in new methods. The new technology of

> the Internet has shifted the work of a rapidly growing number of scholars away from thinking big thoughts to forging new tools, methods, materials, techniques, and modes or work which will enable us to harness the still unwieldy, but obviously game-changing, information technologies now sitting on our desktops and in our pockets. (Scheinfeldt, "Sunset")

In this respect there may well be a degree of "relief in having escaped the culture wars of the 1980s"—for those in the United States especially—as a result of this move "into the space of methodological work" (Higgen) and what Scheinfeldt reportedly dubs "the post-theoretical age" (cited in Cohen, "Digital Keys"). The problem is, though, without such reflexive critical thinking and theories many of those whose work forms part of this computational turn find it difficult to articulate exactly what the point of what they are doing is, as Scheinfeldt readily acknowledges ("Where's the Beef?").

Witness one of the projects I mentioned earlier: the attempt by Dan Cohen and Fred Gibbs to text mine all the books published in English in the Victorian age (or at least those digitized by Google).[2] Among other things, this allows Cohen and Gibbs to show that use of the word "revolution" in book titles of the period spiked around "the French Revolution and the revolutions of 1848" (Cohen, "Searching"). But what argument is it that they are trying to make with this? How exactly is the number of times a word does or does not occur significant? What is it we are able to learn as a result of this use of computational power on their part that we didn't know already and couldn't have discovered without it (Scheinfeldt, "Where's the Beef")?

Elsewhere, in an explicit response to Cohen and Gibbs's project, Scheinfeldt suggests that the problem of theory, or the lack of it, may actually be a matter of scale and timing:

> It expects something of the scale of humanities scholarship which I'm not sure is true anymore: that a single scholar—nay, every scholar—working alone will, over the course of his or her lifetime . . . make a fundamental theoretical advance to the field.
>
> Increasingly, this expectation is something peculiar to the humanities. . . . it required the work of a generation of mathematicians and observational astronomers, gainfully employed, to enable the eventual "discovery" of Neptune . . . Since the scientific revolution, most theoretical advances play out over generations, not single careers. We don't expect all of our physics graduate students to make fundamental theoretical breakthroughs or claims about the nature of quantum mechanics, for example. There is just too much lab work to be done and data to analyzed for each person to be pointed at the end point. That work is valued for the incremental contribution to the generational research agenda that it is. (Scheinfeldt, "Response")

Yet notice how theory is again being marginalized in favour of an emphasis on STEM subjects and the adoption of expectations and approaches associated with mathematicians and astronomers in particular.

This is not to deny the importance of experimenting with the new kinds of knowledge, tools, methods, materials, and modes of working and thinking that digital media technologies create and make possible, including those drawn from computer science, in order to bring new forms of Foucauldian *dispositifs*, or what Bernard Stiegler calls *hypomnemata* (i.e., mnemonics, what Plato referred to as *pharmaka*, both poisons and cures), or what I am trying to think in terms of media gifts into play.[3] And I would potentially include in this process of experimentation techniques and methodologies drawn from computer science and other related fields such as information visualization, data mining, and so forth. Yes, of course, it is quite possible that as Daniel W. Stowell, director of the Papers of Abraham Lincoln project at the Illinois Historic Preservation Society puts it, in the future "people will use this data in ways we can't even imagine yet," both singularly and collaboratively (cited in Cohen, "Digital Keys"). Still, there is something intriguing about the way in which many defenders of the turn toward computational tools and methods in the humanities evoke a sense of time in relation to theory.

Take the argument—one I have heard put forward at a number of different events now—that critical and self-reflexive theoretical questions about the use of digital tools and data-led methodologies should be deferred for the time being, lest they have the effect of strangling at birth what could turn out to be a very different form of humanities research before it has had a chance to properly develop and take shape. Viewed in isolation, it can be difficult, if not impossible, to decide whether this particular form of "limitless" postponement (Deleuze, 5) is serving as an alibi for a naive and rather superficial form of scholarship (Meeks) or whether it is indeed acting as a responsible, political or ethical opening to the (heterogeneity and incalculability of the) future, including the future of the humanities. After all, the suggestion is that now is *not the right time* to be making any such decision or judgment, since we cannot *yet* know how humanists will *eventually* come to use these tools and data and thus what data-driven scholarship may or may not turn out to be capable of critically, politically, theoretically.

This argument would be more convincing as a responsible political or ethical call to leave the question of the use of digital tools and data-led methodologies in the humanities open if it were the only sense in which time was evoked in relation to theory in this context. Significantly, it is not. As we have seen, advocates for the computational turn do so in a number of other and often competing senses, too. These include the following:

1. That the time *of* theory is over, in the sense a particular historical period or moment has now ended (e.g., that of the culture wars of the 1980s)

2. That the time *for* theory is over, in the sense it is now the time for methodology
3. That the time to return to theory, or for theory to (re-)emerge in some new, unpredictable form that represents a fundamental breakthrough or advance, although possibly on its way, has not arrived yet and cannot necessarily be expected to do so for some time given that "most theoretical advances play out over generations" (Scheinfeldt, "Response")

All of this gives a very different inflection to the view of theoretical critique as being at best inappropriate and at worst harmful to data-driven scholarship. Even a brief glance at the history of theory's reception in the English-speaking world is sometimes enough to reveal that those who announce its time has not yet come, or is already over, that theory is in decline or even dead and that we now live in a posttheoretical world, are more often than not endeavoring to keep it at a temporal distance. Positioning their own work as being either pre- or posttheory in this way in effect gives them permission to continue with their preferred techniques and methodologies for studying culture relatively uncontested (rather than having to ask rigorous, critical and self-reflexive questions about their practices and their justifications for them). Placed in this wider context, far from helping to keep the question concerning the use of digital tools and data-led methodologies in the humanities open (or having anything particularly interesting to say about theory), the rejection of critical-theoretical ideas as untimely can be seen as both moralizing and conservative.

In saying this I am reiterating an argument initially made by Wendy Brown in the sphere of political theory. Yet can a similar case not be made with regard to the computational turn in the humanities to the effect that the "rebuff of critical theory as untimely provides the core matter for the affirmative case for it"?[4] Theory is vital from this point of view, not for conforming to accepted conceptions of political critique that see it primarily in terms of power, ideology, race, gender, class, sexuality, ecology, affect, and so forth or for sustaining conventional methods of studying culture that may no longer be appropriate to the networked nature of twenty-first century postindustrial society. Theory is vital "to contest the very sense of time invoked to declare critique untimely" (Brown, 4).

NOTES

This chapter originally appeared as "On the Limits of Openness V: There Are No Digital Humanities," *Media Gifts*, January 12, 2011. http://www.garyhall.info/journal/2011/1/27/on-the-limits-of-openness-vi-has-critical-theory-run-out-of.html.

1. This is one explanation as to why many exponents of the computational turn appear to display such little awareness of the research of "critical media scholars (like Matthew Fuller, Wendy Chun, McKenzie Wark, and many others) and hacker activists of the

past decade; research that has shown again and again how these very formalisms [i.e. 'the "quantitative" formalisms of databases and programming'] are 'qualitative,' i.e. designed by human groups and shaped by cultural, economical and political interests through and through" (Cramer). Liu encapsulates the situation as follows: "In the digital humanities, cultural criticism—in both its interpretive and advocacy modes—has been noticeably absent by comparison with the mainstream humanities or, even more strikingly, with 'new media studies' (populated as the latter is by net critics, tactical media critics, hacktivists, and so on). We digital humanists develop tools, data, metadata, and archives critically; and we have also developed critical positions on the nature of such resources (e.g., disputing whether computational methods are best used for truth-finding or, as Lisa Samuels and Jerome McGann put it, 'deformation'). But rarely do we extend the issues involved into the register of society, economics, politics, or culture in the vintage manner, for instance, of the Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility (CPSR). How the digital humanities advance, channel, or resist the great postindustrial, neoliberal, corporatist, and globalist flows of information-cum-capital, for instance, is a question rarely heard in the digital humanities associations, conferences, journals, and projects with which I am familiar. Not even the clichéd forms of such issues—e.g., 'the digital divide,' 'privacy,' 'copyright,' and so on—get much play."

2. See http://victorianbooks.org.

3. See http://garyhall.info.

4. Lest this aspect of my analysis appear somewhat unfair, I should stress that the ongoing discussion over how the digital humanities are to be defined and understood does feature a number of critics of the turn toward techniques and methodologies derived from computer science who have made a case for the continuing importance of the traditional, theoretically informed humanities. See, in their different ways, not just Higgen and Liu as referenced above but also Drucker and Fitzpatrick. For an analysis that draws attention to some of the elements of misrecognition that are in turn to be found in such a traditional, theoretically informed humanism, see my "On the Limits of Openness: Cultural Analytics and the Computational Turn in the Digital Humanities" (unpublished manuscript), especially the conclusion, and also Hall, "The Digital Humanities Beyond Computing: A Postscript."

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