Dear Colleagues,

Thank you so much for taking the time to engage with my work! I’m pleased to circulate a draft of what will represent the final chapter of a book I’m in the process of completing, provisionally titled “On Paradox: The Claims of Theory.” Since the material represents work-in-progress, I wanted to provide some background to the chapter as well as to outline the book’s main arguments.

First, let me offer a few paragraphs situating this chapter within the arc of the overall book, since I expect it to be the project’s final chapter. The book’s basic claim is that a particular relationship to “paradox” has been one hallmark of the traditions of criticism and theory. The basic etymology of the word *paradox* captures its autobiographical role for critical theorists, given the tendency to define theory as a disputing of orthodoxy and of common sense. In turn, I argue that to be a theorist is to subscribe to various “epistemologies of paradox,” and the book charts the contours of that intellectual formation. While I address the geneses and roots of such thinking, I also offer an intellectual history of its evolution during the institutionalization of theory and “theory era” within the Anglo-American academy. One of its arguments is that poststructuralism converted paradox from a diagnosis into a redemptive truth. In the process, I contend with two (often overlapping) responses to paradox. One has been to ontologize structural contradiction—or to write it into modernity’s anatomy and design. At once, many especially poststructuralist variants of theory venerate paradox (and its conceptual kin of indeterminacy, incalculability, irresolution, aporia, and so on) as what incubates an ethics of alterity and an antinomian justice without guarantees. Throughout, the book wrestles with certain limits of these modes of thought. Typically, the discovery of paradox not only occasions the theoretical adventure but represents its punch line and destination, with the effect that paradox comes to devour everything—or at least anything worthy of theorization.

The first five chapters of the book conduct a series of case studies that illumine the tenacity and reach of this “optics of paradox,” along with what it occludes. Chapter One focuses on the broad tendency to define modernity and its core developments (democracy, capitalism, rights, the subject) in terms of constitutive paradox. However, this logic serves a tangled function, as paradox represents a marker of civilizational advancement, a weapon for critiquing dominant histories, and a redemptive vision of left intellectual resistance—often all at once. Chapters Two and Three instead shift to examine theoretical debates about the construct of rights, which have since their 18th century legal codification been almost uniformly explained as having “only paradoxes to offer” (the title of a book by Joan Scott). Yet theorists...
have responded to these paradoxes in different ways. On the one hand, thinkers as diverse as Marx and Arendt and Agamben have objectivized those paradoxes of rights (foregrounding what I describe as a master paradox of exclusion) to see them as a fatal, in reasoning that contributes to a broad “anti-legalism” within leftist thought. On the other hand, Chapter Three considers how a redefinition of rights as foremost linguistic claims brokered their embrace by a series of poststructuralist thinkers (Le Fort, Derrida, Ranciere), and those efforts to theorize rights in fact precipitated larger intellectual shifts. Often focusing on the exact same paradoxes of rights deemed fatal by others, these and other thinkers converted exclusion into the locus of rights’ promise, folding them into a poetics of paradox broadly characteristic of poststructuralist thought.

Chapter Four adopts a wider gaze to examine the how this epistemology of paradox has shaped public discourses and debates. I focus on how the logic of paradox structures give such sites: trauma theory; defenses of the humanities; humanities pedagogy; disputes over the canon; and fights over the boundaries of freedom of expression. Shifting gears, the formative role of paradox within aesthetic theory is the topic of Chapter Five. Indeed, it is virtually impossible to find an account of the literary or poetic going back to Plato that does not identify paradox as art’s sine qua non. However, this chapter, like the others, ultimately raises hard questions about that conceptual hegemony of paradox, asking how it depletes our expectations for aesthetic experience and engagement. Finally, Chapter Five attempts to develop an alternative to the optics of paradox—one that confines paradox to a smaller realm of intellectual influence. That chapter follows.

I should state up front that this chapter has been extremely difficult to conceive and to write (In truth, it probably represents the most challenging writing I have ever undertaken!) I’ve therefore opted to precede it in the MS with a brief “Interlude” that self-consciously reflects on those challenges. I’m also sharing that material, as a prelude below (so please read the Interlude first). In brief, drafting the chapter has involved various dilemmas concerning both tone (i.e. should the chapter be a manifesto?) and content (how to sum up broad currents of thought within a single paragraph yet without alienating readers?). In a way, every sentence has felt burdened by the fifty-plus years of intellectual baggage that it tries to shirk. So I’m far from fully satisfied with this current draft, and I’ll be eager for your feedback. I plan to undertake a round of revisions geared at the very least to streamline and refine its arguments before submitting it for peer review. So your comments will make a real difference on the ultimate shape of the chapter.

Thank you again for taking the time to engage with my work! I’m looking forward to the conversation a great deal.

All my best,

Liz