Readings on Postmodernism and Identity

A selection of critical articles on post-modernism, identity politics, and related topics

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Chomsky on Postmodernism

Noam Chomsky

I've returned from travel-speaking, where I spend most of my life, and found a collection of messages extending the discussion about "theory" and "philosophy," a debate that I find rather curious. A few reactions -- though I concede, from the start, that I may simply not understand what is going on.

As far as I do think I understand it, the debate was initiated by the charge that I, Mike, and maybe others don't have "theories" and therefore fail to give any explanation of why things are proceeding as they do. We must turn to "theory" and "philosophy" and "theoretical constructs" and the like to remedy this deficiency in our efforts to understand and address what is happening in the world. I won't speak for Mike. My response so far has pretty much been to reiterate something I wrote 35 years ago, long before "postmodernism" had erupted in the literary intellectual culture: "if there is a body of theory, well tested and verified, that applies to the conduct of foreign affairs or the resolution of domestic or international conflict, its existence has been kept a well-guarded secret," despite much "pseudo-scientific posturing."

To my knowledge, the statement was accurate 35 years ago, and remains so; furthermore, it extends to the study of human affairs generally, and applies in spades to what has been produced since that time. What has changed in the interim, to my knowledge, is a huge explosion of self- and mutual-admiration among those who propound what they call "theory" and "philosophy," but little that I can detect beyond "pseudo-scientific posturing." That little is, as I wrote, sometimes quite interesting, but lacks consequences for the real world problems that occupy my time and energies (Rawls's important work is the case I mentioned, in response to specific inquiry).

The latter fact has been noticed. One fine philosopher and social theorist (also activist), Alan Graubard, wrote an interesting review years ago of Robert Nozick's "libertarian" response to Rawls, and of the reactions to it. He pointed out that reactions were very enthusiastic. Reviewer after reviewer extolled the power of the arguments, etc., but no one accepted any of the real-world conclusions (unless they had previously reached them). That's correct, as were his observations on what it means.

The proponents of "theory" and "philosophy" have a very easy task if they want to make their case. Simply make known to me what was and remains a "secret" to me: I'll be happy to look. I've asked many times before, and still await an answer, which should be easy to provide: simply give some examples of "a body of theory, well tested and verified, that applies to" the kinds of problems and issues that Mike, I, and many others (in fact, most of the world's population, I think, outside of narrow and remarkably self-contained intellectual circles) are or should be concerned with: the problems and issues we speak and write about, for example,

and others like them. To put it differently, show that the principles of the "theory" or "philosophy" that we are told to study and apply lead by valid argument to conclusions that we and others had not already reached on other (and better) grounds; these "others" include people lacking formal education, who typically seem to have no problem reaching these conclusions through mutual interactions that avoid the "theoretical" obscurities entirely, or often on their own.

Again, those are simple requests. I've made them before, and remain in my state of ignorance. I also draw certain conclusions from the fact.

As for the "deconstruction" that is carried out (also mentioned in the debate), I can't comment, because most of it seems to me gibberish. But if this is just another sign of my incapacity to recognize profundities, the course to follow is clear: just restate the results to me in plain words that I can understand, and show why they are different from, or better than, what others had been doing long before and have continued to do since without three-syllable words, incoherent sentences, inflated rhetoric that (to me, at least) is largely meaningless, etc. That will cure my deficiencies --- of course, if they are curable; maybe they aren't, a possibility to which I'll return.

These are very easy requests to fulfill, if there is any basis to the claims put forth with such fervor and indignation. But instead of trying to provide an answer to this simple requests, the response is cries of anger: to raise these questions shows "elitism," "anti-intellectualism," and other crimes --- though apparently it is not "elitist" to stay within the self- and mutual-admiration societies of intellectuals who talk only to one another and (to my knowledge) don't enter into the kind of world in which I'd prefer to live. As for that world, I can reel off my speaking and writing schedule to illustrate what I mean, though I presume that most people in this discussion know, or can easily find out; and somehow I never find the "theoreticians" there, nor do I go to their conferences and parties. In short, we seem to inhabit quite different worlds, and I find it hard to see why mine is "elitist," not theirs. The opposite seems to be transparently the case, though I won't amplify.

To add another facet, I am absolutely deluged with requests to speak and can't possibly accept a fraction of the invitations I'd like to, so I suggest other people. But oddly, I never suggest those who propound "theories" and "philosophy," nor do I come across them, or for that matter rarely even their names, in my own (fairly extensive) experience with popular and activist groups and organizations, general community, college, church, union, etc., audiences here and abroad, third world women, refugees, etc.; I can easily give examples. Why, I wonder.

The whole debate, then, is an odd one. On one side, angry charges and denunciations, on the other, the request for some evidence and argument to support them, to which the response is more angry charges --- but, strikingly, no evidence or argument. Again, one is led to ask why.

It's entirely possible that I'm simply missing something, or that I just lack the intellectual capacity to understand the profundities that have been unearthed in the past 20 years or so by Paris intellectuals and their followers. I'm perfectly open-minded about it, and have been for years, when similar charges have been made --

but without any answer to my questions. Again, they are simple and should be easy to answer, if there is an answer: if I'm missing something, then show me what it is, in terms I can understand. Of course, if it's all beyond my comprehension, which is possible, then I'm just a lost cause, and will be compelled to keep to things I do seem to be able to understand, and keep to association with the kinds of people who also seem to be interested in them and seem to understand them (which I'm perfectly happy to do, having no interest, now or ever, in the sectors of the intellectual culture that engage in these things, but apparently little else).

Since no one has succeeded in showing me what I'm missing, we're left with the second option: I'm just incapable of understanding. I'm certainly willing to grant that it may be true, though I'm afraid I'll have to remain suspicious, for what seem good reasons. There are lots of things I don't understand -- say, the latest debates over whether neutrinos have mass or the way that Fermat's last theorem was (apparently) proven recently. But from 50 years in this game, I have learned two things: (1) I can ask friends who work in these areas to explain it to me at a level that I can understand, and they can do so, without particular difficulty; (2) if I'm interested, I can proceed to learn more so that I will come to understand it. Now Derrida, Lacan, Lyotard, Kristeva, etc. --- even Foucault, whom I knew and liked, and who was somewhat different from the rest --- write things that I also don't understand, but (1) and (2) don't hold: no one who says they do understand can explain it to me and I haven't a clue as to how to proceed to overcome my failures. That leaves one of two possibilities: (a) some new advance in intellectual life has been made, perhaps some sudden genetic mutation, which has created a form of "theory" that is beyond quantum theory, topology, etc., in depth and profundity; or (b) ... I won't spell it out.

Again, I've lived for 50 years in these worlds, have done a fair amount of work of my own in fields called "philosophy" and "science," as well as intellectual history, and have a fair amount of personal acquaintance with the intellectual culture in the sciences, humanities, social sciences, and the arts. That has left me with my own conclusions about intellectual life, which I won't spell out. But for others, I would simply suggest that you ask those who tell you about the wonders of "theory" and "philosophy" to justify their claims --- to do what people in physics, math, biology, linguistics, and other fields are happy to do when someone asks them, seriously, what are the principles of their theories, on what evidence are they based, what do they explain that wasn't already obvious, etc. These are fair requests for anyone to make. If they can't be met, then I'd suggest recourse to Hume's advice in similar circumstances: to the flames.

Specific comment. Phetland asked who I'm referring to when I speak of "Paris school" and "postmodernist cults": the above is a sample.

He then asks, reasonably, why I am "dismissive" of it. Take, say, Derrida. Let me begin by saying that I dislike making the kind of comments that follow without providing evidence, but I doubt that participants want a close analysis of de Saussure, say, in this forum, and I know that I'm not going to undertake it. I wouldn't say this if I hadn't been explicitly asked for my opinion --- and if asked to back it up, I'm going to respond that I don't think it merits the time to do so.

So take Derrida, one of the grand old men. I thought I ought to at least be able to understand his *Grammatology,* so tried to read it. I could make out some of it, for example, the critical analysis of classical texts that I knew very well and had written about years before. I found the scholarship appalling, based on pathetic misreading; and the argument, such as it was, failed to come close to the kinds of standards I've been familiar with since virtually childhood. Well, maybe I missed something: could be, but suspicions remain, as noted. Again, sorry to make unsupported comments, but I was asked, and therefore am answering.

Some of the people in these cults (which is what they look like to me) I've met: Foucault (we even have a several-hour discussion, which is in print, and spent quite a few hours in very pleasant conversation, on real issues, and using language that was perfectly comprehensible --- he speaking French, me English); Lacan (who I met several times and considered an amusing and perfectly self-conscious charlatan, though his earlier work, pre-cult, was sensible and I've discussed it in print); Kristeva (who I met only briefly during the period when she was a fervent Maoist); and others. Many of them I haven't met, because I am very remote from these circles, by choice, preferring quite different and far broader ones --- the kinds where I give talks, have interviews, take part in activities, write dozens of long letters every week, etc. I've dipped into what they write out of curiosity, but not very far, for reasons already mentioned: what I find is extremely pretentious, but on examination, a lot of it is simply illiterate, based on extraordinary misreading of texts that I know well (sometimes, that I have written), argument that is appalling in its casual lack of elementary self-criticism, lots of statements that are trivial (though dressed up in complicated verbiage) or false; and a good deal of plain gibberish. When I proceed as I do in other areas where I do not understand, I run into the problems mentioned in connection with (1) and (2) above. So that's who I'm referring to, and why I don't proceed very far. I can list a lot more names if it's not obvious.

For those interested in a literary depiction that reflects pretty much the same perceptions (but from the inside), I'd suggest David Lodge. Pretty much on target, as far as I can judge.

Phetland also found it "particularly puzzling" that I am so "curtly dismissive" of these intellectual circles while I spend a lot of time "exposing the posturing and obfuscation of the *New York Times.*" So "why not give these guys the same treatment." Fair question. There are also simple answers. What appears in the work I do address (NYT, journals of opinion, much of scholarship, etc.) is simply written in intelligible prose and has a great impact on the world, establishing the doctrinal framework within which thought and expression are supposed to be contained, and largely are, in successful doctrinal systems such as ours. That has a huge impact on what happens to suffering people throughout the world, the ones who concern me, as distinct from those who live in the world that Lodge depicts (accurately, I think). So this work should be dealt with seriously, at least if one cares about ordinary people and their problems. The work to which Phetland refers has none of these characteristics, as far as I'm aware. It certainly has none of the impact, since it is addressed only to other intellectuals in the same circles. Furthermore, there is no

effort that I am aware of to make it intelligible to the great mass of the population (say, to the people I'm constantly speaking to, meeting with, and writing letters to, and have in mind when I write, and who seem to understand what I say without any particular difficulty, though they generally seem to have the same cognitive disability I do when facing the postmodern cults). And I'm also aware of no effort to show how it applies to anything in the world in the sense I mentioned earlier: grounding conclusions that weren't already obvious. Since I don't happen to be much interested in the ways that intellectuals inflate their reputations, gain privilege and prestige, and disengage themselves from actual participation in popular struggle, I don't spend any time on it.

Phetland suggests starting with Foucault --- who, as I've written repeatedly, is somewhat apart from the others, for two reasons: I find at least some of what he writes intelligible, though generally not very interesting; second, he was not personally disengaged and did not restrict himself to interactions with others within the same highly privileged elite circles. Phetland then does exactly what I requested: he gives some illustrations of why he thinks Foucault's work is important. That's exactly the right way to proceed, and I think it helps understand why I take such a "dismissive" attitude towards all of this --- in fact, pay no attention to it.

What Phetland describes, accurately I'm sure, seems to me unimportant, because everyone always knew it --- apart from details of social and intellectual history, and about these, I'd suggest caution: some of these are areas I happen to have worked on fairly extensively myself, and I know that Foucault's scholarship is just not trustworthy here, so I don't trust it, without independent investigation, in areas that I don't know --- this comes up a bit in the discussion from 1972 that is in print. I think there is much better scholarship on the 17th and 18th century, and I keep to that, and my own research. But let's put aside the other historical work, and turn to the "theoretical constructs" and the explanations: that there has been "a great change from harsh mechanisms of repression to more subtle mechanisms by which people come to do" what the powerful want, even enthusiastically. That's true enough, in fact, utter truism. If that's a "theory," then all the criticisms of me are wrong: I have a "theory" too, since I've been saying exactly that for years, and also giving the reasons and historical background, but without describing it as a theory (because it merits no such term), and without obfuscatory rhetoric (because it's so simple-minded), and without claiming that it is new (because it's a truism). It's been fully recognized for a long time that as the power to control and coerce has declined, it's more necessary to resort to what practitioners in the PR industry early in this century -- who understood all of this well -- called "controlling the public mind." The reasons, as observed by Hume in the 18th century, are that "the implicit submission with which men resign their own sentiments and passions to those of their rulers" relies ultimately on control of opinion and attitudes. Why these truisms should suddenly become "a theory" or "philosophy," others will have to explain; Hume would have laughed.

Some of Foucault's particular examples (say, about 18th century techniques of punishment) look interesting, and worth investigating as to their accuracy. But the "theory" is merely an extremely complex and inflated restatement of what many others have put very simply, and without any pretense that anything deep is

involved. There's nothing in what Phetland describes that I haven't been writing about myself for 35 years, also giving plenty of documentation to show that it was always obvious, and indeed hardly departs from truism. What's interesting about these trivialities is not the principle, which is transparent, but the demonstration of how it works itself out in specific detail to cases that are important to people: like intervention and aggression, exploitation and terror, "free market" scams, and so on. That I don't find in Foucault, though I find plenty of it by people who seem to be able to write sentences I can understand and who aren't placed in the intellectual firmament as "theoreticians."

To make myself clear, Phetland is doing exactly the right thing: presenting what he sees as "important insights and theoretical constructs" that he finds in Foucault. My problem is that the "insights" seem to me familiar and there are no "theoretical constructs," except in that simple and familiar ideas have been dressed up in complicated and pretentious rhetoric. Phetland asks whether I think this is "wrong, useless, or posturing." No. The historical parts look interesting sometimes, though they have to be treated with caution and independent verification is even more worth undertaking than it usually is. The parts that restate what has long been obvious and put in much simpler terms are not "useless," but indeed useful, which is why I and others have always made the very same points. As to "posturing," a lot of it is that, in my opinion, though I don't particularly blame Foucault for it: it's such a deeply rooted part of the corrupt intellectual culture of Paris that he fell into it pretty naturally, though to his credit, he distanced himself from it. As for the "corruption" of this culture particularly since World War II, that's another topic, which I've discussed elsewhere and won't go into here. Frankly, I don't see why people in this forum should be much interested, just as I am not. There are more important things to do, in my opinion, than to inquire into the traits of elite intellectuals engaged in various careerist and other pursuits in their narrow and (to me, at least) pretty uninteresting circles. That's a broad brush, and I stress again that it is unfair to make such comments without proving them: but I've been asked, and have answered the only specific point that I find raised. When asked about my general opinion, I can only give it, or if something more specific is posed, address that. I'm not going to undertake an essay on topics that don't interest me.

Unless someone can answer the simple questions that immediately arise in the mind of any reasonable person when claims about "theory" and "philosophy" are raised, I'll keep to work that seems to me sensible and enlightening, and to people who are interested in understanding and changing the world.

Johnb made the point that "plain language is not enough when the frame of reference is not available to the listener"; correct and important. But the right reaction is not to resort to obscure and needlessly complex verbiage and posturing about non-existent "theories." Rather, it is to ask the listener to question the frame of reference that he/she is accepting, and to suggest alternatives that might be considered, all in plain language. I've never found that a problem when I speak to people lacking much or sometimes any formal education, though it's true that it tends to become harder as you move up the educational ladder, so that indoctrination is much deeper, and the self-selection for obedience that is a good part of elite education has taken its toll. Johnb says that outside of circles like this

forum, "to the rest of the country, he's incomprehensible" ("he" being me). That's absolutely counter to my rather ample experience, with all sorts of audiences. Rather, my experience is what I just described. The incomprehensibility roughly corresponds to the educational level. Take, say, talk radio. I'm on a fair amount, and it's usually pretty easy to guess from accents, etc., what kind of audience it is. I've repeatedly found that when the audience is mostly poor and less educated, I can skip lots of the background and "frame of reference" issues because it's already obvious and taken for granted by everyone, and can proceed to matters that occupy all of us. With more educated audiences, that's much harder; it's necessary to disentangle lots of ideological constructions.

It's certainly true that lots of people can't read the books I write. That's not because the ideas or language are complicated --- we have no problems in informal discussion on exactly the same points, and even in the same words. The reasons are different, maybe partly the fault of my writing style, partly the result of the need (which I feel, at least) to present pretty heavy documentation, which makes it tough reading. For these reasons, a number of people have taken pretty much the same material, often the very same words, and put them in pamphlet form and the like. No one seems to have much problem --- though again, reviewers in the *Times Literary Supplement* or professional academic journals don't have a clue as to what it's about, quite commonly; sometimes it's pretty comical.

A final point, something I've written about elsewhere (e.g., in a discussion in Z papers, and the last chapter of *Year 501*). There has been a striking change in the behavior of the intellectual class in recent years. The left intellectuals who 60 years ago would have been teaching in working class schools, writing books like "mathematics for the millions" (which made mathematics intelligible to millions of people), participating in and speaking for popular organizations, etc., are now largely disengaged from such activities, and although quick to tell us that they are far more radical than thou, are not to be found, it seems, when there is such an obvious and growing need and even explicit request for the work they could do out there in the world of people with live problems and concerns. That's not a small problem. This country, right now, is in a very strange and ominous state. People are frightened, angry, disillusioned, skeptical, confused. That's an organizer's dream, as I once heard Mike say. It's also fertile ground for demagogues and fanatics, who can (and in fact already do) rally substantial popular support with messages that are not unfamiliar from their predecessors in somewhat similar circumstances. We know where it has led in the past; it could again. There's a huge gap that once was at least partially filled by left intellectuals willing to engage with the general public and their problems. It has ominous implications, in my opinion.

End of Reply, and (to be frank) of my personal interest in the matter, unless the obvious questions are answered.

(Noam Chomsky, 1995 - http://cscs.umich.edu/~crshalizi/chomsky-on-postmodernism.html)

Rationality/Science

Noam Chomsky

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This discussion involves people with a large range of shared aspirations and commitments; in some cases at least, friends who have worked and struggled together for many years. I hope, then, that I can be quite frank. And personal, since to be honest, I don't see much of independent substance to discuss.

I don't want to mislead, and therefore should say, at once, that I am not all sure that I am taking part in the discussion. I think I understand some of what is said in the six papers, and agree with much of it. What I don't understand is the topic: the legitimacy of "rationality," "science," and "logic" (perhaps modified by "Western")--call the amalgam "rational inquiry," for brevity. I read the papers hoping for some enlightenment on the matter, but, to quote one contributor, "my eyes glaze over and thanks, but I just don't want to participate." When Mike Albert asked me to comment on papers advocating that we abandon or transcend rational inquiry, I refused, and probably would have been wise to keep to that decision. After a good deal of arm-twisting, I will make a few comments, but, frankly, I do not really grasp what the issue is supposed to be.

Many interesting questions have been raised about rational inquiry. There are problems about justification of belief, the status of mathematical truth and of theoretical entities, the use to which rational inquiry is put under particular social and cultural conditions and the way such conditions influence its course, and so on. These, however, are not the kinds of topics we are to address; rather, something about the legitimacy of the entire enterprise. That I find perplexing, for several reasons.

First, to take part in a discussion, one must understand the ground rules. In this case, I don't. In particular, I don't know the answers to such elementary questions as these: Are conclusions to be consistent with premises (maybe even follow from them)? Do facts matter? Or can we string together thoughts as we like, calling it an "argument," and make facts up as we please, taking one story to be as good as another? There are certain familiar ground rules: those of rational inquiry. They are by no means entirely clear, and there have been interesting efforts to criticize and clarify them; but we have enough of a grasp to proceed over a broad range. What seems to be under discussion here is whether we should abide by these ground rules at all (trying to improve them as we proceed). If the answer is that we are to abide by them, then the discussion is over: we've implicitly accepted the legitimacy of rational inquiry. If they are to be abandoned, then we cannot proceed until we learn what replaces the commitment to consistency, responsibility to fact, and other outdated notions. Short of some instruction on this matter, we are reduced to primal screams. I see no hint in the papers here of any new procedures or ideas to replace the old, and therefore remain perplexed.

A second problem has to do with the allusions to "science," "rationality," etc., throughout these papers. These targets are sharply criticized, but they are not clearly identified. True, they are assigned certain properties. But these are either irrelevant to the issue raised or unrecognizable to me; in many cases, the properties attributed to rational inquiry are antithetic to it, at least as I have always understood this endeavor.

Perhaps my failure to recognize what is called here "science," etc., reflects personal limitations. That could well be, but I wonder. For some 40 years, I've been actively engaged in what I, and others, regard as rational inquiry (science, mathematics); for almost all of those years, I've been at the very heart of the beast, at MIT. When I attend seminars, read technical papers in my own or other fields, and work with students and colleagues, I have no problem in recognizing what is before me as rational inquiry. In contrast, the descriptions presented here scarcely resemble anything in my experience in these areas, or understanding of them. So, there is a second problem.

With regard to the first problem, I'm afraid I see only one way to proceed: by assuming the legitimacy of rational inquiry. Suppose that such properties as consistency and responsibility to fact are old-fashioned misconceptions, to be replaced by something different--something to be grasped, perhaps, by intuition that I seem to lack. Then I can only confess my inadequacies, and inform the reader in advance of the irrelevance of what follows. I recognize that by accepting the legitimacy of rational inquiry and its canons, I am begging the question; the discussion is over before it starts. That is unfair, no doubt, but the alternative escapes me.

With regard to the second problem, since what is called "science," etc., is largely unfamiliar to me, let me replace it by "X," and see if I understand the argument against X. Let's consider several kinds of properties attributed to X, then turning to the proposals for a new direction; quotes below are from the papers criticizing X.

First category. X is dominated by "the white male gender." It is "limited by cultural, racial and gender biases," and "establishes and perpetuates social organization [with] hidden political, social and economic purposes." "The majority in the South has waited for the last four hundred years for compassionate humane uses of X," which is "outside and above the democratic process." X is "thoroughly embedded in capitalist colonialism," and doesn't "end racism or disrupt the patriarchy." X has been invoked by Soviet commissars to bring people to "embrace regimentation, murderous collectivization, and worse"; though no one mentions it, X has been used by Nazi ideologists for the same ends. X's dominance "has gone unchallenged." It has been "used to create new forms of control mediated through political and economic power." Ludicrous claims about X have been made by "state systems" which "used X for astoundingly destructive purposes...to create new forms of control mediated through political and economic power as it emerged in each system."

Conclusion: there is "something inherently wrong" with X. We must reject or transcend it, replacing it by something else; and we must instruct poor and suffering people to do so likewise. It follows that we must abandon literacy and the arts, which surely satisfy the conditions on X as well as science. More generally, we must take a vow of silence and induce the world's victims to do so likewise since language and its use typically have all these properties, facts too well-known to discuss.

Even more obviously, the crafts and technology should be utterly abolished. It is surprising that several of these critiques appear to be lauding the "practical logical thinking" of "technologists" who concentrate on "the mechanics of things," the "T-knowledge" that is "embedded in practice" and rooted in "experience"; that is, the kind of thinking and practice which, notoriously, have been used for millenia to construct tools of destruction and oppression, under the control of the white males who dominate them (I say "appear to be," because the intent is not entirely clear). The inconsistency is startling, though admittedly, if consistency is to be abandoned or transcended, there is no problem.

Plainly, what I've reviewed can't be the argument; these cannot be the properties of rational inquiry that lead us to abandon (or transcend) it. So let us turn to a second category of properties attributed to X.

X is "E-knowledge," "obtained by logical deduction from firmly established first principles." The statements in X must be "provable"; X demands "absolute proofs." The "most distinctive component of Western E-knowledge" may be its "elaborate procedures for arriving at acceptable first principles." These are among the few attempts here to define or identify the villain.

Furthermore, X "claims to a monopoly of knowledge." It thus denies, say, that I know how to tie my shoes, or know that the sky is dark at night or that walking in the woods is enjoyable, or know the names of my children and something about their concerns, etc.; all such aspects of my (intuitive) knowledge are far beyond what can be "obtained by logical deduction from firmly established first principles," indeed well beyond the reach of rational inquiry now and perhaps ever, and is therefore mere "superstition, belief, prejudice," according to advocates of X. Or if not denying such knowledge outright, X "marginalizes and denigrates" it. X postulates dogmatically that "a predictable end point can be known in advance as an expression of X-achieved truth," and insists upon "grounding values in [this] objective truth." It denies the "provisional and subjective foundations" of agreement in human life and action, and considers itself "the ultimate organizing principle and source of legitimacy in the modern society," a doctrine to which X assigns "axiomatic status." X is "arrogant" and "absolutist." What doesn't fall "within the terms of its hegemony...--anger, desire, pleasure, and pain, for example--becomes a site for disciplinary action." The varieties of X are presented as "charms to get us through the dark of a complex world," providing a "resting place" that offers a "sure way of `knowing' the world or one's position in it." The practitioner of X "screens out feeling, recreating the Other as object to be manipulated," a procedure "made easier because the subjective is described as irrelevant or un-X." "To feel was to be

anti-X." "By mid twentieth century the phrase `it works' came to be enough for X-ists," who no longer care "why it worked," and lost interest in "what its implications" are. And so on.

I quite agree that X should be consigned to the flames. But what that has to do with our topic escapes me, given that these attributions scarcely rise to the level of a caricature of rational inquiry (science, etc.), at least as I'm familiar with it.

Take the notion of "E-knowledge," the sole definition of science presented here. Not even set theory (hence conventional mathematics) satisfies the definition offered. Nothing in the sciences even resembles it. As for "provability," or "absolute proofs," the notions are foreign to the natural sciences. They appear in the study of abstract models, which are part of pure mathematics until they are applied in the empirical sciences, at which point we no longer have "proof." If "elaborate procedures," or any general procedures, exist "for arriving at acceptable first principles," they have been kept a dark mystery.

Science is tentative, exploratory, questioning, largely learned by doing. One of the world's leading physicists was famous for opening his introductory classes by saying that it doesn't matter what we cover, but what we discover, maybe something that will challenge prevailing beliefs if we are fortunate. More advanced work is to a large extent a common enterprise in which students are expected to come up with new ideas, to question and often undermine what they read and are taught, and to somehow pick up, by experience and cooperative inquiry, the trick (which no one begins to comprehend) of discerning important problems and possible solutions to them. Furthermore, even in the simplest cases, proposed solutions (theories, large or small) "outrun empiricism," if by "empiricism" we mean what can be derived from experience by some procedure; one hardly has to move to Einstein to exhibit that universal trait of rational inquiry.

As for the cited properties of X, they do hold of some aspects of human thought and action: elements of organized religion, areas of the humanities and "social sciences" where understanding and insight are thin and it is therefore easier to get away with dogmatism and falsification, perhaps others. But the sciences, at least as I am familiar with them, are as remote from these descriptions as anything in human life. It is not that scientists are inherently more honest, open, or questioning. It is simply that nature and logic impose a harsh discipline: in many domains, one can spin fanciful tales with impunity or keep to the most boring clerical work (sometimes called "scholarship"); in the sciences, your tales will be refuted and you will be left behind by students who want to understand something about the world, not satisfied to let such matters be "someone else's concern." Furthermore, all of this seems to be the merest truism.

Other properties are attributed to X, including some that are presumably intended as caricature: e.g., that practitioners of X claim "that seventeenth-century Europe answered all the basic questions of humankind for all times to come..." I've tried to select a fair sample, and apologize if I've failed. As far as I can see, the properties assigned to rational inquiry by the critics fall into two categories. Some hold of

human endeavor rather generally and are thus irrelevant to the issue (unless we mean to abandon language, the arts, etc., as well); they clearly reflect the social and cultural conditions that lead to the outcome that is properly deplored. Others do not hold of rational inquiry, indeed are flatly rejected by it; where detected, they would elicit internal critique.

Several writers appear to regard Leninist-Stalinist tyranny as an embodiment of science and rationality. Thus "the belief in a universal narrative grounded in truth has been undermined by the collapse of political systems that were supposed to [have] produced the New Socialist Man and the New Postcolonial Man." And the "state systems" that "used positive rationality for astoundingly destructive purposes" were guided by "socialist and capitalist ideologies"--a reference, it appears, to radically anti-socialist (Leninist) and anti-capitalist (state-capitalist) ideologies. Since "scientific and technological progress were the watchword of socialist and capitalist ideologies," we see that their error and perversity is deep, and we must abandon them, along with any concern for freedom, justice, human rights, democracy, and other "watchwords" of the secular priesthood who have perverted Enlightenment ideals in the interests of the masters.

Some of the commentary is more familiar to me. One contributor calls for "plural involvement and clear integration in which everyone sits at the table sharing a common consciousness," inspired by "a moral concept which is linked to social trust and affection in which people tell what they think they see and do and allow the basic data and conclusions to be cross examined by peers and non-peers alike"-- not a bad description of many seminars and working groups that I've been fortunate enough to be part of over the years. In these, furthermore, it is taken for granted that "knowledge is produced, not found, fought for--not given," a sentiment that will be applauded by anyone who has been engaged in the struggle to understand hard questions, as much as to the activists to whom it is addressed.

There is also at least an element of truth in the statement that the natural sciences are "disembedded from the body, from metaphorical thought, from ethical thought and from the world"--to their credit. Though rational inquiry is rife with metaphor and (uncontroversially) embedded in the world, its intent is to understand, not to construct doctrine that accords with some ethical or other preferences, or that is confused by metaphor. Though scientists are human, and cannot get out of their skins, they certainly, if honest, try to overcome the distortions imposed by "body" (in particular, human cognitive structures, with their specific properties) as much as possible. Surface appearances and "natural categories," however central to human life, can mislead, again uncontroversially; we "see" the sun set and the moon illusion, but we have learned that there is more to it than that.

It is also true that "Reason separates the `real' or knowable...and the `not real'," or at least tries to (without identifying "real" with "knowable")--again, to its credit. At least, I know that I try to make this distinction, whether studying questions that are hard, like the origins of human knowledge, or relatively easy, like the sources and character of U.S. foreign policy. In the latter case, for example, I would try, and urge others to try, to separate the real operative factors from the various tales that

are spun in the interests of power and privilege. If that is a fault, I plead guilty, and will compound my guilt by urging others to err in the same way.

Keeping to the personal level, I have spent a lot of my life working on questions such as these, using the only methods I know of--those condemned here as "science," "rationality," "logic," and so on. I therefore read the papers with some hope that they would help me "transcend" these limitations, or perhaps suggest an entirely different course. I'm afraid I was disappointed. Admittedly, that may be my own limitation. Quite regularly, "my eyes glaze over" when I read polysyllabic discourse on the themes of poststructuralism and postmodernism; what I understand is largely truism or error, but that is only a fraction of the total word count. True, there are lots of other things I don't understand: the articles in the current issues of math and physics journals, for example. But there is a difference. In the latter case, I know how to get to understand them, and have done so, in cases of particular interest to me; and I also know that people in these fields can explain the contents to me at my level, so that I can gain what (partial) understanding I may want. In contrast, no one seems to be able to explain to me why the latest post-this-and-that is (for the most part) other than truism, error, or gibberish, and I do not know how to proceed. Perhaps the explanation lies in some personal inadequacy, like tone-deafness. Or there may be other reasons. The question is not strictly relevant here, and I won't pursue it.

Continuing with my personal quest for help in dealing with problems to which I have devoted a large part of my life, I read here that I should recognize that "there are limits to what we know" (something I've been arguing, in accord with an ancient rationalist tradition, for many years). I should advance beyond "panopticized rationality" (which I might happily do, if I knew what it was), and should not be "transferring God into knowable nature" (thanks). Since "it is now obvious" that its "very narrow and surface idea of rationality and rationalism" has undermined "the canon of Western thought," I should adopt "a new notation system which laid out moral and historical propositions" in a "rationality [that is] deepened" (thanks again). I should keep to "rebuttable axioms," which means, I take it, hypotheses that are taken to be open to question--the practice adopted without a second thought in all scientific work, unless the intent is that I should drop Modus Ponens and the axioms of arithmetic; apparently so, since I am also to abandon "absolutism or absolute proofs," which are unknown in science but, admittedly, sometimes assumed with regard to the most elementary parts of logic and arithmetic (a matter also subject to much internal controversy in foundational inquiries).

I should also follow the lead of those who "assert that there is a common consciousness of all thought and matter," from human to "vegetable or mineral," a proposal that should impinge directly on my own attempts for many years to understand what Hume called "the secret springs and origins, by which the human mind is actuated in its operations"--or might, if I had the slightest idea what it means. I am also enjoined to reject the idea that "numbers are outside of human history" and to regard Goedel's incompleteness theorem as "a situation of inability" of the 20th century, which to my old-fashioned ear, sounds like saying that the

irrationality of the square root of two--a disturbing discovery at the time--was "a situation of inability" of classical Greece. How human history or the way rationality "is presently defined" impinge on these truths (or so I thought them to be), I again fail to see.

I should regard "Truth" not "as an essence" but "as a social heuristic," one "predicated on intersubjective trust and story telling whether through narrative or numbers and signs." I should recognize that "scientific endeavor is also in the world of story and myth creation," no better or worse than other "stories and myths"; modern physics may "have more funding and better PR" than astrology, but is otherwise on a par. That suggestion does in fact help solve my problems. If I can just tell stories about the questions that I've been struggling with for many years, life will indeed be easier; the proposal "has all the advantages of theft over honest toil," as Bertrand Russell once said in a similar connection.

I should also "favor particular directions in scientific and social inquiry because of their likely positive social outcomes, "thus joining the overwhelming mass of scientists and engineers--though we commonly differ on what are "positive social outcomes," and no hints are given here as to how that issue is to be resolved. The implication also seems to be that we should abandon "theories or experiments" favored "because of their supposed beauty and elegance," which amounts to saying that we should abandon the effort to understand the mysteries of the world; and by the same logic, presumably, should no longer be deluded by literature, music, and the visual arts.

I'm afraid I didn't learn much from these injunctions. And it is hard for me to see how friends and colleagues in the "non white world" will learn more from the advice given by "a handful of scientists" who inform then that they should not "move on the tracks of western science and technology," but should prefer other "stories" and "myths"--which ones, we are not told, though astrology is mentioned. They'll find that advice a great help with their problems, and those of the "non white world" generally. I confess that my personal sympathies lie with the volunteers of Tecnica.

In fact, the entire idea of "white male science" reminds me, I'm afraid, of "Jewish physics." Perhaps it is another inadequacy of mine, but when I read a scientific paper, I can't tell whether the author is white or is male. The same is true of discussion of work in class, the office, or somewhere else. I rather doubt that the non-white, non-male students, friends, and colleagues with whom I work would be much impressed with the doctrine that their thinking and understanding differ from "white male science" because of their "culture or gender and race." I suspect that "surprise" would not be quite the proper word for their reaction.

I find it depressing, frankly, to read learned left discourse on science and technology as a white male preserve, and then to walk through the corridors at MIT and see the significant results of the efforts to change that traditional pattern on the part of scientists and engineers, many of them very remote from the understanding of "positive social outcomes" that we largely share. They have dedicated serious and

often successful efforts to overcome traditional exclusiveness and privilege because they tend to agree with Descartes (as I do) that the capacity for understanding in the "profoundest sciences" and "high feeling" are a common human attribute, and that those who lack the opportunity to exercise the capacity to inquire, create, and understand are missing out on some of life's most wonderful experiences. One contributor condemns this humane belief for labelling others as "defective." By the same logic, we should condemn the idea that the capacity to walk is a common human possession over a very broad range.

Acting on the same belief, many scientists, not too long ago, took an active part in the lively working class culture of the day, seeking to compensate for the class character of the cultural institutions through programs of workers' education, or by writing books on mathematics, science, and other topics for the general public. Nor have left intellectuals been alone in such work, by any means. It strikes me as remarkable that their left counterparts today should seek to deprive oppressed people not only of the joys of understanding and insight, but also of tools of emancipation, informing us that the "project of the Enlightenment" is dead, that we must abandon the "illusions" of science and rationality--a message that will gladden the hearts of the powerful, delighted to monopolize these instruments for their own use. They will be no less delighted to hear that science (E-knowledge) is intrinsically a "knowledge system that legitimates the authority of the boss," so that any challenge to such authority is a violation of rationality itself--a radical change from the days when workers' education was considered a means of emancipation and liberation. One recalls the days when the evangelical church taught not-dissimilar lessons to the unruly masses as part of what E. P. Thompson called "the psychic processes of counter-revolution," as their heirs do today in peasant societies of Central America.

I'm sorry if the conclusion sounds harsh; the question we should consider is whether it is correct. I think it is.

It is particularly striking that these self-destructive tendencies should appear at a time when the overwhelming majority of the population regard the economic system as "inherently unfair" and want to change it. Through the Reagan years, the public continued its drift towards social democratic ideas, while the shreds of what existed were torn away. Furthermore, belief in the basic moral principles of traditional socialism is surprisingly high: to mention merely one example, almost half the population consider the phrase "from each according to his ability, to each according to his need" to be such an obvious truth that they attribute it to the U.S. Constitution, a text taken to be akin to Holy Writ. What is more, with Soviet tyranny finally overthrown, one long-standing impediment to the realization of these ideals is now removed. With limited contribution by left intellectuals, large segments of the population have involved themselves in urgent and pressing problems: repression, environmental concerns, and much else. The Central America solidarity movements of the 1980s are a dramatic example, with the direct involvement in the lives of the victims that was a novel and remarkable feature of protest and activism. These popular efforts have also led to a good deal of

understanding of how the world works, again, with very limited contributions from left intellectuals, if we are to be honest.

Particularly noteworthy is the divergence of popular attitudes from mainstream ideology. After 25 years of unremitting propaganda, including ten years of Reaganism, over 70 percent of the population still regard the Vietnam war as "fundamentally wrong and immoral," not a "mistake." Days before the U.S.-UK bombing began in the Gulf, the population, by two-to-one, favored a negotiated settlement with "linkage" rather than war. In these and numerous other cases, including domestic affairs and problems, the thoughts are individual and private; people have rarely if ever heard them publicly expressed. In part, that reflects the effectiveness of the system of cultural management; in part, the choices of left intellectuals.

Quite generally, there is a popular basis for addressing the human concerns that have long been part of "the Enlightenment project." One element that is lacking is the participation of left intellectuals.

However meritorious motives may be, the abandonment of these endeavors, in my opinion, reflects yet another triumph for the culture of power and privilege, and contributes to it. The same abandonment makes a notable contribution to the endless project of creating a version of history that will serve the reigning institutions. During periods of popular activism, many people are able to discern truths that are concealed by the cultural managers, and to learn a good deal about the world; Indochina and Central America are two striking recent examples. When activism declines, the commissar class, which never falters in its task, regains command. As left intellectuals abandon the field, truths that were once understood fade into individual memories, history is reshaped into an instrument of power, and the ground is laid for the enterprises to come.

The critique of "science" and "rationality" has many merits, which I haven't discussed. But as far as I can see, where valid and useful the critique is largely devoted to the perversion of the values of rational inquiry as they are "wrongly used" in a particular institutional setting. What is presented here as a deeper critique of their nature seems to me based on beliefs about the enterprise and its guiding values that have little basis. No coherent alternative is suggested, as far as I can discern; the reason, perhaps, is that there is none. What is suggested is a path that leads directly to disaster for people who need help -- which means everyone, before too long.

Source: http://www.chomsky.info/articles/1995----02.htm

Postmodernism and the Left

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ALAN SOKAL'S HOAX, "Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity," which was published in the "Science Wars" issue of *Social Text,*[1] and the debate that has followed it, raise important issues for the left. Sokal's article is a parody of postmodernism, or, more precisely, the amalgam of postmodernism, poststructuralist theory, deconstruction, and political moralism which has come to hold sway in large areas of academia, especially those associated with Cultural Studies. These intellectual strands are not always entirely consistent with each other. For instance, the strong influence of identity politics in this arena seems inconsistent with the poststructuralist insistence on the instability of all identities. Nevertheless, no one who has participated in this arena can deny that it is dominated by a specific, highly distinctive subculture. One knows when one finds oneself in a conference, seminar, or discussion governed by this subculture, by the vocabulary that is used, the ideas that are expressed or taken for granted, and by the fears that circulate, the things that remain unsaid. There are many critiques of the literature that informs this arena, which can for convenience be called postmodernism (though the term poststructuralist points more specifically to the dominant theoretical perspective).[2] But there is little if any discussion of postmodernism as a subculture.

The subculture of postmodernism is difficult to locate precisely. It is more pervasive in the humanities than elsewhere, but it has also entered the social sciences. It cannot be entirely identified with any particular discipline, but in some sense constitutes a world of its own, operating outside of or above disciplinary categories. Within the world of postmodernism intellectual trends take hold and fade into oblivion with extraordinary rapidity. Many of the people who play major roles in shaping it refuse such labels as "postmodernist" (or even "poststructuralist"), on the ground that such categories are confining.[3] The difficulty of defining postmodernism discourages discussion of it as a particular intellectual arena. Nevertheless it does constitute a subculture. It has increasing reach and power within the university; it has become increasingly insistent that it is the intellectual left.

Many people, inside and outside the world of postmodernism (and for that matter inside and outside the left), have come to equate postmodernism with the left. There are many academic departments and programs that associate themselves with progressive politics in which the subculture of postmodernism holds sway. This is especially the case in interdisciplinary programs, especially those in the humanities;

postmodernism is most likely to be the dominant perspective if the institution is relatively prestigious and if the faculty has been hired since the 60s. These programs tend to draw bright students who regard themselves as left, progressive, feminist, concerned with racism and homophobia. The result is that many students with this sort of orientation have come to associate progressive concerns with a postmodernist perspective. Many professors and other intellectuals, of all political shades, also accept this equation. Left intellectuals who object to postmodernism tend to complain in private but remain largely silent in public, largely because they have not learned to speak the postmodernist vocabulary. The equation of postmodernism with the left poses problems both for the intellectual work conducted under the aegis of postmodernism and for efforts to rebuild the left in the U.S. Alan Sokal's hoax, and the debate that has followed it, provide an opportunity to address these issues.

A physicist at NYU, Sokal was inspired to write a parody of postmodernism two years ago, having read Paul Gross and Norman Levitt's book, *Higher Superstition: The Academic Left and Its Quarrels with Science,*[4] which describes attacks on science, and on concepts of truth and rationality, in areas of the humanities. Sokal is a leftist, and was particularly upset that these attacks were being made in the name of left and feminist politics. He was also taken aback by the apparently intentional obscurity of the language in which these attacks were being made. At first Sokal found it difficult to believe that the statements quoted by Gross and Levitt could be representative of any significant trend. However in checking the quotes he found that these were not isolated instances but part of a growing and apparently influential literature. Believing that mockery would be the best way of combatting this trend, Sokal wrote an article that begins with the following statement:

There are many natural scientists, and especially physicists, who continue to reject the notion that the disciplines concerned with social and cultural criticism can have anything to contribute, expect perhaps peripherally, to their research. Still less are they receptive to the idea that the very foundations of their worldview must be revised or rebuilt in the light of such criticism. Rather, they cling to the dogma imposed by the long post-Enlightenment hegemony over the Western intellectual outlook, which can be summarized briefly as follows: that there exists an independent world, whose properties are independent of any individual human being and indeed of humanity as a whole; that these properties are encoded in eternal physical laws; and that human beings can obtain reliable, albeit imperfect and tentative, knowledge of these laws by hewing to the objective procedures and epistemological strictures prescribed by the (so-called) scientific method. [5]

The article presents what is described as a review of developments in quantum gravity, and claims that this research justifies the conclusion that physical reality, no less than social reality, is at bottom a social and linguistic construct; that scientific knowledge, far from being objective, reflects and encodes the dominant ideologies and power relations of the culture that produced it. In the article Sokal extensively cites real research but (according to his subsequent critique of his own article) exaggerates and distorts its implications. His article consists of assertions that are backed up, not by evidence or careful argument, but by appeals to authorities -- the

postmodern masters, Derrida, Irigaray, Lacan, Aronowitz, and others, whose vacuous remarks on quantum gravity and other areas of science Sokal quotes as if they were authoritative. Sokal makes vague statements implying some connection between scientific discoveries and the need for vast changes in thinking in other areas. For instance, Sokal claims that general relativity calls for new ways of thinking about time, space and causality not only in the physical realm but in philosophy, literary criticism, and the human sciences. He supports this point by a quote from Jean Hyppolite:

With Einstein...we see the end of a kind of privilege of empiric evidence. And in that connection we see a constant appear, a constant which is a combination of time-space, which does not belong to any of the experiments who live the experience, but which, in a way, dominates the whole construct; and this notion of the constant -- is this the center? (p. 221)

Sokal responds to Hyppolite's question with a quote from Derrida, which he describes as going to the heart of classical general relativity:

The Einsteinian constant is not a constant, is not a center. It is the very concept of variability -- it is, finally, the concept of the game. In other words, it is not the concept of something -- of a center starting from which an observer could master the field -- but the very concept of the game. (p. 221)

Further on, Sokal quotes Lacan on the importance of differential topology:

This diagram [the mobius strip] can be considered the basis of a sort of essential inscription at the origin, in the knot which constitutes the subject. This goes much further than you may think at first, because you can search for the sort of surface able to receive such inscriptions. You can perhaps see that the sphere, that old symbol for totality, is unsuitable. A torus, a Klein bottle, a cross-cut surface, are able to receive such a cut. And this diversity is very important as it explains many things about the structure of mental disease. If one can symbolize the subject by this fundamental cut, in the same way one can show that a cut on a torus corresponds to the neurotic subject, and on a cross-cut surface to another sort of mental disease.

Sokal adds: "As Althusser rightly commented, Lacan finally gives Freud"s thinking the scientific concepts that it requires." (p.224)

After what he presents as a review of research in the field of quantum gravity (and in related areas of science and mathematics) Sokal goes on to claim that in order to have a truly liberatory science, it is not sufficient to dispose of the outdated view that there is such a thing as objective reality. One must also subordinate science to progressive politics. In elaborating this point Sokal first quotes Andrew Ross that we need a science that will be publically answerable and of some service to progressive interests. This is a reasonable remark, tangentially related to Sokal's point, but not a call for subordinating science to politics. Sokal then presents a quote from Kelly Oliver.

In order to be revolutionary, feminist theory cannot claim to describe what exists, or, natural facts. Rather, feminist theories should be political tools, strategies for overcoming oppression in specific concrete situations. The goal, then, of feminist theory, should be to develop strategic theories -- not true theories, not false theories, but strategic theories. (p.227)

In approvingly quoting this remark, and linking it to Ross' comment about the importance of science serving progressive goals, Sokal makes the leap from a call for a socially responsible science to a call for an approach that sets aside questions of truth or falsehood and is driven by already given political goals.

Sokal submitted his article to *Social Text*, which accepted it for their "Science Wars" issue. After his article had been accepted but had not yet appeared, Sokal began working on a piece disclosing his own hoax and explaining why he had felt that it was necessary to mock postmodernism in order to save the left from its own silliness. Sokal wanted to find humanists critical of postmodernism, like him, from a left/feminist perspective, to comment on his piece. Through a string of associations he was led to me. I began working with him on the piece in which he disclosed his own hoax. At that point Sokal wanted to allow some time to elapse between the publication of his hoax and his disclosure. He wanted to see how long it would take for someone to discover his hoax. If, after a few months, no one had caught it, he intended to send his self-disclosure to *Social Text* with a request that they publish it.

The course of events went differently. While the article was in press, an enterprising free-lance journalist, David Glenn, overheard a remark (made, presumably, by one of the by this time fairly large circle of people who knew of Sokal's hoax) which led him to believe that a scandal was brewing within *Social Text*. Some skillful investigation led Glenn to the page proofs of *Social Text*'s forthcoming issue. It seemed to Glenn, on reading Sokal's article, that even for the world of Cultural Studies this was a bit extreme. Glenn contacted Sokal and asked him if the article was a hoax. Sokal acknowledged that it was and congratulated Glenn on his detective work. The two took the story to *Lingua Franca*, whose editors offered to publish a statement by Sokal in their forthcoming issue, disclosing his own hoax and explaining why he had done it.

The result was that the "Science Wars" issue of *Social Text*, with Sokal's article, appeared in mid-April of 1996, and *Lingua Franca*, with Sokal's statement about his article, about a week later. The story was picked up by the media. On May 17 there was a story about Sokal's hoax on the front page of the *New York Times*. After that the story spread; articles about it appeared not only in newspapers throughout the U.S. but in Europe and Latin America. Probably no one concerned with postmodernism has remained unaware of it. People have been bitterly divided. Some are delighted, some are enraged. One friend of mine told me that Sokal's article came up in a meeting of a left reading group that he belongs to. The discussion became polarized between impassioned supporters and equally impassioned opponents of Sokal; it nearly turned into a shouting match. The astonishing thing about this, my friend said, was that actually no one had read the article, because that issue of *Social Text* had sold out so quickly. Members of this

group knew about the article only from having read accounts of it in the press, or from discussions with others who had read it. Clearly Sokal's article has brought to the surface intensely felt divisions, raising the question: what are these differences about?

Some of us who were delighted by Sokal's hoax, at one time had a more positive view of postmodernism. The constellation of trends that I am calling postmodernism has its origins in the writings of a group of French intellectuals of the 60s, most preeminently Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, and Jean-Fran‡ois Lyotard. Those who developed postmodernism tended to be associated with the radicalism of the 60s, and to see May '68 as a formative moment in their intellectual and political development. French postmodernism expressed many aspects of the ethos of May '68: its anti-authoritarianism, its rejection of Marxism and view of it as implicated in unacceptable structures of authority, its celebration of the imagination and resistance to all constraints.[6]

In addition to being shaped by the politics of May '68 (including the French Communist Party's betrayal of the student movement and support for the authorities), French postmodernism developed out of the debates that were taking place in French intellectual circles at that time. It included a rejection of humanism, in particular of Sartre's view of the self as the center of political resistance and his quest for an integrated, authentic selfhood. Postmodernism rejected aspects of the structuralist legacy, particularly its emphasis on the stability of social structures but retained its focus on language, the view that language provides the categories that shape self, society. This could be extended to the view that all reality is shaped by language; it could suggest that language is real, everything else, constructed or derived from it. Such an approach could suggest a critique of social analysis or radical politics emphasizing the economic level, or overt structures of political power. It could suggest the need for a critique of culture and a call for cultural transformation.

POSTMODERNISM ENTERED THE U.S. IN THE LATE 70s AND EARLY 80s, by a number of routes simultaneously. There were academics, especially philosophers and literary critics, who were drawn to poststructuralist philosophy. Many feminists and gay and lesbian activists became interested in the work of Michel Foucault, whose attention to the social construction of sexuality, view of power as dispersed through society, and insistence on the connection between power and knowledge, intersected with their own concerns. Foucault's work seemed to provide a theoretical ground for shifting the focus of radical analysis away from macrostructures such as the economy and the state, and toward daily life, ideology, social relations and culture. Foucault's view of state power as always repressive and his identification of resistance with the marginalized and suppressed made sense at a time when radical struggles were being led by groups peripheral to mainstream culture and power relations, such as disaffected youth and women, blacks and other racial minorities, gays and lesbians.

The attractiveness of postmodernism, in the late 70s and early 80s, had something to do with the cultural and political currents with which it was associated. It was

loosely affiliated with avant-garde trends in architecture and art, and also with the impulse of many intellectuals to set aside the old distinction between high and low culture and begin taking popular culture seriously. Poststructuralist theory emphasized flux, instability, fragmentation, and questioned the validity of claims to authenticity and truth. These concerns overlapped with emerging themes in popular culture: distraction, absence of rootedness in the past, a sense of meaninglessness. More important, these poststructuralist, or postmodernist, concerns spoke to levels of reality that seemed increasingly salient and that more conventional theories, including left theories, did not address. Postmodernism seemed to refer to a set of cultural changes that were taking place around us (and within us) as much as it referred to a literature or set of theories about those changes. The increasing use of the term poststructuralism to refer to a set of theories in part grew out of the need to distinguish between theory and the cultural realities to which it responded.

In the latter part of the 70s, many young people whose center of attention was shifting from the movements of the 60s to intellectual work, often in the academy, were avidly reading Foucault. Many were also reading other French intellectuals, including French feminist such as Luce Irigaray, Monique Wittig, the eclectic theorists of society and psychology, Gilles DeLeuze and Felix Guattari, the Marxist structuralist, Louis Althusser, the psychoanalytic structuralist, Jacques Lacan. Through the works of these writers and the debates in which their work was embedded, the poststructuralist ideas that had come to dominate French radical intellectual circles in the late 60s and 70s filtered into parallel intellectual circles in the U.S. By the early 80s an intellectual subculture was emerging in the U.S. which tended to use the term "postmodernism" to describe its outlook. Though it was located primarily in the university, it had links to avant-garde developments in art and architecture and a strong interest in experimental trends in popular culture. Postmodernists tended to feel strong sympathies for feminism and for gay and lesbian movements, and were especially drawn to a politics that was tinged with anarchism and oriented toward spectacle -- a politics that happened to be quite salient in a cluster of movements that emerged in the U.S. around the late 70s and early 80s.

The excitement of postmodernism, certainly in the early 80s and to some degree through the decade, had to do with its links to vital cultural and political movements, and the fact that it was pointing to rapid changes in culture and examining these through the poststructuralist categories of language, text, discourse. Through the 80s, original and provocative books and articles appeared, loosely associated with a postmodernist perspective or at least addressing questions raised by postmodernism. Though everyone would have a different list, most would no doubt include James Clifford's *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art,* Donna Haraway's *Primate Visions: Gender, Race and Nature in the World of Modern Science*, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, Jean Beaudrillard's *For a Critique of The Political Economy of the Sign*, Jacques Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*.[7]

Others examined postmodernism as a cultural phenomenon and criticized from a broadly Marxist perspective. Works in this vein would include David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (and his influential article, "Postmodernism, or the Logic of Late Capitalism.")[8] In the 80s and 90s a great deal of European postmodernist (or poststructuralist) literature was being published in English, and was widely read in the U.S. In fact, postmodernist books by European authors may have been read more widely in the U.S. than in their authors' home countries, since by this time interest in postmodernism had faded considerably in France and elsewhere in Europe.

DESPITE THE ATTRACTIONS OF POSTMODERNISM, SOME OF US WERE UNEASY about it from the start. Postmodernism not only pointed to processes of flux, fragmentation, the disenchantment or draining of meaning from social life, but tended to be fascinated with them. It often seemed that postmodernists could see nothing but instability, and that a new set of values was being established without ever being acknowledged, according to which the shifting and unstable was always preferable to the unified or integrated. Despite the brilliance of much of the literature there seemed at times to be a kind of flatness of vision, a tendency to insist on one set of qualities while refusing to recognize their necessary counterparts, as if one could have up without down, hot without cold. There seemed to be a celebration of the fragmentation of self and society that ignored the need for balance, for new level of coherence. Not that all writers who addressed the questions posed by postmodernism fell into this trap. But on the whole those who escaped it were those who addressed questions raised by postmodernism rather than adopting it as their own perspective.

By the late 80s and early 90s, postmodernism seemed to have been taken over by the pursuit of the new or avant-garde. Radicalism became identified with criticism for the sake of criticism, and equated with intellectual or cultural sophistication. The aestheticization of postmodernism corresponded to the attenuation of its ties with any actual social movements, as the movements with which postmodernism had felt the greatest rapport shrivelled. Postmodernism had always been pulled between the agendas of the academy and the social movements; the agenda of the academy now took over. Politics became increasingly a matter of gestures or proclamations. By the 90s, the quest for success in an increasingly harsh and competitive academic world became the driving force. Claims to radicalism, oddly, seemed to serve this purpose.

ONE WAY OF UNDERSTANDING POSTMODERNISM IS TO SAY THAT THERE ARE strong and weak, or more ambitious and more restrained versions of it. According to the strong version, there is no such thing as truth. Because all perception of reality is mediated, because what we regard as reality is perceived through discourse, there is no truth, there are only truth claims. Since there is nothing against which these claims can be measured, they all have the same standing. Another way of putting this would be that there is nothing prior to interpretation or theory, nothing that stands outside of interpretation and can be taken as a basis for judging its validity. In the postmodernist or poststructuralist

lexicon, the terms "essentialism" and "foundationalism" are used to denote a host of presumably bad attitudes, including the view that interpretation or theory can and should be judged in relation to some reality external to itself, the view that some social groups have characteristics or interests that are given rather than continually constructed and reconstructed -- and reductionism, stereotyping, as in the view that all women are nurturent, or that African Americans have innate musical abilities. The fact that the term essentialism refers simultaneously to an epistemological approach and also to racist, sexist or at least naive politics tends to link these two and makes it difficult to have a calm discussion of whether there is such a thing as truth, and whether theory should be judged by reality external to itself. In many discussions the use of the term "essentialist" is enough to identify the philosophical stance as politically retrograde and therefore unacceptable.

Those of us who disagree with the strong postmodernist position do not object to the premise that our perception of reality is mediated. What we object to is the leap of logic between this premise and the conclusion that there is no truth, that all claims have equal status. We would argue that although we do not possess ultimate truth and never will, it is nevertheless possible to expand our understanding, and it is worth the effort to gain more knowledge -- even if that knowledge is always subject to revision. This version of the strong postmodernist position is -- in my experience -- rarely explicitly argued in the literature; it is in discussion (in conferences, seminars, and private conversations) that one encounters it. It is often posed against a straw-person argument that would claim that the truth is readily accessible, completely transparent, unaffected by culture. This straw-person argument is used as a foil, to excuse the implausibility and logical weakness of the strong postmodernist view. On the whole postmodernist literature, instead of arguing this position explicitly, assumes an attitude of radical skepticism toward truth, or toward claims that there is an objective reality that is to some extent knowable, without ever clearly defining the grounds for this skepticism.

The strong position, as it appears in postmodernist or poststructuralist writing, tends to take the form of an extreme social constructionism, a view that identities, relations, political positions are constructed entirely through interpretation, that there is no identifiable social reality against which interpretations can be judged, no ground in material or social reality that places any constraints on the formation of identities or perspectives. Joan Scott, for instance, in her influential article "Experience," argues that any account of experience takes for granted categories and assumptions that ought to be questioned, that to accept the category of experience, or to use the word without distancing oneself from it by surrounding it with quotation marks, is dangerous, and opens the way to essentialism and foundationalism. Scott admits that the concept of experience is too deeply embedded in culture to be done away with easily. In the end she suggests that we retain it but treat it with suspicion.[9]

Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, in their book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, apply the same approach to the formation of political positions. They argue that all political identities or perspectives are constructed, that there is no particular relation between class position, for instance, and political stance. In support of this, they

argue that workers are not automatically socialist or even progressive: often they support right-wing politics. Laclau and Mouffe are of course correct that there is no automatic connection between class and politics, or between the working class and socialism, but this does not mean that there is no connection between the two, that all interpretations or constructions of class interest are equally possible and equally valid. For instance, it is hard to imagine a situation in which a socialist program, proposed by the capitalist class, was defeated by working-class opposition. Laclau and Mouffe make their argument by setting up a straw argument (that workers are automatically socialist -- a view held by no one that I know of), knocking it down, and substituting a position that is equally extreme, namely that there is no connection at all between class position and political perspective. Without this straw economism as a foil, the problems of the extreme social constructionist argument become more apparent.[10]

An even more extreme example of strong postmodernism is Judith Butler's argument, in her book *Gender Trouble*,[11] that sexual difference is socially constructed. Butler accepts Foucault's now widely accepted view that gender is socially constructed; she goes beyond this and criticizes Foucault for his unwillingness to extend an anti-essentialist perspective to sexuality itself. She argues that not only gender but sex itself, that is, sexual difference, should be seen as an effect of power relations and cultural practices, as constructed "performatively" -- that is, by acts whose meaning is determined by their cultural context. Butler argues that the conventional view of sex as consisting of two given, biologically determined categories, male and female, is ideological, and defines radical politics as consisting of parodic performances that might undermine what she calls "naturalized categories of identity." Her assertion that sexual difference is socially constructed strains belief. It is true that there are some people whose biological sex is ambiguous, but this is not the case for the vast majority of people. Biological difference has vast implications, social and psychological; the fact that we do not yet fully understand these does not mean that they do not exist. Butler's understanding of radicalism shows how the meaning of the word has changed in the postmodernist arena. It no longer has to do with efforts to achieve a more egalitarian society. It refers to the creation of an arena in which the imagination can run free. It ignores the fact that only a privileged few can play at taking up and putting aside identities.

There is a weak, or restrained, version of postmodernism which is much more plausible than the strong version described above. This version argues that language and culture play a major and often unrecognized role in shaping society, that things are often regarded as natural which are actually socially constructed. This is a valid and important perspective. Those of us on the left who criticize postmodernism reject the strong version, not this more restrained approach. The difference between the two lies in the excessive ambition, and the consequent reductionism, of the strong approach, and the greater modesty or caution of the weak or restrained approach. Strong postmodernism is cultural reductionism: it represents the ambition to make culture the first or only level of explanation. It is no better to argue that everything can be understood in terms of culture or language than to argue that everything is driven by economic forces, or by the quest for political power. The

project that frames postmodernism is the critique of Enlightenment rationality; there are aspects of that tradition that deserve to be criticized, such as the tendency to take the white male as the model of rational subjectivity, and the equation of truth with the discoveries of Western science, excluding other contributions. But the postmodernist critique of the Enlightenment is one-sided. It forgets that a universalist view of humanity was a major (and only partially accomplished) step away from narrow nationalisms, and that the concept of truth is a weapon in the hands of progressive social movements, that they rely on opposing the truth of oppression to hollow official claims that society is just.

THE PROBLEMS OF POSTMODERNISM THAT I HAVE NAMED, and more, have been displayed in the public response to the Sokal article. The first response was from Stanley Fish, Professor of English at Duke University and a leading figure in the field of Cultural Studies. In an op-ed piece in the *New York Times*, "Professor Sokal's Bad Joke,"[12] Fish tried to shift the terrain of the debate from postmodernism to the social sciences, suggesting that the field of Science Studies consists of scholars whose modest aim is to investigate the ideas that drive scientific research. The work of these scholars, he implied, hardly goes beyond the bounds of conventional sociology. In this article, Fish appeared not to have noticed the more extreme positions that have been taken in the name of postmodernism or Cultural Studies, inside or outside the field of Science Studies. It is hard not to see Fish's piece as a strategic move, a slide to the weak or restrained position when the strong position has begun to look foolish.

The next piece to appear was a statement in *Lingua Franca*, by Andrew Ross and Bruce Robbins, editors of *Social Text*.[13] Robbins and Ross wrote that they had regarded Sokal's article as "a little hokey" and "not their cup of tea" but that they published it to encourage a natural scientist who appeared to be interested in Cultural Studies. Next, *Tikkun* published an article by Bruce Robbins,[14] who wrote that the editors of *Social Text* had published the article because of the merit they saw in its argument. Robbins asked what conclusions should be drawn and what should not be drawn from the fact that *Social Text* had published Sokal's piece. One conclusion not to draw, he wrote, is that postmodernists can't recognize an unintelligible argument when they see one.

When Sokal said his essay was nonsense, most reporters instantly followed his lead. After all, he should know, right? But we thought Sokal had a real argument, and we still do. Allow me to quote Paul Horgan, senior writer at *Scientific American*, summarizing in the July 16 *New York Times*: Sokal, Horgan says, "proposed that superstring theory might help liberate science from dependence upon the concept of objective truth.'" Prof. Sokal later announced that the article had been a hoax, intended to expose the hollowness of postmodernism. In fact, however, superstring theory is exactly the kind of science that subverts conventional notions of truth.(p.58)

Robbins went on to argue that the concept of truth is questionable on political grounds:

Does subverting conventional notions of truth really have anything to do with being politically progressive?...Is it in the interests of women, African-Americans, and other super-exploited people to insist that truth and identity are social constructions? Yes and no. No, you can't talk about exploitation without respect for empirical evidence and a universal standard of justice. But yes, truth can be another source of oppression. It was not so long ago that scientists gave their full authority to explanations of why women and African-Americans (not to speak of gays and lesbians) were inherently inferior or pathological or both. Explanations like these continue to appear in newer and subtler forms. Hence there is a need for a social constructionist critique of knowledge.(p.59)

Here we have an argument that has become hopelessly tangled, perhaps through the effort to see everything through a postmodernist lens while refusing to acknowledge that postmodernism is a lens, that it is anything other than pure Truth. Robbins is of course right that some people say things about African Americans, women, etc., that are not true. This does not mean that we should reject the concept of truth. It means that we should reject false assertions.

Robbins goes on to deride critics of postmodernism as "know-nothings of the left [who] delude themselves: Capitalism is screwing people! What goes up must come down! What else do we need to know?" Robbins continues, "It seems likely that what is really expressed by the angry tirades against cultural politics that have accompanied the Sokal affair is a longing for the days when women were back in the kitchen and it was respectable to joke about faggots and other natural objects of humor. These are not the family values I want my children to learn." (p.59) Presumably Robbins is referring to people who have expressed support for Sokal, such as Ruth Rosen (a feminist historian), Katha Pollitt (a feminist journalist), Jim Weinstein (editor of *In These Times*), Michael Albert (editor of *Z Magazine*), myself. Robbins' remark is self-righteous posturing, and unfortunately it is not an isolated example. In the arena of postmodernism, left politics is often expressed through striking poses, often conveying moral superiority, greater sophistication, or both. There often seems to be a sneer built into postmodernist discourse, a cooler-than-thou stance. This enrages the critics of postmodernism, and it is one reason why it has been so difficult for supporters and critics of Sokal to discuss their differences calmly.

THERE ARE SERIOUS PROBLEMS WITHIN THE POSTMODERNIST SUBCULTURE. There is an intense ingroupyness, a concern with who is in and who is out, and an obscurantist vocabulary whose main function often seems to be to mark those on the inside and allow them to feel that they are part of an intellectual elite. This is not to object to the use of a technical vocabulary where it is needed to express ideas precisely. The world of postmodernism has unfortunately come to be flooded with writing in which pretentiousness reigns and intellectual precision appears to have ceased to be a consideration. There is the fetishization of the new: the rapid rise and fall of trends, the collective deference to them while they last. For a while it seemed that every debate in this arena entailed accusations of essentialism. The exact definition of essentialism was never clear, but it nevertheless seemed that essentialism was the source of all error, and the use of the

term as invective was enough to halt discussion. There is the inflation of language and the habit of self-congratulation: it has become common practice in this arena to advertise one's own work as radical, subversive, transgressive. All this really means is that one hopes one is saying something new. There is the worship of celebrities. This is a culture that encourages and rewards self-aggrandizement and grandiosity. There is intellectual bullying, the use of humiliation, ridicule, implicit threats of ostracism, to silence dissent. All of this stands in direct contrast to the endless talk of difference that takes place in this arena.

Efforts to raise criticisms from within this arena have not had much effect; those who have made such efforts have been treated with hostility or at best ignored. Those of us who supported Sokal's hoax felt that a public act of mockery was required to open up discussion. Now that postmodernism has lost its aura of invincibility people have begun to laugh, and it does not seem likely that the laughter will stop anytime soon. For instance, in a review of a book entitled *Male Matters: Masculinity, Anxiety, and the Male Body on the Line*, by Calvin Thomas (University of Illinois Press), reviewer Daniel Harris writes,

In the fast-paced intellectual environment of postmodern cultural studies, the line between ostensibly serious scholarship and outright parody is not just thin but, in many instances, nonexistent, as became embarrassingly evident last month to the editors of one of the house organs of contemporary theoretical discourse, *Social Text*....One can only hope that Sokal's brilliant act of intellectual terrorism...will be the first of many similar practical jokes. If even a handful of the numerous critics of cultural theory did their part, postmodern journals and academic presses would be swamped with fraudulent manuscripts that would shatter the self-confidence of the entire field. This vast industry would collapse into a state of total disarray were its tightly-knit ranks to become infiltrated by jargon-spewing moles posing as the real McCoy, double agents cloaked in the uniform of the American university's elitist new brand of paper radicals.

Harris goes on to speculate that the book under review must be another hoax. How else, he asks, can one explain the bewildering statements that appear in this book, such as:

The excrementalization of alterity as the site/sight of homelessness, of utter outsideness and unsubiatable dispossession figure(s) in...Hegel's metanarrational conception of Enlightenment modernity as the teleological process of totalization leading to absolute knowing.

The anal penis...function(s) within a devalued metonmymic continuity, whereas the notion of the phallomorphic turd functions within the realm of metaphorical substitution.

If the bodily in masculinity is encountered in all its rectal gravity, the specular mode by which others become shit is disrupted.

Harris suggests that if Thomas wants to become an academic success he should follow Sokal's example and proclaim his book to be a prank. Only slightly less tongue in cheek, he speculates that what he describes as the central metaphor of this book, the comparison of writing to "productions" of the body, especially shit, may be apt in a field in which jargon is used as an offensive weapon, to score points against competitors in the battle for tenure and prestige.[15]

POSTMODERNISM DID NOT INVENT INTELLECTUAL BULLYING. This is not the first instance of dogmatism on the left. In the 30s people on the left (at least those in or close to the Communist Party) felt considerable pressure not to admit, or even consider the possibility, that the Soviets were anything less than angels. In the late 60s a kind of Maoist politics swept the left, in particular the radical core of the anti-war movement. Under the aegis of "Marxism-Leninism" a politics was put forward that revolved around the assumption that revolution was possible in the U.S. if only people on the left would follow the example set by revolutionaries in the Third World. Strategies were proposed that were utterly inappropriate to the U.S.; questioning these strategies, or for that matter suggesting that a revolution was not very likely in the U.S., was tantamount to labelling oneself a defector from the cause. Similar things took place in the radical wing of the women's movement: extreme conceptions of feminism, such as the belief that having anything to do with men amounted to fraternizing with the enemy, took hold in many circles, and questioning these ideas was likely to earn one a reputation as a friend of the patriarchy. The left in the U.S. seems prone to being seized by ideas which, when recollected a few years later, look somewhat mad. But it is worth asking why particular ideologies take over at particular moments. After all, in the case of postmodernism, it is not clear why culturalism, a social constructionism set in competition with other levels of social analysis, should be equated with radicalism.

Terry Eagleton, in his article "Where Do Postmodernists Come From?"[16] argues that left intellectuals in the U.S. have adopted postmodernism out of a sense of having been badly defeated, a belief that the left as a political tendency has little future. Culturalism, he argues, involves an extreme subjectivism, a view of the intellect as all-powerful, a mindset that might be described as taking the May '68 slogan "all power to the imagination" literally, combined with a deep pessimism, a sense that it isn't worth the effort to learn about the world, to analyze social systems, for instance, because they can't be changed anyway.

I would add two points to Eagleton's analysis. First, postmodernism takes many of its ideas from the 60s. To some extent it represents a rigidification of ideas that were widespread in movements of that time, especially the voluntarism or hubris of a generational cohort that tended to think that it could accomplish anything. The widespread view among leftists of the 60s that revolution was waiting in the wings, and the fact that so few people openly challenged this, reflected a grandiosity, a loosening of the collective grip on reality. In the heated atmosphere of the late 60s it was possible for radicals to take fairly crazy positions without utterly losing their audience or becoming irrelevant to politics. In the 90s there is considerably less room for extreme voluntarism, or grandiosity, cast as a political position.

There was also a widespread tendency in the movements of the 60s to equate personal and cultural change with broader social change. One of the most important contributions of the movements of the 60s (especially feminism and the countercultural left) was the critique of a culture that promoted consumerism, that equated happiness with individual striving for power and wealth. But in rejecting a politics that left this element out it was easy to fall into the opposite problem of believing that creating communities in which people tried to live according to different values would inevitably move society as a whole in the same direction. This made change seem easier than it was. The prosperity of the late 60s and early 70s allowed alternative communities to flourish, and it seemed plausible that the more egalitarian relationships and humane values developed in them might serve as models. But as it turned out the egalitarian impulse that found expression in these communities was overshadowed by the shift to the right that has taken place in American society as a whole since the mid- to late 70s. Alternative communities themselves were weakened and destroyed by social changes over which they had no control, especially the depression of the 70s and the withdrawal of support from the public sector in the 80s and 90s. In the 90s it would be very hard to make a convincing case that cultural change equals social change. The equation of the personal or the cultural with the political was a mixed blessing for the movements of the 60s. In the 90s it tends to mean retreating into one's own community and allowing politics to drift further and further to the right.

POSTMODERNISM SUFFERS NOT ONLY FROM ITS RELIANCE ON a conception of radicalism that made more sense in the 60s than it does now, but also from the fact that it is located in academia and reflects its pressures. The logic of the market is not a new presence in the American academy, but it now seems to be sweeping all other values and considerations aside. There has been a dramatic increase in the pressures toward intellectual specialization and a frantic pace of publication. There is intense competition between and within fields. In the years following World War II there was a widespread belief, in government and business circles, that the U.S. economy would benefit if a broad liberal higher education were widely available. In the wake of Sputnik there was a sudden rush of support for science education; this resulted in more government support for universities without diminishing its commitment to the humanities. Through the 60s it was mostly the children of the white middle class who attended universities, public or private. Since the 60s the economy has changed, the values governing public spending have changed, and the composition of university student bodies has changed. In a society increasingly stratified between haves and have-nots, an economy in which technical expertise seems more important than familiarity with history and literature, support for liberal education is hardly reliable.

In the 50s and 60s academics could believe that their profession was held in high esteem. They were well paid, and at least some found their opinions sought by the White House or by large corporations. Over the last few decades it has become harder to believe that public esteem of the academy is unqualified. The loss of prestige (and of resources) is felt most sharply in the humanities. In the 50s the social sciences tried to show that they could be as rigorous, quantitative, and ostensibly value-free, as the natural sciences. This encouraged huge quantities of

unimaginative, narrowly-conceived, jargon-ridden papers. Now it seems to be the turn of the humanities to try to raise their stock within academia, though this time the strategy is not to imitate science but to assert the supremacy of a vocabulary and theoretical perspective nurtured in the humanities over all fields of knowledge. But postmodernism only highlights its own weaknesses when it overreaches its scope. I have heard many postmodernists denounce Sokal on grounds that his hoax could lead to funds being withdrawn from Cultural Studies or the humanities generally. It seems more useful to look at postmodernism's internal problems. Sokal's hoax and the laughter it generated shows that the field had become ripe for parody.[17]

WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS OF THIS FOR THE LEFT? As restraints on capitalism have loosened and the logic of the market has crept into virtually every area of life, the more human values of the left have come to seem archaic and irrelevant. We certainly need a critique of this culture. But postmodernism is not that critique. There are too many respects in which postmodernism accepts or revels in the values of the marketplace for it to serve as a critique. On a deeper level the problem is that postmodernism is a stance of pure criticism, that it avoids making any claims, asserting any values (or acknowledging its own implicit system of values, in particular its orientation toward sophistication and aesthetics). Left politics requires a conception of a better society and an assertion of a better set of values than those that now prevail. This does not mean that any particular vision of society or any particular definition of those values is the last word; a left perspective requires ongoing discussion and debate. But it is not possible for a purely critical stance to serve as the basis for left politics.

No doubt, one reason that postmodernism has taken hold so widely is that it is much easier to be critical than to present a positive vision. Being on the left means having a conception of the future and confidence that there is a connection between the present and the future, that collective action in the present can lead to a better society. It is difficult these days to articulate any clear vision of the future, even more difficult to figure out how we might get from where we are to a more humane, egalitarian, and ecologically balanced society. A friend of mine recently told me that her image is that we are on a log that is slowly drifting down the Niagara River, and we can begin to hear the roar of the Falls. But because we do not know what to do, we are not roused from our lethargy. It seems to me that postmodernism has become an obstacle to addressing urgent issues, including impending environmental and social disasters, and how to build a movement that might begin to address them. Clearing away the fog won't automatically provide us with any answers, but might make it easier to hold a productive discussion.

NOTES

Alan Sokal, "Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity," *Social Text* 46-47, Spring/Summer 1996: 217-252.

For critiques of postmodernism, or poststructuralist theory, see Brian Palmer, *Descent into Discourse: The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990); Peter Dews, *Logics of Disintegration: Post-Structuralist Thought and the Claims of Critical Theory* (London: Verso, 1987), Alex Callinocos, *Against Post-Modernism* (London: Methuen, 1982); Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* (London: Methuen, 1982), and *Deconstruction and the Interests of Theory* (London: Pinter, 1988), Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), Perry Anderson, *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism* (London: Verso, 1984), and Somer Broberibb, *Nothing Mat(t)ers: A Feminist Critique of Postmodernism* (North Melbourne: Spiniflex Press, 1992).

See, for instance, Judith Butler, "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of Postmodernism'", 3-21, in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992).

Paul Gross and Normal Levitt, *Higher Superstition: The Academic Left and its Quarrels with Science* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1994).

Alan Sokal, "Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity," *Social Text* 46-47 (Spring/Summer 1996), p. 217.

See Luc Ferry and Alain Renault, *French Philosophy of the 60s: An Essay on Antihumanism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1985) on the ways in which poststructuralism and the spirit of May '68 coincided, and differed. Ferry and Renault point out that while a politics of authenticity, of the self as agent of social change, was central to May '68, poststructuralism emphasizes fragmentation and incoherence to the point of denying the existence of the self and the possibility of authenticity.

James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), Donna Haraway, *Primate Visions: Gender, Race and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (New York: Routledge, 1989), Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985), Jean Beaudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (St. Louis, Telos Press, 1981), Jacques Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: an Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), and "Postmodernism, or the Logic of Late Capitalism," first published in *New Left Review* 146 (July-August 1984): 53-92, later included in Jameson's book of the same title (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991).

Joan W. Scott, "Experience," in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, (New York: Routledge, 1992), ed. Judith Butler and Joan W, Scott: 22-40.

Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy (London: Verso, 1985), pp. 82-85.

Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

Stanley Fish, "Professor Sokal's Bad Joke," *New York Times*, Op Ed, May 21, 1996.

"Mystery Science Theater," Bruce Robbins and Andrew Ross, Co-Editors, of *Social Text, Lingua Franca*, July/August 1996: 54-57.

Bruce Robbins, "Anatomy of a Hoax," *Tikkun* Vol. 11, No. 5, September-October 1996, pp. 58-59.

Daniel Harris, "Jargon Basement," review of *Male Matters: Masculinity, Anxiety, and the Male Body on the Line*, by Calvin Thomas (University of Illinois Press). *Bay Area Reporter*, June 13, 1996, p. 40.

Terry Eagleton, "Where Do Postmodernists Come From?" *Monthly Review* Vol. 47, No. 3, July-August 1995, Special Issue: "In Defense of History: Marxism and the Postmodern Agenda," pp. 59-70.

For a discussion of the public view of academics and how postmodernism has made a bad situation worse, see Loic J.D. Wacquant, "The Self-Inflicted Irrelevance of American Academics," *Academe,* July-August 1996, 18-23.

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Paralysed by postmodernism

Gavin Kitching
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MANY readers may be familiar with The Postmodernism Generator (www. elsewhere.org/pomo), a computer program produced by Andrew Bulhak in 1996 that uses a syntax-based algorithm to generate "meaningless -- but grammatically correct and disturbingly plausible -- academic-style texts filled with postmodern jargon".

Feed it a small number of standardised inputs and it will instantly churn out a "postmodern essay" on any topic you like.

Perhaps fewer people will know about the Sokal hoax, the publication, also in 1996, in the American cultural studies journal Social Text, of an article titled Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity. The article, by New York-based physicist Alan Sokal, purported to present a postmodernist "rereading" of the theory of gravity, but shortly after its publication the author revealed it as a hoax that the unsuspecting editors of Social Text had swallowed whole.

That hoax led to a book, Intellectual Impostures: Postmodern Philosophers' Abuse of Science (1998), by Sokal and a French colleague, Jean Bricmont, and the whole affair generated a voluminous and extremely bad-tempered debate, online and in print.

I have enjoyed playing with the Pomo Generator and for a while I followed the Sokal debate closely. But it became clear to me, both from the tone of many of the contributions defending the editors of Social Text, and from the dismissive response of some of my colleagues to the issue, that hoax and parody, while gleefully feeding the prejudices of postmodernism's opponents, does much the same for its proponents.

Faced with the theoretical and philosophical "naivety" and "philistinism" of those who see in postmodernism only pretentious and risible jargon or who (like Sokal) make "pedantic" quibbles about scientific inaccuracy while failing to grasp the "deep" philosophical truths that transcend such quibbles -- and in fact make them quibbles -- postmodernism's defenders can feel as vindicated by such attacks as the attackers. For what can account for all this "misunderstanding" and abuse-by-laughter but postmodernism's philosophical depth and profundity, a depth and profundity which, of course, only a minority of savants can grasp?

And buttressing this intellectual defence is a kind of ethical and political rectitude, a sense of the rightness of the political causes that postmodernists typically espouse, a rectitude that allows the mockers to be painted, not merely as intellectually mistaken or superficial, but as morally and politically reactionary (which they may sometimes be). And thus, in a familiar self-justifying syndrome, every attack is further vindication, every snigger an impetus to deeper theoretical seriousness and moral earnestness.

None of this would matter much if it only involved a handful of academics pursuing arcane debates and self-righteous vendettas in obscure journals. But when ideas become fashionable the education industry funnels them down quickly and efficiently via the web, textbooks and popular articles, as well as through face-to-face teaching, to students in universities, colleges and even high schools. Indeed, such funnelling down is mainly what makes such ideas fashionable.

Postmodernism has been fashionable in this way for nearly 30 years now, and has influenced a large number of students in cultural studies, history and the social sciences more generally. I had seen that influence grow in my own discipline (politics), as well as in departments of history and sociology for which I had acted as an external examiner.

My impression had been that postmodernism's pedagogical impact at these lower levels in the educational hierarchy was, if anything, even worse than its intellectual impact at higher levels. This is because the ideas became cruder with transmission, and also because students were more likely to be impressed into acceptance of these ideas whether they really understood them or not. And it was often the more serious and committed students, anxious to use ideas to change the world, who were influenced, and damaged, as their high-minded aspirations became "postmodernised". Such was my impression. But I wanted, and needed, some more systematic means to show this was the case, and to examine precisely how such damage occurs.

Inspiration came one day as I was sitting in the seminar room of the school of politics at the University of NSW, staring at the large glass and wood cabinet in which were stored the undergraduate honours theses of the school, going back to the early 1980s. There turned out to be 253 of them. I trawled through their synopses, seeking out all those that identified with postmodernist, poststructuralist or discourse theory. There were 32 in all, dating from 1983 to 2006. Some I remembered having examined, most I had never seen before. I removed from the sample five that had been given poor marks (I did not want to pick soft targets). The 27 remaining had all been awarded either distinctions or high distinctions. They covered a variety of topics in international relations, feminism and what might broadly be called "the politics of culture" (film, dance, literature). Then, having sorted them by date and topic, I read them.

I was astonished by what I found. Of course there was lots of jargon, the worst of it ready-made for parody. But this I had expected and was not the most worrying feature. Much more concerning was a strange kind of linguistic determinism at play throughout their theoretical sections and chapters. Almost without exception these student authors argued as if the language that people speak forces or causes them to think and act in certain ways.

Thus they would take a politically loaded term such as, terrorism, note that it has a standard definition (say, "the use of terror or extreme violence for political ends") and then conclude that anyone who accepts this definition must always and in every case believe that people called terrorists are terrorists. In other words, people who accept the standard definition can only say, for example, "these people are a bunch of bloody terrorists" and never "calling these people terrorists distracts attention from the justice of their cause". Or again, it would be argued that any and all users of the phrase "a totally camp queer darling" must be homophobic, a conclusion strangely at odds with the existence and activities of, for example, gay stand-up comics.

This way of arguing not only involved students in a strange sort of linguistic determinism, it also entangled them in self-contradiction. They would often be found condemning, say, "the discourse of terrorism" for committing its users to an uncritical belief in terrorism, while never asking themselves how such condemnation was even possible if their deterministic conceptions of language and discourse were valid.

The failure of all the student authors to appreciate the significance of the distinction between language and the use of language (and the determinism that produced) was also closely bound up with their conception of the meaning of words. Nearly always these students

treated abstract nouns as if they were the names of curious sorts of hollow objects. And "doing theory" therefore consists of looking at "society" (another object) from somewhere imaginatively outside "it", and seeing how the people who, as it were, have to live inside these hollow spaces are constrained in their thoughts and actions as a result.

In fact, a great deal of theory in the humanities and social sciences -- and not just postmodern theory -- involves the creating of a kind of conceptual "landscape" filled with these curious kinds of abstract objects -- "language", "power", "justice", "state", "culture", "government", "the polity", "the economy" and a host of others, which are viewed "theoretically" from somewhere way "outside" or "above" them. But it is just this way of looking at things -- from "on high" -- that makes it so difficult to see how people in the landscape are able to create and re-create the world in which they live, and are not simply trapped or formed by it.

And part of their capacity for creating and re-creating the social world consists precisely in their using these concepts in daily life not as names of encompassing objects (within which they have to live and act), but as instruments of their highly varying purposes.

The problems that result from not distinguishing the definitions of words from their uses, and from always treating abstractions as the names of imprisoning objects, are further compounded when these two misunderstandings are put together, as in fashionable postmodernist treatments of identity or subjectivity. Here, language, as the ultimately hollow and imprisoning object, is put together with the notion that anybody who uses words must be committed to the standard definition of those words, to produce the conclusion that "language" determines the meaning of "identity" words such as man, woman, gay, straight, black, white, natural, normal -- and thus "constructs" (as it is said) human identity or subjectivity itself.

But again the same objections apply. Language is a (highly heterogeneous) instrument of (highly heterogeneous) human purposes, and therefore there are always ironic, sarcastic or simply questioning ways of using identity words, ways that do not commit their users to accepting standard definitions and ways that thus allow identities to be changed, melded and subverted as well as affirmed. One has only to consider the subverting way in which many African-Americans in the US use the word nigger to appreciate this point. Everything depends on how (and thus why) we use words.

These elementary distinctions, between language and the use of language, between the definitions of words and their employment in sentences and propositions, between abstractions as names of objects and as purpose-dependent instruments or operators, were standard, indeed commonplace, in the analytic philosophy that dominated many Western universities until about 30 years ago. Many of them go back to the later philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein, the towering genius of 20th-century Western philosophy. But Wittgenstein and the philosophical tradition he helped to found became unfashionable long ago, and philosophy in general has shrunk in size and influence in most universities across the Western and especially the Anglo-Saxon world.

But if philosophy is little taught, or not taught at all, this will not prevent students or their teachers doing it, because there is almost nothing of any importance to human beings that does not involve their reflecting on their use of language. So since philosophy is unavoidable, in place of good philosophy well and professionally taught we get bad philosophy poorly and amateurishly taught, and called theory.

This is not the place for a detailed analysis of present university teaching practices or for advocacy of reform. But I will say that I think no undergraduate should complete a pure or applied natural science degree without doing a major and compulsory course in the philosophy of natural science, no undergraduate should complete a law degree without doing a major and compulsory course in the philosophy of law and no undergraduate should complete a history, economics, sociology or politics degree without doing a major and compulsory course in the philosophy of history or social science. (And just in case anybody wonders, I am not a professional philosopher nor do I work in a philosophy department. This is intellectual advocacy, not disguised self-interest.)

And this is also not -- most assuredly not -- a matter of politics, and still less of party politics. Wittgenstein was proud that his philosophy classes (in 1930s Cambridge) were attended by convinced Communists and convinced Catholics, and devotees of his thought have included highly conservative judges, Marxist-Leninists and every shade of liberal between. Like many a rigorous liberal educator before and since, he had a professional ethic that made it his primary duty not to tell students what to think, but how to think clearly and well, not to teach students what to believe, but how to argue for and defend what they believed in the most rigorous possible way. Most of the student theses I analyse in my new book, The Trouble with Theory, espouse leftish views and causes (views and causes with which I have a fair amount of sympathy) but the desperately question-begging way in which they do so does nothing to win them converts. And had they been right-wing or conservative in orientation, the same would have been true.

I am not concerned here with politics. I am concerned with one way, just one way among many, in which our universities are letting down some of their brightest and best students. It must stop.

(Source: http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/arts/paralysed-by-postmodernism/story-e6frg8px-1111117050226)

Multi-Culturalism or World Culture?
On a "Left"-Wing Response to
Contemporary Social Breakdown

Loren Goldner

A Rosa Luxemburg of the 21st century, studying America during the decades after 1973, will see a general fall in living standards of roughly 20% for at least 80% of the population. She will note that in 1945, the U.S. had the world's leading industrial exports, the world's highest level of productivity, and the world's highest paid work force. In such a setting, lasting into the late 1950's, she will note that one working-class income was sufficient to support, i.e. to reproduce, a family of four or even more people. She will note that, into the early 1960's, most, but by no means all such incomes were earned by whites, and she will also note the steady growth of a northern urban black proletariat into the same period, also reproducing black working class families. By 1992, on the other hand, two or more working-class incomes were necessary for the early 1960's level of reproduction, and more and more of the children of those black working class families, living among the ruins of America's industry, were being pushed into the underclass. She might come across a Business Week survey (August 1991) showing that the joint income of a typical young white working class couple, both holding full-time dead-end jobs, was equal to 44%, in real terms, of the pay of one skilled worker of the same age 30 years earlier. For a working-class couple of color, the fall was even more dramatic. In the early 1950's, our Rosa Luxemburg figure will note, the average American working-class family paid 15% of its income for housing, whereas in 1992, this figure was approaching 50%. She will therefore not be surprised to see that over the 45 years following World War II, the bulk of capitalist profits earned in the U.S. shifted radically from industry to banking and real estate. The top items among U.S. exports by 1992 were no longer primarily technology and industrial products, but agricultural goods and popular culture.

Our 21st century historian will naturally ask herself how such a dramatic change could occur so quickly, and she will easily find the answer in a vast outflow of productive investment capital, beginning in the late 1950's, first toward Canada and Europe, then, by the mid-1960's, increasingly toward parts of the Third World. She will see how the 35-year de-industrialization of America was the other side of the this "farming out" of mass production, the steady rise of European and above all Japanese competition, and the global revolution of "high technology" expelling living labor from the production process. Applying the earlier Rosa Luxemburg's concept of the total social wage to this process, she will see without great difficulty that the main target of this accumulation (and dis-accumulation) was the very same well paid, highly skilled U.S. work force of the immediate postwar period. She will see the parallel to the decline of England from 1870 to 1945, except that she might note the skill with which America's rulers, from the late 1950's onward, finessed, cajoled and bludgeoned European, Japanese and Arab holders of ever-mounting dollar reserves to re-invest them in American government bonds and the U.S.

capital market, thereby enabling the gravity of the decline to be concealed from the majority of Americans, and even from most members of the ruling elite. Re-reading Marx's Theories of Surplus Value or her earlier namesake's Accumulation of Capital, our historian may smirk at the imprisonment of the elite in their pitiful Keynesian and monetarist economic ideas, touting as "growth" a year-to-year increase in GNP while America's cities filled up with closed factories, potholed streets, drug addicts, fast food chains, security guards and homeless people.

Pushing our thought experiment further, perhaps it will catch our historian's attention that by the late 1980's, American high school students taking international standardized exams were, in every subject, in precisely 20th place of 20 so-called "advanced industrial countries". She may note that by the same time, over 50% of PhDs in scientific and technical subjects in American universities were awarded to foreigners, and that what remained of American R&D thereafter depended increasingly on such foreigners remaining in the U.S. (She might smile at such an unexpected reversal of "dependency theory".) Looking at the reproduction of the broader work force, she will not be surprised to see managers, in what skilled industrial sectors remained, wondering out loud what to do when the current, older generation of workers retired, because the high schools and colleges were no longer replacing their skills. But familiar with earlier Marxian and Luxemburgist concepts of the reproduction of labor power, and seeing how the American capitalists had been by-passing the costs of this reproduction for 35 years, none of this will surprise her.

Nor, finally, will our Rosa be surprised to learn that in the glitzy mainstream institutions of ideology, in the media, in the highly-funded research institutes, in academia, in publishing or the schools, this gutting of America's ability to materially reproduce itself, from the late 1950's onward, was barely mentioned, and rarely discussed with any seriousness or awareness of the gravity of the problem. Reviewing standard figures of the dominant ideologies, she will note that the John Kenneth Galbraiths and the Milton Friedmans of the 1960's, the E.F. Shumachers and Ivan Ilyches of the 1970's, or the "supply-siders" and "flexible specialization theorists" of the 1980's were doing their job in keeping attention focused on phony problems and phony solutions.

Remembering the earlier Rosa Luxemburg's pre-World War I polemic with Lenin and other revolutionaries about the meaning of the expanded material reproduction of society, our 21st century historian will eagerly turn to the radical opposition in declining American capitalism, fully expecting to find there, at last, a serious discussion of these issues and contending programmatic and strategic solutions for them. How, she will ask herself, were the "cutting questions" being posed among America's self-styled radical milieu, inside and outside the academy, as the country sank into an economic and social crisis worse than that of the 1930's? Surely, there, she will find the debate about the above questions carried out with the seriousness the situation demanded.

In fact, as we know, in a survey of the great majority of milieus or publications broadly associated with the left in America today (1991), activist or academic, our

historian will find very little discussion of the issues above, still less any programmatic initiatives organized around them. She will find, perhaps, some brilliant literary theorist explaining that social class, the economy and-- why not?-- deindustrialization are essentially a "text". Thinking perhaps that such a concept of class nonetheless arises in a search for a new basis of class unity in the new, post-1973 period of crisis and decline, she will perhaps be surprised to learn that, no, the big debate on the American left in the late 1980's and early 1990's was about the "difference" of the "identity" of every oppressed group, with the notable exception of the working class as a whole, and that this difference was, in fact, just...difference. Reading more deeply, she will discover that the very word "reproduction" did not mean in 1992 what it meant in the writings of Marx--the ability of a social class or society to materially reproduce itself in an expanded way--but had been pre-empted by a debate over reproductive rights in the strictly biological sense, which are by no means trivial questions but which can be trivialized by isolating them from the notion of reproduction in the broader social sense. She will initially be surprised to discover the widespread belief that identities along lines of race, gender and class are not constituted in relationship to production and social reproduction but rather by the "desires" of the groups and individuals concerned. She will be even more surprised to hear proponents of the older, apparently more pedestrian view of the working class as a universal class, whose emancipation is the necessary (but not sufficient) precondition for all emancipation, mocked as exponents of an antiquated "master discourse".

But nothing, I think, will surprise our 21st century Rosa Luxemburg more than the discovery that, during the two decades of the pulverization of America's work force in the process described above, the majority of the American left increasingly came to characterize many of the very processes associated with the material reproduction of society, such as industry, technology, social infrastructure, science, education, technical skills and their transmission from one generation to the next, as well as literacy and the cultural traditions that arose inseparably from these phenomena in the earlier history of capitalism, as expressions of "white male" values and ideology. She will be even more perplexed to realize that this identification of the expanded material reproduction of society as a "white male" phenomenon took hold in the very decades when Japan and the new capitalist powers of Asia were becoming powerhouses of the capitalist world economy, and were contributing mightily to the dismantling of the life supports of the American working class. She might note the convergence between the increasing circulation of all types of fictitious paper in the U.S. economy and the increasing preoccupation of broad segments of the American left with symbolically defined identities and with a general view of reality as "text". She might see a parallel between the economic trend of deindustrialization and the academic fad of deconstructionism. She might conclude that the majority of the American left had been colonized by the dominant ideology and its obliviousness, over decades, to these problems. She might notice that the way in which the American left, historically confined to its ghettoes in the society and in academia, posed the very important questions of race, gender, sexual preference and class were in fact shared by very few ordinary working people, who did not experience these questions as text and who were nonetheless also preoccupied with these issues. Our Rosa Luxemburg might finally conclude that,

going into the great social and economic crisis of the 1990's essentially blind to the question of expanded material reproduction of society as a the sole framework in which to seriously pose issues of race, gender and class, the bulk of the American left was not only blinded by its own ideology, but that it was positively contributing, often stridently, to the dominant ideology of the times.

Our Rosa Luxemburg will have discovered the great debate about multi-culturalism.

Multiculturalism is in. Not inappropriately, multiculturalism means different things to different people. To the well-funded and much-trumpeted theorists of the right, the self-styled exponents of "cultural literacy", the Allan Blooms and William Bennetts, multiculturalism is a subversive euphemism for the end of white supremacy in American education and in American society as a whole. To the pseudo-radicals of the academic intelligentsia, who have turned social class into a "text", multiculturalism is the freeing of a "multiplicity of discourses", a dissolution of the ostensible "phallologocentrism" of an ostensible "Western" cultural tradition. (One important clue to the sterility of the debate, as currently posed, is a startling agreement between the opposing sides on just exactly what Western culture is.) So extreme is the situation that neoconservative critics like Hilton Kramer can present themselves as defenders of the safely embalmed "high" modernist avant-garde of the early 20th century, of Joyce, Proust, or Kafka, as if men of Kramer's sensibility did not, 70 years ago, revile such revolutionaries, and as if they would be capable of recognizing, and appreciating, a new Joyce, Proust or Kafka today. At the other end of the spectrum, while the American population as a whole falls to 49th place in comparative world literacy, the purveyors of the post-modern "French disease" continue a frenzied production of self-involved books and posh academic journals which communicate nothing so much as a basic ignorance of real history and the pathetic belief that the deconstruction of literary texts amounts to serious radical political activity.

In this article, we will not concern ourselves with the right- wing media assault on the multi-culturalists as the force primarily responsible for the palpable collapse of liberal education in the U.S. The vacuousness of such claims, coming from the political camp which has been gutting the reproduction of labor power at every level of American society for more than thirty years, has been dealt with elsewhere. We will focus rather on the claims to radicalism of the multiculturalists themselves, or of any definition of human beings in society which is essentially cultural. From such a focus, we will develop a critique of the Eurocentric conservatives and of the multiculturalists from the vantage point of an emerging WORLD culture.

It might be said without great exaggeration that the contemporary debate over culture comes down to a debate over the world historical status of ancient Greece. For an Allan Bloom and many of his ilk, all that is valid in the last 2,500 years of history is almost literally a series of footnotes to Plato and Aristotle. For the multiculturalists, on the other hand, trapped as they are in the logic of relativism, ancient Greece must necessarily be just one "equally valid" culture among many. But, given its centrality in the classical Western canon, ancient Greece cannot be only that, but also the very source of phallologocentrism.

When one probes the terms of this debate, however, what it truly amazing is that the ostensibly anti-Eurocentric multiculturalists are, without knowing it, purveying a remarkably Eurocentric version of what the Western tradition really is.

The ultimate theoretical sources of today's multiculturalism are two very white and very dead European males, Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger. For the uninitiated, the continuity between these philosophers and today's revolutionary claims for rap music may seem arcane indeed. But they are also very telling. Even if Nietzsche and Heidegger must ultimately be rejected (and they must), one trivializes them at one's peril. Nietzsche, writing in the latter decades of the last century, and Heidegger, whose most important work was written in the second guarter of this one, could hardly have imagined the contemporary fin de siecle in which their names would be mentioned in the same breath with 2 Live Crew, Los Lobos or the Sex Pistols. Both men were haunted by a vision of a world of crushing uniformity which they saw taking shape around them, and of which the working-class socialist movement of the last century was--for them-- the culmination. They sought the origins of this levelling process in the most remote origin of the Western cultural tradition, that of archaic Greece, and above all in the pre-Socratic philosophers. What is today called "difference" with distinctly populist emphasis was, ironically, first articulated by Nietzsche as a radical aristocratic refusal of the culmination of history in a "closed system" of egalitarianism, liberalism, democracy, science and technology, or socialism, which for him were so many manifestations of a "slave morality", the levelling wish for sameness which the "weak" foist upon the "strong". That such an idea, one hundred years later, would become the basis for vaunting the radical "difference" of a gay black woman of the underclass did not, in all probability, occur to Nietzsche. Nietzsche looked rather to the emergence of a new elite of aesthetic lawgivers, whom he called supermen, and who would have the strength and courage to shape reality like great artists, without having to invoke debilitating universal truths valid for everyone. Nietzsche's specific solution, which has often (and wrongly) been seen as an important source of fascism (it was a minor source of fascism), interests his contemporary partisans far less than his diagnosis, but the idea of every individual as an aestheticized "will to power", who shapes a world with no reference to supra-individual, universal laws and with no limits except those imposed by other such wills, is the direct source of Michel Foucault's "microphysics of power", and indisputably foreshadows something of the contemporary reality of a Donald Trump or an Ivan Boesky, just as it foreshadows the reality of a postmodern literary theorist pursuing tenure on an Ivy League campus.

Nietzsche and Heidegger saw the origin of planetary uniformity and levelling in the very Western conception of reason, with its universal claims. They, like their postmodern followers, did not trouble themselves with analyses of material conditions, modes of production and the like. They felt that in taking on the problem at the philosophical level, they were aiming for the jugular. While socialism was the culmination of the trend they denounced, Nietzsche knew next to nothing of Marx or Marxism (although he did brilliantly intuit the bourgeois character of the German Social Democrats, long before most Marxists did).

Heidegger was more familiar with Marx-- above all through his student Herbert Marcuse-- he but rarely treats Marx directly in his work. For both of them, Hegel was a stand-in for the kind of historical rationality which culminated in socialism. The meaning of the contemporary fashionable word "deconstruction" is a distillation of their attempt to overthrow a dialectical rationality, and what they attack in Hegel is subliminally imputed to Marx. (The occasional assertion that Marxian and de-construction theories are compatible is like saying that Marxism and monetarist economics are compatible.) Their target is a rationality for which all "otherness", i.e. difference, is sooner or later subsumed in a higher synthesis or supercession. For Nietzsche, such a dialectic was (as it also was for Hegel), the dialectic of master and slave, but in contrast to Hegel, a dialectic which grew out of the resentment of the slave, a slave morality. For Nietzsche, the critique of the dialectic was a defense of the "difference" of the aristocratic master, the higher aesthetic lawgiver he called the Superman.

(Having said this, it is important to point out that there ARE false universals, which conceal the specific interests of class, caste, racial or gender elites within empty pretensions of all-inclusiveness. The error of the post- modern theorists of difference, however, is to conclude that because such false universals exist, no other kind COULD exist. For Nietzsche, universal values (or what the post-modernists call "master discourses") were invented by the weak to rein in the strong; for the post-modernists, who get their Nietzsche through Foucault, such values, including Marxism, are "discourses of power" over the powerless. If the French Communist Party, or Stalinism generally, used Marxism to justify totalitarian bureaucracy, the logic goes, then all Marxism must necessarily lead to totalitarian bureaucracy. If Ronald Reagan speaks of morality, then all morality must be similar to that of Ronald Reagan. And so on.)

Heidegger carries the critique of the dialectic much farther. All of the stages of his complex evolution cannot be traced here. While deeply influenced by Nietzsche, Heidegger saw both Nietzsche and his own early phase (which was summarized in Being and Time (1927) as the culmination of the very tradition he was attempting to overthrow. Nietzsche's solution had been to see every individual as a "will to power", strong or weak, master or slave, and every perspective articulated by individuals as a "will to power", an aesthetic attempt to shape a reality that had no laws separate from such wills, because such wills are all that exist. The early Heidegger had, by a complex transposition, taken up such a will to power into his conception of individual existence in Being and Time. But the experience of Nazism, which he initially saw as a revolution against Western metaphysics, convinced him that the "will to power" pointed invariably to a planetary domination of the earth by technology (again, the closed system of technique and science which was the nightmare of both Nietzsche and Heidegger), and that this impulse was latent in the Western philosophical project from Parmenides onward. (Heidegger later concluded that the Nazis had remained trapped in the general "technological' nihilism" of the West. In his last phase, which would be decisive for Michel Foucault, Heidegger decided that the history of Being in Western culture was the history of this will to power, codified in a conception of Being as PRESENCE, reducible to a discrete image. In Western culture, in Heidegger's interpretation,

what cannot be reduced to such an image has no "Being", but the ontological level of Being, as Heidegger conceives it, is precisely what defies such a reduction. The Western planetary project of technical mastery, in this critique, was a direct outgrowth of the pre-Socratic Greek vision of Being after Parmenides, which was, in reality, a "forgetting" of Being. The only solution, in the last phase of Heidegger's work, was to wait for the emergence of a new sense of Being, something as fundamentally new as the Parmenidean sense had been new 2,500 years ago. Anything which did not overthrow (i.e. deconstruct) the metaphysics of presence could only be another step in a planetary "technological nihilism".

But the post-modern cultural theory which has swept North American academia in the past two decades did not come directly from German philosophy, nor does it preoccupy itself directly with the Nietzsche-Heidegger diagnosis of the planetary dominion of technique and the metaphysics of presence. The North American current is unthinkable without the Parisian Nietzsche and Heidegger as they developed after 1945, for it was in France above all that these philosophers acquired left-wing credentials. The two major mediators of Nietzschean-Heideggerian "difference" to North American post-modern academia are Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. In their work, "difference" is radically transformed. It is no longer, as with Nietzsche, the difference of the aristocratic radical against mass resentment, nor, as with Heidegger, the critique of a planetary project of the dominion of technique, of "technological nihilism", the triumph of the Same at the heart of the metaphysics of presence. In France, "difference" became, with Foucault, differences of "desire" and, with Derrida, of "other voices"; in America, it became, in pseudo-radical guise, the ideological counterpoint to the pulverization of the social in the era of high-tech neoliberalism, the ultimate intellectual leveraged buyout.

Currents on the left which are hostile to or skeptical of French- inspired post-modernism have been at a loss to combat it because of their own disarray at many levels. The "race/gender/class" theorists sound radical enough, and few people of a traditional Marxist background are philosophically equipped to combat the theory at its roots (indeed, few of the "race/gender/class" theorists know where the roots are). Furthermore, most variants of the Marxist tradition find themselves shackled, in attacking the post-modernists, by certain assumptions held in common with them, flowing from the centrality of France and of the French Revolution in the revolutionary tradition. The cachet of the post-modernists, internationally, is the French connection, and certain assumptions, now crumbling, about the position of France in capitalist and socialist history still create a space for them in the debris. It was for this reason that the recent debate over the French Revolution, and the rise of the French revisionist school led by Francois Furet, must be seen as a broader context for the international impact of post-modernism.

At the beginning of Words and Things (1966), the book that established Michel Foucault as a major figure in France, there is a fascinating analysis of Velasquez's painting "Las Meninas", which contains in some sense the whole Foucaultian project. In this analysis, Foucault identifies the king as the lynchpin in the whole game of representation, which is the real subject of the painting. In all of Foucault's early work, and above all in his innovative (but problematic) early studies of

medicine and of madness, the project is the identification of Western reason with the ostensibly omniscient vantage point of the king, of representation, and of power. This project is the ultimate source of Foucault's conception that all "representational" discourses of ostensibly universal knowledge--including Marxism--actually conceal discourses of separate power. For Foucault, any attempt at such a universal "discourse", and by implication a universal class, which attempts to unite the different fragments of social reality, or the different oppressed groups of capitalist society, (particularly one which privileges the working class), must necessarily be a separate discourse of power, the game of representation centered on the "king", or master discourse. When attempting to fathom the French phase of post-modernism, it must always be kept in mind that the overwhelming experience of "Marxism" in that country was the experience of the ultra-Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF), of which Foucault was briefly a member at the beginning of the 1950's. But even more revealing than such biographical details (which are, for all phenomena emanating from the postwar French intelligentsia, real enough) is Foucault's equation of rationality with the principle of the king, and with the French absolutist state of the 17th and 18th centuries, the state overthrown, (and then strengthened) by the French Revolution. For Foucault and the Foucaultians, there is no other reason than the reason of the "Classical Age", that of French Enlightened absolutism. The aestheticized formalism of the French intellectual tradition, of which Foucault is a perfect product, has its ultimate roots in aristocratic Gallican Catholicism, and achieved its finished form in France's "grand siecle", the 17th century that witnessed the rise of Louis XIV's prototypical enlightened absolutist state. Foucault could not be farther from the Cartesian tradition of "clarity" spawned by that state, but it is significant that for him, such rationality is the only rationality there is. Of course Foucault was perfectly aware of, and deeply indebted to, German philosophy from Kant, via Hegel and Marx, to Nietzsche and Heidegger. But German philosophy is, like French philosophy, the product of another Enlightened absolutist state, Prussia, and therefore easily unmasked as another discourse of power. The tradition that remains opaque to Foucault is the English, in the same way that the revolution which remains opaque to him (and to all the contending parties in the post-modernism debate) is the English revolution, particularly its radical currents. But the blindness of Foucault is unfortunately also the blindness of most of the Marxian tradition, including Marx, for whom the French Revolution was always of far greater importance than the English. Because of this blindness, the contemporary crackup of statism, from France to Russia, and of which Foucault is in some sense a major theoretician, leaves the bulk of the international left, which had its own problems with statism, theoretically and politically disarmed.

Before probing this assertion, it is necessary to look at the common ground between Foucault and the neo-liberal revival of the 1970's, which at first glance could not be farther from Foucault's predilections. It is this common ground which allows us to see how the post-modernists are the unwitting pseudo-radical theoreticians of the era of Reagan and Thatcher, giving a "radical" panache to the atomization of society in the new period.

As we have indicated, the ideology of "difference" began with Nietzsche's and Heidegger's attack on the universal claims of Western, above all dialectical reason,

and its drive to make the "Other" into a moment of the "same". In France, through Foucault and Derrida, this "deconstruction" of the unitary subject of Western philosophy (culminating in Hegel's world-historical subject, the latter often seen as a stand-in for Marx's proletarian subject) led to a view of a "plurality of discourses", of "multiple voices", that were never mediated in a higher unity, understood as illusory by definition. Finally, in America, these currents became the extremely esoteric veneer of what amounts to a radical restatement of American pluralism, radical only in the radicalism of its insistence that people of various races, ethnicities, and sexual preferences in fact have nothing of importance in common with one another. In this view, in opposition to Marx, even "class" becomes just one more difference, not a unifying element whose emancipation is the sine qua non of all emancipation. (One recalls, in contrast, the assertion of the Wobbly preamble that "the working class and the employer class have nothing in common", where the working class bears within itself the germ of a higher unity.) For Hegel and Marx, difference is CONTRADICTION, pointing to a higher synthesis; for the post-modernists, difference is irreducible difference, and a higher synthesis just a new discourse of power, a new "master narrative." The high irony is that for Heidegger, such qualities as class, race, ethnicity and sexual preference are precisely in the fallen realm of a "metaphysics of presence", images "beneath" which real authenticity, always totally individual, and always destroyed by such "presencing", is discovered. The current theorists of "identity" who base themselves on such collective categories, and for whom individuality is hardly a concern, have completely inverted the source. But in such a way do ideas migrate, particularly to America.

But there is more. It is not often appreciated in the U.S. that Foucault, in France, anticipated both the media
event of the "new philosophers" (Andre Glucksmann, Bernard Henri-Levi, et al.) in 1977, but also the neo-liberalism that first gained currency under Giscard d'Estaing and then became an international tidal wave in the 1980's, fervently embraced by the "socialist" Mitterand government. What is the connection?

As indicated above, France, because of the international impact of the French Revolution (which far exceeded that of the English Revolution) always had a central position in the mythology of the Marxist left. Although the French working class, at the beginning of the 20th century, had vital revolutionary syndicalist and anarchist currents, by the post-World War II period the dominant PCF and the erratic Socialist Party, as well as the major trade unions which gravitated around them, were overwhelmingly statist. This statism merely echoed the statism of the main French economic tradition of mercantilism, which had origins in the pre-1789 ancien regime. It was a statism quite similar to 20th century versions which proliferated in welfare, socialist, communist and fascist ideologies just about everywhere, and which also had roots in the mercantilism of 17th and 18th century continental Europe. Because France had, along with England, Holland, and the United States, participated in the first wave of bourgeois revolutions prior to industrialization, it was always assumed that France was a capitalist society of roughly the same maturity, and that the bureaucratic statism of the French left was a degenerate form of a movement that pointed "beyond capitalism".

In fact, France in 1945 was still a deeply rural society, with 50% of the population still living on the land, engaged in micro-agricultural production. Yet only since the 1970's, when the French peasantry had sunk to 8% of the population, has it generally been appreciated that the statism of the French left, like the statism of the left everywhere, was an expression not of maturity, but of backwardness, and that the Parisian culture which fascinated leftist intellectuals throughout the world was not so much about the supercession of capitalism as the absence of full-blown capitalism.

French statism, of which French leftist statism was an important part, oversaw the rapid industrial transformation of the country from 1945 to 1975. As a result, France became a country of the type pioneered (on the continent) by Germany, in which agricultural producers also fell to less than 10% of the population. Then, as in other countries at the same threshold, the state bureaucracy became a positive hindrance to further economic development. The result was, from the mid-1970's onward, an ideological and then programmatic wave of neo-liberal de-centralization in which the French left discovered it was no less trapped in statism than were the Gaullists. Foucault's "de-centering" of the Hegelian subject, aimed at "Western" Marxism of the 1950's and 1960's and, beyond that, at Marxism generally, had carried out ideologically what Giscard and then Mitterand carried out practically, the dismantling of the French mercantilist development tradition.

The final connection was made by the "new philosophers", who popularized Foucault in their slick paperbacks and media happenings. At the cutting edge of this development were figures such as Glucksmann and Henri-Levy, both of whom had once been ultra-Stalinist militants of France's post-1968 Maoist movement. The appearance, in 1974, of Solzhenitzn's Gulag Archipelago was the moment of truth with their ostensible earlier ""Marxism". After a decade of glorifying the most elphantine totalitarian state in modern history, Mao's China, the "new philosophers" became famous by proclaiming, in the newly receptive neo-liberal climate, that all Marxists, including those who had been combatting Stalinism fifty years before them, were of necessity totalitarians too. What they took from Foucault was the notion of the "master discourse", the philosophy of the Hegelian or Marxist type which attempts, or purports, to unify fragmentary realities into higher, universal syntheses. Within a decade, suspicion of universalizing "master discourses" had become rife in American academia, tantalizingly parallel to Reaganism's ideological dismantling of big statism and de-centralization of poverty and austerity to states and cities.

But nevertheless, contemporary post-modernism does remain rooted in the original problematic of Nietzsche and Heidegger, in the defence of difference. And as such it retains Nietzsche's and Heidegger's account of Western thought, one which is paradoxically highly Eurocentric, in keeping with the highly Eurocentric view of history which supported such a view of philosophy. For Nietzsche and Heidegger were pure products of what we will call, momentarily, the Greek romance of German philosophy. The post-modernists are thus caught in the trap of presenting and "de-constructing" a curiously "Western" version of the Western "tradition", a

version which reads out of history a fundamental non-Western moment, the contribution of ancient Egypt and its further elaboration in Alexandria and in Islam.

As it is emerging in recent serious characterizations of actual Eurocentrism, such as those of Samir Amin and Martin Bernal, one of the great crimes of Western ethnocentrism since the 18th century has been the writing of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Moslem world out of its history, not merely since the Moslem conquests of the 7th century, but also in the period prior to the emergence of ancient Israel and ancient Greece, perhaps best exemplified by the occultation of the historical importance of the civilization of ancient Egypt. The merit of Bernal's multi-volume Black Athena, whatever its other problems, has been to squarely pose the significance of ancient Egypt for the formation of the Western tradition.

The disappearance of ancient Egypt from the horizon of Western cultural origins is, historically, a relatively recent phenomenon, barely two centuries old. As Bernal and others have pointed out, the ancient Greeks themselves frankly acknowledged Egypt (whose civilization predated their own by more than two millenia) as a major source of their world. For the other pole of Western origins, ancient Israel, the sojourn in Egypt, and the exodus from the land of the pharoahs, was a founding moment of the culture. The Egyptian provinces of the Roman empire, centered on Alexandria, were the source of the last important philosophical movement of antiquity, neo-Platonism, from which the Hegelian and Marxian dialectic directly derive. Further, Alexandrian neo-Platonism grew out of an international ferment in which all manner of Near Eastern philosophies and mystery religions, as well as Buddhism, mixed with the moribund remnants of Greco-Roman classicism, and decisively marked the early history of Christianity. It was this very Alexandrian legacy which the Moslem conquests of the 7th century appropriated, and molded, by the 11th century, into the apex of Arab and Persian civilization, associated with the urban splendour of Bagdad, Damascus and Cordoba. During the same period, the knights of the court of Charlemagne were valiantly struggling to learn to write their names. When, in the 12th and 13th centuries, the works of Avicenna, Averroes, al-Ghazali, and al-Farabi were translated into Latin, the cultural heritage of antiquity, but one thoroughly tranformed by its Alexandrian and Moslem phases, passed into the then-impoverished "West". (The contemporary multiculturalists never tell us that "Oriental" Islamic civilization also claims to derive from both Jewish and Greek sources, and that therefore these "logocentric" legacies are not unique to the sources of the "West", nor do they tell us that Islam spread the study of Plato and Aristotle from Morocco to Malaysia.)

When, in 15th century Italy, these Arab and Persian roots had contributed mightily to the Renaissance, ancient Egypt was again revered, through the writings of the so-called "Hermes Trismegistus", as the ultimate source of neo-Platonic wisdom, although in a way more mystified than had been the case among the ancient Greeks. Finally, in the 17th and 18th century phase of Enlightened absolutism, "Egyptian wisdom", ultimately of Alexandrian origin, was thoroughly entwined with the ideologies of the middle-class radical secret societies and sects, such as the Rosicrucians and the Freemasons, which played an important role in the French Revolution.

(It should be kept in mind that prior to the decipherment of Egyptian hieroglyphs in 1822, most Western Egyptophilia was of a wildly speculative nature. What is important, for this discussion, is the continuity of the myth of Egypt, whatever the reality, and the fact that "Western" tradition had no difficulty acknowledging it.) It is the highest irony that virtually every major figure in the "Western" "canon" from the 12th to the early 19th century, as defended by the actual Eurocentrists, from the French troubadours to Dante, by way of the Florentine neo-Platonists Pico and Ficino, Rabelais, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Spencer, Milton, Leibnitz, Spinoza, Goethe and Hegel (to focus for a moment on the philosophical and literary currents) were deeply influenced by this "Egyptian wisdom" or "Alexandrian" legacy in either its neo-Platonist or Hermeticist or Jewish mystical (Kabbalistic) form, and acknowledged it more or less as such. In actual fact, the Eurocentrists would be hard pressed to mention a major pre-Enlightenment figure who was NOT influenced by such currents. After 1800, these same traditions passed into the legacy of romanticism and later the Bohemian avant-garde, where they remained a force up to at least surrealism. Nevertheless, in spite of the increasing tendency, through the 19th century, among Western Hellenophiles, to see ancient Greece as a sui generis phenomenon, hermetically sealed from Semitic and African (Egyptian) influences, figures of no less stature than Melville, Hawthorne and Poe (to cite only American examples) still bore the markings of successive "Egyptian revivals".)

But in the late 18th and early 19th century, an ideological shift began to eclipse the "Egyptian" tradition. This shift was the Anglo- German romance with ancient Greece, which achieved its apotheosis in Germany after 1760. The causes of this shift are complex, and cannot be dealt with here. The Anglo-French intrusion into the eastern Mediterranean after 1798 made the "Eastern question"--the struggle for the corpse of the moribund Ottoman empire--a major foreign policy question in Europe until 1918, and undoubtedly influenced the West's desire to read the legacy of the Near East, over millennia, out of a new view of history which imagined ancient Athens arising quite in isolation from its historical environment. Bernal is undoubtedly right to see a new anti-Semitism and racism at work in this transformation. But there are many other factors as well. The final phase of the "Egyptian" tradition within the mainstream of European culture was that of Enlightened absolutism, which had been destroyed or thoroughly reformed in the era of the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars. Once the absolutist state which contributed to the Enlightenment was shattered, secular rationality could separate from the old "Egyptian" mystique. Indeed, the new militant Enlightenment world views had no need for, and every reason to dispense with, the apparent obscurantism of Freemason ritual. This "de-canting" of Enlightenment rationality from its pre-revolutionary institutional framework pushed the "Egyptian" tradition toward the romantic and Bohemian margins of the new, ascendant bourgeois society.

The new, Anglo-German and above all German romance with ancient Greece was already a break with earlier views of Greco-Roman antiquity as they developed from the Renaissance onward. The revival of antiquity in the 15th century was first of all a revival of Roman civic culture, and the literary and historical models of 15th

century Italy were above all models of Roman civic virtue and civic rhetoric. The philosophical revival of Plato, as indicated earlier, came through Arab and Byzantine sources, and arrived in the garb of Egyptian mystery religion, which only later was discovered to have nothing to do with ancient Egypt. When the rise of Enlightened absolutism modeled on the France of Louis XIV, set down a cultural hegemony extending from Paris to St. Petersburg, by way of Santo Domingo and Rio de Janeiro, the ultimate tone of this culture was again Latin, and Roman. The legacy of ancient Greece, prior to the 18th century, (when Latin was far more widely known than Greek) was always filtered through a Roman garb: it was empire, the state, law, the civic virtues of the citizen which were remembered, and not the communitarian dimension of the Athenian polis and the Greek city state. It was left to disunited, fragmented Germany, where national unification was still a distant dream, to lead the cultural revolt against the imperial mode of the Roman-Latin-French civilization of Enlightened absolutism. This revolt, and the Greek romance to which it gave rise, is associated with figures such as Herder, Winckelmann, Goethe, and later Hoelderlin and Hegel; it cannot be explained through racism and imperialism alone, but it was German Hellenophilism that buried the "Egyptian" tradition and occulted it from the historical memory of Western origins. A similar development occurred in England, out of English romanticism's involvement with the Greek war of independence in 1823 (and therefore once again with the "Eastern question"), but figures such as Keats, Shelley and Byron had no international cultural impact on the scale of the German Hellenophiles, who were, among other things, the direct precursors of another Hellenophile, Karl Marx.

The disappearance of ancient Egypt, or the myth of ancient Egypt, from the horizon of Western cultural origins, where it held sway until the late 18th century, was the sine qua non for the constitution of a "modernist" view of Western history which, unfortunately, was until very recently uncritically accepted by the great majority of the Western left, a view which made the left susceptible to the blandishments of post-modernism. This outlook traced a certain Western history from Athens to Renaissance Florence, to the London and Paris of the Enlightenment, to the culmination of Western high bourgeois culture which ended in the successive deaths of Beethoven, Goethe and Hegel ca. 1830. This was a history written with an eye to the progress of a certain kind of classical rationality, which vaguely acknowledged the Hebrew prophets as distant precursors of that rationality (for their role as de-mystifiers). For such a sense of Western history, deeply shaped by the French view of the Enlightenment and by the French Revolution, and deeply critical of religion from a positivist point of view, nothing much had happened in the two millennia from Socrates' Athens to the Florence of the Medici. For such a sense of history, the Alexandrian and Islamic moments sketched above, because of their religious dimension, for all intents and purposes did not exist, except possibly as transmitters, and certainly not as shaping forces in their own right. This was the legacy of the Anglo-German romance with ancient Greece, the world view in which the Near East, before, during and after Greco-Roman antiquity, dropped out of Western history. The disappearance of Alexandria and Islam was inseparable from the disappearance of ancient Egypt, as part of a general isolation of ancient Athens from its eastern Mediterranean environment, before and after its golden age.

This is the real Eurocentric view. And what do the ostensibly radical post- modern multiculturalists tell us about all this? Precisely nothing! And why? Because, through Nietzsche and Heidegger, Foucault and Derrida, THEY have swallowed the Hellenophile romance whole, except to change the plus and minus signs. They ignore the Arabic and Persian sources of the Renaissance, and thus obscure the Alexandrian and Moslem mediation, and further development, of the Greek legacy. Further, they agree with the Eurocentrists across the board that "Western" culture, like all "cultures", is a self-contained phenomenon. Do they tell us that French Provencal poetry, from which modern Western literature begins, borrowed massively from Arab poetry, and particularly the erotic mystical poetry of Islamic Spain? Do they tell us that Dante was steeped in the work of the Andalucian Sufi Ibn Arabi? That some of the greatest Spanish writers of the 16th century siglo de oro, such as St. John of the Cross and Cervantes, drew heavily on Islamic and Jewish sources? Do they tell us about the Franciscan heretics in 16th century Mexico who attempted to build, together with the Indians, a Christian communist utopia in defiance of a hopelessly corrupt European Catholicism? Do they tell us about the belief in the Egyptian sources of Western civilization which held sway from the ancient Greeks, via the Florentine Academy, to the 18th century Freemasons? They tell us nothing of the kind, because such syncretistic cross-fertilization of cultures flies in the face of their relativistic assumption that cultures confront each other as so many hermetically sealed, and invariably distorting "texts". So many "dead white European males" turn out to have massive debts to dead males (and in the case of Arabic poetry, females) of color! The post-modernists are so busy exposing the "canon" as a litany of racism, sexism and imperialism that they, exactly like the explicit Eurocentrists, fail to notice that some of the canon's greatest works have roots in the very cultures they supposedly "erase".

Edward Said's omnipresent book Orientalism virtually founded this genre. Said tells us about how Western views of the Eastern Mediterranean world, particularly after the rise of modern imperialist rivalry (the so-called "Eastern question) were a distorting discourse of power, and could essentially only be that. (His discussion of Dante, for example, makes no mention of Ibn Arabi.) But Said tells us absolutely nothing about the Western "discourse" on the Orient when the balance of forces were exactly reversed, namely from the 8th until the 13th centuries, when Islamic civilization towered over the West, culturally and militarily. As one writer put it:

"Were the Eskimos suddenly to emerge as the world's leading artists and scholars, were factories in Greenland to outproduce those of Japan, and were invaders from the far north to conquer the United States and the Soviet Union, we would hardly be more astonished than were the Muslims two hundred years ago when they suddenly fell under West European control". (D. Pipes, In the Path of God, p. 97)

Centuries of Arab and then Ottoman hegemony in the Mediterranean, and their very real ability to militarily threaten the European heartland, which receded only at the end of the 17th century, had blinded Moslems to the rising world power to the north, hundreds of years after their actual ascendancy had been lost.

Said is of course not writing about "Occidentalism", or a Moslem "discourse" on the West, and cannot be criticized for not including examples such as the statement of the Arab Ibn Sa'id, who described the Franks in the mid-11th century as "resembling animals more than men...The cold air and cloudy skies (cause) their temperaments to become frozen and their humours to become crude; their bodies are extended, their coloring pale, and their hair too long. They lack keenness of understanding and acuteness of mind, they are dominated by ignorance and stupidity, and blindness of purpose is widespread". (ibid. p. 81)

What is important is not to multiply quotations proving the banal point that the Moslem world at its apogee was as ethnocentric as the Europeans were at theirs; the point is rather that, in the periods of Moslem world ascendancy, Moslems thought of the inhabitants of the Christian West as barbarians inhabiting a backwater which interested them as little as the blue-painted inhabitants of Britain interested the Roman cultural elite in the 2nd century AD.

But we can criticize Said for not telling us more about "Orientalism" in the West during the period from the 8th to the 13th centuries when the cultural superiority of the Islamic world over Europe was a reality, and an acknowledged one. He does not tell us about the archbishop of Zaragoza in the 9th century who deplored the decadence of the Christian youth in his time and their enchantment by the brilliant Arabic culture emanating from southern Spain, to which.all of Europe then looked:

"They are incapable of writing a correct sentence in Latin but excel the Moslems in the knowledge of the finest grammatical and rhetorical points of Arabic. The scriptures and the writings of the Church fathers lie unread, but they rush to read and translate the latest manuscript from Cordoba."

Said and the other analysts of Western "discourse" do not often discuss these realities, because they challenge one of their most sacrosanct assumptions, whether implicit or explicit, that of total cultural relativism. They are loathe to admit that some cultures are, in the context of world history, at certain moments more dynamic, in fact superior to others, and that Arabic culture in Moslem Spain in the 11th century towered over culture in Zaragoza or in Paris. To acknowledge this would open the way to acknowledging the unacceptable, unrelativist idea that in the 17th century, the situation had reversed itself and that some cutting edge of world historical ascendancy and superiority had passed to the West. Yet one need only look at the direction of translations to see the change, as it was understood by both sides. From the 11th to the 13th centuries, thousands of works of Arabic philosophy, science, mathematics and poetry were translated into Latin and avidly read all over Europe, while little or nothing was translated in the opposite direction. After the French invasion of Egypt in 1798 (the event which, long after the West had laid the foundations of world hegemony, awoke the Moslem world to the new situation), a mass of translations from French into Arabic began and continued through the 19th century.

Donald Lach begins his multi-volume Asia in the Making of Europe with the following statement:

"It has often been acknowledged that gunpowder, the printing press and the compass were essential to the ascendancy of Europe. It is less often acknowledged that none of these were European inventions." This reality is acknowledged neither by the Eurocentrists, nor by the relativists of contemporary multiculturalism. To do so, once again, would be to acknowledge a world historical process larger than any single culture, and a dynamism at the level of world history in which there is cross-cultural syncretism and PROGRESS.

To look seriously at world history prior to Western ascendancy would also undermine another cherished dogma of multiculturalist relativism, namely that the global hegemony of Western culture in modern history rests exclusively on military force. For Said, the discourse of Orientalism is first and foremost a discourse of such "power". But history shows repeatedly that military conquest is usually followed by the cultural conquest of the conqueror, that cultural hegemony has often moved in the OPPOSITE direction from military superiority. The repeated Mongol and Turkic invasions of China and the Middle East up to the 15th century, so devastating to Chinese and Moslem civilizations (and no small factor in their later vulnerability to the West), invariably led, within a couple of generations, to the integration of the Mongols and Turks into the cultures they had overrun. The Almoravid and Almohad invasions of Moslem Spain from North Africa in the 11th and 12th centuries similarly led to their integration of the invaders into the overrefined urban culture they conquered; indeed, the great Arab historian Ibn Khaldun built his whole theory of universal history on this cycle of nomadic conquest and later absorption by the conquerors.

The rather singular convergence of military ascendancy and of cultural hegemony by the West, from the 16th to the 19th centuries, is one "difference", seen in the perspective of world history, which the multiculturalists should tell us more about. To do so, all they lack, like their counterparts the Eurocentrists, is a notion of world history, and. knowledge of it.

A look at world history in a contemporary context would also lead the multiculturists to the question of the current economic and technological supremacy of Japan, which, one would think, might pose some difficulties for their assault on the ideology of "dead white European males" as the ruling ideology of our time. The indisputable fact that the world's most dynamic capitalist zone for the past three decades has been in Asia does not trouble them in the least, since they are, among other things, profoundly bored by questions of economics and technology which cannot be connected to cultural difference. The implicit, if not explicit, agenda of the multiculturalists is to present the values associated with intensive capitalist accumulation as "white male", so that "non-white" peoples such as the Japanese or Koreans who currently embody those values with a greater fervor than most "whites" somehow lose their difference, and certainly their interest. 'The executives and R&D teams of the Asian firms currently pounding American and European industry with their cutting-edge products would undoubtedly be surprised

to learn that their values were "white". (It used to be the case that the association of cultural attributes with skin color was called.. .racism.) The multiculturalists document the struggles of Andean or Eritrean women against imperialism and gender oppression in every detail, but the successive strikes waves of the Korean workers, one of the most important upsurges of the past decade, is passed over in silence. Somehow when a Third World country is industrialized, is ceases to be "different".

In this connection, to conclude, it is necessary to consider the "material conditions" in which post-modern multiculturalism has come to center stage. It is only slightly an exaggeration to say, as indicated earlier, that it emerged out of the collapse, in the West, of the model of capitalist accumulation based on the assembly line, of which the automobile, in production and consumption, was the symbol par excellence. The vision of "modernity" we have analyzed throughout had as its implicit or explicit teleology the transformation of the planet into a world of mass production workers, a transformation which France, from which the theory emerged, underwent after 1945 as few other countries. The end of this model of accumulation in the post-1973 world economic crisis dissolved the climate in which various "archaisms" could be assumed to be on the verge of extinction. This is not to offer a narrowly economic analysis of the current ideologies of multicultural identity, or to imply that there was something fundamentally healthy about the 1945-1973 model of accumulation, or to suggest that a new expansion based on a new model of accumulation would restore the old notions of modernity and rationality which were shared, at bottom, by Western capitalism, the Eastern bloc, and Third World development regimes.

(1991, 2000 - Source: http://home.earthlink.net/~lrgoldner/multiculturalism.html)

Critical notes on Edward Said

Irfan Habib
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The writer and critic Edward Said who died last year was admired by the whole anti-imperialist left for his courageous defence of Palestinian rights. The image of this successful, western-educated, frail academic throwing a token stone against the Israeli forces in occupation of his land of birth is one that few will forget. So it is not surprising that many take his writings, especially his early work Orientalism, as the standard reference point for examining the impact of imperialism on culture.

One, central, claim of the book is that that all western scholarship dealing with Asia and North Africa (the orient) since the time of the Ancient Greeks, including the work of Marx, suffers from the same irredeemable, invalidating prejudice, 'Orientalism'. But can this claim be justified? Irfan Habib argues not. He has been involved recently in his own struggle against prejudice in India, confronting the former Hindu chauvinist BJP government's attempts to rewrite the country's history and to justify the destruction of the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya. He was formerly professor at the Centre of Advanced Study in History, Aligarh Muslim University.

In 1978 the late Edward W Said published his influential work, Orientalism. He subtitled it Western Conceptions of the Orient, thereby calling for an altogether new conception of Orientalism. 'Orientalism', as understood till then, meant scholarship and learning in eastern languages and cultures (OED, sv 'Orientalism'). Such learning was not necessarily confined to western scholarship of the Orient, as Said assumes. Moreover, Orientalism went much further than a mere body of conceptions; it chiefly encompassed, in Said's own words (p203), 'the work of innumerable devoted scholars who edited texts and translated them, codified grammars, wrote dictionaries, reconstructed dead epochs, [and] produced positivistically verifiable learning'.

But such basic work is only incidental to Said's definition of Orientalism, which has its scope enlarged to take in the discourse of anyone 'who teaches about, or researches the Orient—and this applies whether the person is an anthropologist, sociologist, historian or philologist—either in its specific or general aspects', and such a person is deemed 'an Orientalist, and what he or she does is Orientalism' (p2). Soon enough Said forgets the professional boundaries of teacher and researcher. Journalists, novelists and politicians appear with quiet ease on his pages as 'Orientalists' wherever they have a statement to make that Said wishes to attribute to 'Orientalism'. (Henceforth in these notes, the words 'Orientalism' and 'Orientalist' as understood by Said appear within single inverted commas; without these marks, the words represent their ordinary, or pre-Said, senses.) And, then, of course, there is the restriction which by a curious slip he forgets in the definition just quoted. The 'Orientalist' is exclusively a western person, and it is thus assumed

that there are no corresponding teachers and researchers in subjects Oriental within the Orient itself. This being so, Said does not have to face the embarrassment of considering how western and eastern Orientalists interact with each other; and how this interaction could influence the thought of both. Indeed, he assumes—and selects only such Orientalists as fulfil this requirement—that Orientalists write only for western audiences ('Afterword', p336).

There is yet another, and an equally less justifiable, restriction. Said limits his study of 'Orientalism' to the British and French traditions, and German and other European Orientalists are excluded (pp3-4). The reason given for this exclusion is that since Britain and France had major colonial engagements with the East, their Orientalist scholarship was different from that of other European countries. But such a priori slicing up of European Orientalism needs to be given a better and more convincing reason. For the part of Orientalism Said closes his eyes to includes such extremely influential figures as I Goldziher (a Hungarian, incidentally, not a German—contra Said, p18) who would hardly fit Said's perception of an 'Orientalist'. Classical master of hadis-criticism, Goldziher was an anti-Zionist Jew, who received his 'post-graduate' education at al-Azhar and professed the same critical respect for Islam as for Judaism and Christianity. Where would such a man be placed in Said's scheme? But, then, by what definition has Joseph Needham been excluded from Said's ranks of Orientalists? He was, after all, British; and his Science and Civilisation in China volumes have not only focused on China's scientific and technological achievements, but are rich in similar achievements of the Arab-Islamic civilisation and of India. There is no hint in his work too of any intrinsic superiority of the West over the East—the presence of which Said regards as central to 'Orientalism'.

II

I would not take more space to press the point that Said's concept of 'Orientalism' is both far too general and far too restricted, and the limits of his definition are so set and the actual selection so executed that his conclusions are thereby simply predetermined. I would also not go into the other fundamental questions that Aijaz Ahmad has raised about Said's method in his essay, 'Orientalism and After' (In Theory, Delhi, 1994, pp159-220). But one further problem with Said that needs certainly to be taken up is his notable lack of rigour in terms of documentation and logic; and I illustrate this by the treatment he metes out to Karl Marx.

On a preliminary page of his Orientalism, Said puts two short quotations, the first of which is from Marx: 'They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented.' An innocent reader will surely assume that Marx is here implying that Oriental peoples are incapable of representing themselves, and so Europeans (better still, European Orientalists) must speak for them. And, indeed, on p21, quoting Marx's words in original German, Said explicitly furnishes this precise context for his words.

There is a double sense in which this use of the quotation is unethical and irresponsible. The quoted words are taken from a passage in Marx's Eighteenth

Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, where he speaks not of the position of Eastern peoples, but of the poverty-stricken smallholding peasants of France at a particular juncture in the mid-19th century. Since these peasants could not unite, they were 'incapable of enforcing their class interest in their own name, whether through a parliament or through a convention. They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented. Their representative must at the same time appear as their master…' (K Marx and F Engels, Selected Works, Moscow, 1950, vol I, p303).

Not only does Said thus coolly substitute eastern peoples for French peasants; by a sleight of hand he also converts Marx's word 'representation', meaning political representation, into 'depiction' (The Oriental people cannot depict themselves, and so the Orientalists' 'representation does the job'—p21). The exploitation of Marx's quotation does not even end with this double misuse. On p293, Said makes the still more audacious statement that Marx had used the quoted phrase 'for Louis Napoleon', as if Louis Napoleon had made any claims to represent or depict Orientals. Further on, quite forgetting what context he had given to Marx's quotation on p21, Said alleges in the 'Afterword' to the 1995 edition (p335), that by putting the quotation as one of the book's epigraphs, he, on his part, meant to refer to 'the subjective truth insinuated by Marx…which is that if you feel you have been denied the chance to speak your truth, you will try extremely hard to get that chance!' One fears to voice the suspicion that Said had never cared to read the original passage of the Eighteenth Brumaire, and had just picked up the quotation from some secondary source. Even so, the range of manifestly wrong meanings so confidently ascribed to the same words, on different spurs of the moment, is incredible.

So much for the short 'epigraph'. Marx as a subject of Said's study (pp153-156) also offers further examples of the cavalier way in which Said can stuff anyone he dislikes or wishes to belittle into his nasty basket of 'Orientalists'. Much has already been said on this matter by Aijaz Ahmad in his essay, 'Marx on India: a Clarification' (In Theory, as above, pp221-242). He shows that Said builds his interpretation on just two passages taken from Marx's two articles published in the New York Tribune in 1853, and seems to be unacquainted with what Marx wrote elsewhere on India. Here it must be added that while Marx necessarily relied on (the quite extensive) European reports on India, the picture that he drew out of it, of the social and economic devastation that British rule caused in India, was largely his own—and this was hardly an 'Orientalist' enterprise under Said's definition. Moreover even in Marx's second essay, apparently consulted by Said, there is a passage looking forward to the Indians overthrowing 'the English yoke' (K Marx and F Engels, Collected Works, vol 12, Moscow, 1979, p221). Marx also writes in the very same article of 'the profound hypocrisy and inherent barbarism of bourgeois civilisation [which] lies unveiled before our eyes, turning from its home where it assumes respectable forms, to the colonies where it goes naked.' And yet, again and again in his book, Said sneers at Marx as being, at the end of the day, a pro-colonial 'Orientalist'. So we are told, 'This Orientalism can accommodate Aeschylus, say, and Victor Hugo, Dante and Karl Marx' (p3). The view that 'Indians were civilisationally, if not racially, inferior' is indirectly ascribed to Marx on page 14. On page 102 Said goes so far as to put Marx among those writers who

could use all the following 'generalities unquestioningly': 'An Oriental lives in the Orient, he lives a life of Oriental ease, in a state of Oriental despotism, and sensuality, imbued with a feeling of Oriental fatalism.' The italicised words constitute a fantastic misrepresentation of Karl Marx's writings on Asia. But Said does not still stop here. On p231 he puts Marx among those who held that 'an Oriental man was first an Oriental and only second a man'—a meaningless formula seemingly coined simply to belittle Marx.

III

Such reckless rhetoric cannot but create grave suspicions about Said's general credibility. Here it must be made clear that it cannot be any serious critic's case that colonialism and imperialism have not promoted a particular kind of writing about the East; the real point of criticism is that not only does Said unreasonably use the term 'Orientalism' to represent only this particular class of writing, but he also goes on to tar with the same brush the entire corpus of learned writing on the Orient, which in common parlance constitutes the product of Orientalism. This is a clever device, and verve and verbosity tend to conceal the resort to a verbal confusion pure and simple. Said himself tells us ('Afterword', pp341-342) that the late Professor Albert Hourani, while agreeing with much of his criticism of a part of the writing on the Orient, protested that the criticism was not applicable to a large part of Orientalist writing, and yet now after Said's Orientalism, the very word Orientalism has 'become a term of abuse'.

How much Said has been successful here was borne upon me while reading a recent article by a western 'Orientalist', Carl W Ernst. This author claims credit, without any sense of embarrassment, for 'foreign scholars who alone had the resources and the motivation' to analyse an Islamicised Yogic text. The claim has all the marks of a self-satisfied sense of western superiority that Said treats as the trademark of 'Orientalism'. Yet Ernst himself dubs early theories of a possible Indian origin of Sufism as 'early Orientalist theories' ('The Islamicisation of Yoga in the Amrtakunda Translations', Journal of Royal Asiatic Society, 3rd series, vol 13, part 2, London, 2003, p226, italics mine). 'Orientalist' here just does duty for what one thinks is wrong: otherwise, how can there be any indication of western superiority in an 'Orientalist' theory that places the source of Islamic sufism in early Indian beliefs rather than, say, Christian mysticism? 'Orientalism' as a word has thus been so degraded that anyone can use it for anything one disapproves of, even when the disapprover may himself be a dyed in the wool 'Orientalist'!

Despite Said's denials that it was not his intention to protect chauvinistic or conservative beliefs in Asia, especially in relation to Islam, one can see that any critical or historical view of any aspect of Islam by any western scholar is yet taken by him as reflective of a sense of western superiority and so a kind of 'Orientalist', colonial discourse. The hypersensitivity goes to such an extent that the word 'Mohammedan', used in place of 'Islamic', as in 'Mohammedan Law', is held to be an 'insulting' designation (p66): Said obviously forgets that innumerable Muslim scholars down the centuries have also spoken (in Persian) of Din-i Muhammadi (Muhammedan faith), or Shari'at-i Muhammadi (Muhammedan law), without at all

being conscious of any insult implied in such use of the Prophet's name. But with the aggressive stance of modern Islamic 'orthodoxy', the word 'Mohammedan' is quickly disappearing from books, and even from titles of works by authors long dead: thus Goldziher's Mohammedanische Studien and H A R Gibb's Mohammedanism now reappear in print respectively as Muslim Studies (English translation) and Islam in editions by established academic publishers. An innocent designation becomes disreputable the moment it is found to be tainted through association with that pernicious weed, 'Orientalism'.

IV

One should not naturally be greatly concerned about the fate of individual words, but the substance of the theory that has brought about their downfall needs attention. The essential weakness of Edward Said and those who follow him and speak of 'Orientalism' and 'colonial discourse' in the same breath lies in the failure to see that colonialism (including imperialism, neocolonialism, etc) does not form the only major influence over Oriental scholarship in the west or in the Orient. There is too easy a readiness on their part to assume that such ideas as those of gender and racial equality, and of nation and democracy, that arose in the West in modern times, and obtained popular acceptance through upheavals like the French Revolution of 1789 and the Soviet Revolution of 1917, have exercised no influence at all on modern studies of Oriental societies. Yet who can read Wellhausen's Arab Kingdom and its Fall without being convinced that his analysis of the Umayyid Caliphate, as structured on distinct classes based on political and economic dominance and subjugation, is derived from ideas that social democracy had introduced in the Germany of his time. In India D D Kosambi, drawing quite firmly on the Orientalist tradition of scholarship, aimed at reconstructing ancient Indian history through the application of Marxist concepts. Modern democratic, as against colonial, notions have thus created an increasing belief that Oriental societies, like all human societies, are susceptible to the same methods of study—indeed, with the same essential assumptions—as the history of western societies. There has accordingly developed within Oriental learning almost parallel, but ultimately conflicting, trends based respectively on colonial and what may be called universalist approaches. The dichotomy can be seen even in individuals. We can see this in the voluminous writings of A B Keith, for example, as when he did duty as a semi-official expert on the constitutional history of British India and when he wrote as a critical but sympathetic scholar on the religion and philosophy of the Vedas or on the history of Sanskrit literature.

There is also a third element within modern Oriental learning that cannot be dismissed as casually as Said and his followers tend to do: the application of increasingly complex scientific methods to expand our knowledge. When, on page 203, Said concedes that the work of 'innumerable' Orientalists has consisted in editing and translating texts, codifying grammars, establishing lexical meanings, and reconstructing 'dead epochs', he fails to recognise that this very work, irrespective of the conservative or liberal views of the individual scholars concerned, results in continuously altering our fundamental notions of the past as well as the present. What were hitherto regarded as unchanging or insular societies

may by archaeological discoveries or closer studies of sources, or intensive field-work, turn into changing and outward-looking ones. One cannot simply imagine how much our understanding of historical ancient India has been influenced by the discovery and decipherment of Asoka's inscriptions, including those in Aramaic and Greek. That such expansion of 'positivistically verifiable' knowledge of the Orient should make no difference to the currency of prior prejudices is in itself prejudice pure and simple. Said can cite no better authority in running down the impact of such discoveries on our mind than Nietzsche, the notorious father of Fascism, with his notions of 'truths' as 'illusions' (p203). Between the time Said wrote his book and his 'Afterword' western archaeologists and geneticists established that Africa is the most likely original homeland of succeeding hominid species, including the anatomically modern man. No racial 'truths' of Nietzsche and Co, however deeply rooted in one's mind, can possibly accommodate this discovery created out of the work of persons, many of whom individually possibly had no great motivation to undermine the widespread racial prejudice against African peoples.

It is true that colonialism does not cease to be an influence on authors' ideas just because Oriental learning receives other ideological influences as well and continuously develops through scientific discoveries. In many ways, one fears, Said's rhetoric and sweep itself has brought into discredit the rigour and precision of older scholarship and so opened the doors to new forms of neo-colonial influences. Such scholars might indeed put themselves forward as critics of 'Eurocentrism', of 'Orientalist appropriations', and of 'colonial discourse', but this rhetoric is often found to be of little relevance when the actual substance of their work is considered. A trend of this kind, which Said greatly applauds in his 'Afterword', is that of the Subaltern group, whose main target of attack has been Indian nationalism. Indeed, Said himself acknowledges the possibility that the Subalterns' 'mostly academic work' is 'easily co-optable and complicit with "transnational" neo-colonialism' (p352). One cannot improve on this insight into the historiographic situation of Subalternism; but surely Said should have considered why neo-colonialism cannot as easily co-opt old-fashioned anti-imperialist writing, whether bourgeois or Marxist. If he had pondered on it, he might have found that there is much more to the Orientalist tradition of scholarship than can be detected through selective literary criticism. As we have said, ideas of nationalism and democracy wrestle, within Oriental scholarship, with colonialism and neo-colonialism; and science gradually but surely reduces the area of bias and prejudice. Good robust Orientalism, with reason and rigour guiding it, may still have the last laugh when many of the present post-modernist fashions, with their fuzzy terminologies and neo-colonial potentialities, have departed.

(Source: http://www.isj.org.uk/index.php4?id=141)

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Edward Said's shadowy legacy

Tricky with argument, weak in languages, careless of facts: but, thirty years on, Said still dominates debate

Robert Irwin

So many academics want the arguments presented in Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) to be true. It encourages the reading of novels at an oblique angle in order to discover hidden colonialist subtexts. It promotes a hypercritical version of British and, more generally, of Western achievements. It discourages any kind of critical approach to Islam in Middle Eastern studies. Above all, *Orientalism* licenses those academics who are so minded to think of their research and teaching as political activities. The drudgery of teaching is thus transformed into something much more exciting, namely "speaking truth to power".

It is unlikely that the two books under review, both of which present damning criticisms of Said's book at length and in detail, will change anything. Daniel Martin Varisco is a professor of anthropology who has specialized in Yemeni agriculture. It is perhaps because of this that he takes exception to Said's "textualism" and his consequent neglect of anthropology, sociology and psychology. Varisco has a multitude of other charges to bring against Orientalism and he is able to draw on an astonishingly long list of witnesses for the prosecution, including Sadiq Jalal al-'Azm, Bryan Turner, Malcolm Kerr, Ziauddin Sardar, Bernard Lewis, Nadim al-Bitar, Victor Brombert, Ernest Gellner, Jane Miller, John Sweetman, John Mackenzie and many others. But the chief concern of Varisco, who hovers over Orientalism's text like a hawk, is to expose Said's rhetorical tricks. For example, Varisco quotes a passage in which Said sought to distinguish between latent and manifest Orientalism, before continuing as follows:

"Before teasing out the meaning of this passage, it is important to look at Said's rhetorical style. Beyond the working definitions outlined at the start, this distinction here is what he "really" means, the heart of the matter. Notice how this passage sidesteps a totalizing sense by qualifying "unconscious" with "almost", "found" with "almost exclusively", and "unanimity, stability, and durability" with "more or less". This trope of the adverbial caveat dangled like catnip before the reader allows Said to speak in round numbers, so to speak, rather than giving what might be called a statistical, and thus potentially falsifiable, sense to his argument. As a result, any exceptions pointed out by a critic are pre-mitigated. The caveats appear to flow from cautious scholarship, but the latent intent is that of a polemicist."

Elsewhere, Varisco notes how "a dogmatic assertion at one moment is softened in the next". This is a kind of rhetorical giving and taking away.

Then there is Said's use of pejorative vocabulary. Varisco, following the scholar of comparative literature Brombert, wonders why Said describes the grand nineteenth-

century Orientalist Antoine Isaac Silvestre de Sacy as having "ransacked the Oriental archives". What licence has Said for the use of "ransacked" here? What about "read", "consulted", or "examined" instead? Again: "Another dimension of Said's dismissal of difference is guilt by association, a tendency to cite a litany of all-alike Orientalists". He was a specialist in producing "laundry lists" of ill-assorted but allegedly villainous Orientalists which damned some individuals by association with others.

But there are worse things than rhetorical tricksiness. Tampering with quotations is one of them. According to Said, Gustave Flaubert wrote "Inscriptions and birddroppings are the only two things in Egypt that give any indication of life", which would be damning if true. But, in the original French, what he wrote was "les inscriptions et les merdes d'oiseaux, voilà les deux seules choses sur les ruines d'Égypte qui indiquent la vie", which is unexceptionable. (Since Flaubert's diary and letters from Egypt were not intended for publication, Said's decision to characterize him as an archetypal Orientalist travel writer is also questionable.) Varisco further demonstrates how Said systematically misrepresented the political scientist P. J. Vatikiotis by furtively dropping individual words and whole paragraphs from his purported quotation from an essay by Vatikiotis on revolutions in the Middle East. Said seems to have been blind to irony (in, for example, Mansfield Park) and indifferent to humour. Although he listed Mark Twain as one of the leading Orientalist travel writers of the nineteenth century, Said's reading of Twain's The Innocents Abroad seems careless, or he would surely have noticed that it was intended as a satire on textual Orientalism.

Similarly, Said was utterly oblivious to the humour and stylishness of Alexander Kinglake's Eothen. Kinglake had enough money to travel to amuse himself. But Said's Orientalists are a classless lot. That is silly. It is impossible to browse through the early proceedings of the Royal Asiatic Society or the Société Asiatique without recognizing that nineteenth-century Orientalism was presided over by aristocrats and that for the most part the research was done by men with private incomes. Varisco is alert to issues concerning class and money. William Beckford's novel Vathek was unmistakably the work of an extremely wealthy man. Similarly, with regard to the Orientalist painter Jean-Léon Gérôme, his elite family connections allowed him to travel extensively and to collect the Oriental props he used in his paintings.

Said's pro-Palestinian stance, as well as his assault on various traditional academic values and procedures, have made his books targets for criticism from right-wingers and supporters of Zionism. But in an endnote, Varisco states that his own position here is similar to that of his fellow anthropologist Michael Gilsenan, "who admires Said's courage as an advocate for Palestinian rights without feeling a need to defend Said's arguments about Oriental studies or anthropology". With respect to Said's bête noire, Bernard Lewis, a leading historian of Islam and an emeritus professor at Princeton University, Varisco notes that "apologists against Islam frequently use careless comments in the Lewis corpus to buttress their polemic. Ibn Warraq, for example, repeatedly cites Lewis". Also, according to Varisco: "One of the most egregious attacks on the character and work of Edward Said is Martin Kramer's

loosely constructed Ivory Towers on Sand, in which Orientalism is blamed for unleashing a revolution that 'has crippled Middle Eastern studies to this day'". Varisco concludes that "Kramer's unseemly creed would be laughable were it not for the favourable reception it received from the neocon clique that engineered the wars against Taliban Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein's Iraq". (Kramer is a close ally of Lewis.) "Good historians are also capable of making good puns", according to Varisco.

Varisco's are pretty excruciating. His punning, of course, starts with the subtitle of Reading Orientalism: Said and the unsaid. And consider the following: "the catachresis has been let out of the bag"; "women authors are token for granted"; "voy[ag]eurs; mal[e]odorous prose"; "in terms of intellectual history, his interdisciplinary rigor borders on the mortis". He also follows the ugly American academic fashion for using "critique" as a verb. (Even as a noun, does critique have more meaning than criticism? The Chambers Dictionary suggests not.) Varisco's book is long and closely argued, and it is impossible adequately to summarize its many points of contention in a review. Its discursive endnotes practically amount to a second book. If there is a serious criticism to be made, it is that the structure of Reading Orientalism seems almost as invertebrate as that of Orientalism. But Varisco's book makes for exhilarating reading, comparable to the supremely efficient, if brief, hatchet job carried out on Said's Representations of the Intellectual in Stefan Collini's Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain (2006).

Ibn Warraq is the pseudonym of a former Muslim and the author of Why I Am Not a Muslim and Leaving Islam. Since the penalty for apostasy is death, he is wise to write under a pseudonym. He is less concerned than Varisco with Said's rhetorical sleight of hand, though he does point out quite a few examples of it. He is more interested in Said's numerous factual errors. Defending the West is more diffuse than Reading Orientalism, since Orientalism has provoked Ibn Warraq to defend Western culture, rationality and objectivity from the assaults of Said and others. In the first part of his book Ibn Warraq combines a broad history of Western culture with a detailed attack on Edward Said. Particular attention is paid to the heritage of Greek rationality, Christian values in seventeenth-century Orientalism, and the history of Orientalism in India. In the second half of the book he discusses Orientalism in painting, sculpture, literature and music.

Ibn Warraq shows how, lacking a background in history, Said was as ignorant of the chronology and geography of the Arab conquests, as he was of those of the British and French empires. Said was obsessed with sexual readings of apparently innocent texts. He managed to find an erotic subtext in Vatikiotis's slightly dull article on revolutions. Alphonse de Lamartine does not travel in the Middle East, but he "penetrates" it. In discussing Kipling's Kim, Ibn Warraq remarks that "Said has the irritating habit of claiming to know how the 'Indian reader' will react to the novel. I am an Indian reader, and do not read it as Said's ideal Indian reader does, and I shall quote other Indian readers who do not either". Ibn Warraq finds Said's characterization of Thomas Carlyle and John Henry Newman as "liberal culture heroes" quite absurd.

Said had a problem with languages. For example, when discussing the writings of Sir William Jones and Friedrich Schlegel, he was mysteriously determined to deny that Sanskrit, Persian, German and Greek all belonged to the same broad group of languages – a sort of club to which Arabic could not belong. Ibn Warraq, in discussing Said's attitude to Orientalists, remarks that he was "particularly jealous of their mastery of languages". German scholars dominated Arabic, Hebrew and Sanskrit studies in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, yet Said avoided any substantial discussion of their work. Some critics have argued that this was because the pre-eminence of German Orientalists did not fit his thesis about the interdependence of Orientalism and imperialism in the Middle East, but others have suggested that it was because his German was not very good. Varisco has noted how Said mistranslates Goethe's famous line "Gottes ist der Orient!" as "God is the Orient". He has also spotted that Nerval's "La mer d'Ionie" was mistranslated as "the Ionian sky". Ibn Warraq is unhappy with Said's English, specifically with his misuse of the adverb "literally" and his confusion of scatology with eschatology. Other critics have wondered about Said's Arabic.

And so on. Ibn Warraq's bill of indictment is as lengthy and detailed as Varisco's, but it is, I think, less balanced, particularly when he turns to attack the Muslim world for its alleged dislike of knowledge for its own sake, its incapacity for self-criticism, its suspicion of Orientalists and its apparent failure to take an interest in Europe until modern times. By contrast, the history and cultural values of the West are extolled at length. The praise of the West is as relentless as the belittlement of Islam. As a Westerner and an Orientalist, I find myself somewhat embarrassed to be defended in such uncompromising terms. "Use every man after his desert, and who should 'scape whipping?" When discussing the fourteenth-century Dominican Ricoldo of Monte Croce's statement that the Koran was only put together after Muhammad's death, Ibn Warraq comments this is "a startlingly modern idea associated with the theories of John Wansbrough". On the contrary, orthodox Muslims have always believed that the Koran was compiled after the Prophet's death. Ibn Warraq exaggerates somewhat the intellectual independence of such institutions as the medieval University of Paris. In 1277, Étienne Tempier, Chancellor of the University, issued a condemnation of and ban on the teaching of 219 propositions, including ones by Aristotle, Averroes and Aquinas. It is true that until recent centuries Muslims tended not to be interested in Europe, but they were very interested in India and Africa. Moreover, in In the Lands of the Christians: Arabic travel writing in the seventeenth century (2003), Nabil Matar has suggested that there was more Muslim interest in Europe than has been hitherto thought. Ibn Warraq hates the niceness of Western liberals and humanists, which reminds me of W. C. Fields's insight, "Anybody who hates children and dogs can't be all bad".

Moreover, Ibn Warraq has a remarkably wide knowledge of Indian history, Classical literature and art history. Knowledge of the latter serves him well when he turns his attention to an ally of Said, Linda Nochlin, the author of a brief and under-researched but influential article "The Imaginary Orient", which appeared in Art in America in 1983. In this article she attacked the Orientalist paintings of Gérôme and others. According to Nochlin, we have to understand those paintings in terms "of the particular power structure in which these works came into being".

Gérôme's "Snake Charmer" was, according to Nochlin "a visual document of nineteenth-century colonialist ideology". But why Gérôme should have wanted to produce such a document is not clear. Moreover, the painting is set in Constantinople, the capital of the Ottoman Empire. The picture was completed in around 1883, when neither France nor Britain had any colonies in the Middle East, except for a British coaling station at Aden. Nochlin condemned the background of the painting for its "ferociously detailed tiled wall", but what is wrong with detail? Nochlin disliked the licked finish of Gérôme's painting, but that seems to be merely a matter of subjective taste on her part. According to a note in Nochlin's article, "Edward Said has pointed out to me in conversation that most of the so-called writing on the back wall of the 'Snake Charmer' is in fact unreadable". To which Ibn Warraq responds that the wall bears a clearly legible quotation from the Koran's Sura of the Cow in thuluth script. (Hence, perhaps, doubts about Said's Arabic.)

More generally, according to Nochlin, "one of the defining features of Orientalist painting is its dependence for its very existence on a presence that is always an absence: the Western colonial or touristic presence". But Ibn Warraq has no difficulty at all in demonstrating that Gérôme and plenty of other French artists did paintings of Napoleon in Egypt. To which one might add that other French painters, notably Horace Vernet, portrayed the progress of the French Army in Algeria. Holman Hunt put a European in a stovepipe hat in the background of "The Lantern Maker's Courtship". John Frederick Lewis's magnificent "A Frank Encampment in the Desert of Mount Sinai, 1842" is dominated by the figure of Viscount Castlereagh. David Roberts's painting of Karnak features Western tourists. Walter Charles Horsley painted Western visitors in al-Azhar. John Frederick Lewis painted himself and his wife in Eastern costumes in Cairene interiors. Richard Dadd painted Sir Thomas Phillips in the Middle East. Lucien-Lévy Dhurmer painted Pierre Loti in Constantinople. Vassily Vershchagin painted the British in India. The absent presence turns out to be no such thing.

Though Nochlin has attracted plenty of earlier criticism from, among others, John Mackenzie and Gerald Ackerman, the issues she raised are still live ones. Last month there was a conference at the Courtauld Institute in London, "Framing the Other: 30 Years After Orientalism". The titles of the papers given suggest that Nochlin has at least some disciples in Britain. According to the organizers,

"the thirtieth anniversary of the publication of Edward Said's Orientalism comes as a suitable opportunity to consider again the Western vision of the Orient. For Said, developing the foucauldian concept of power/knowledge, the West produced and codified knowledge that justified relationships of power, an argument he developed further in Culture and Imperialism (1993). In the current climate of conflicts and the disastrous effects of the West's new 'crusade' (or 'war on terror'), Said's central question 'how can we know and respect the Other' becomes more and more pressing."

Said died in 2003, and it is thirty years since he launched his assault on Western culture. Things may have moved on since then. As a last resort, some of Said's

nervous apologists have suggested this, hoping, perhaps, to fend off further criticism of his inconsistent methodology and shaky grasp of facts. But still his shadow hangs heavy over *The Lure of the East: British Orientalist Painting*, the catalogue of an exhibition which is due to open at Tate Britain in June. According to the foreword to that catalogue, "the issues identified in Edward Said's seminal book Orientalism (1978) and since fiercely debated, are omnipresent".

Daniel Martin Varisco
READING ORIENTALISM
Said and the unsaid
512pp. University of Washington Press. $90; distributed in the UK by Combined Academic Publishers. £54.
978 0 295 98758 3

Ibn Warraq
DEFENDING THE WEST
A critique of Edward Said's Orientalism
556pp. Amherst, NY: Prometheus. $29.95; distributed in the UK by Lavis.
978 1 59102 484 2

Robert Irwin's For Lust of Knowing: The Orientalists and their enemies was published in 2006. His book on the Alhambra appeared in 2004 and his most recent novel, Satan Wants Me, in 1999. He is the Middle East editor of the TLS.

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Identity is that which is given

Kenan Malik

The anthropologist Margaret Mead once observed that in the 1930s, when she was busy remaking the idea of culture, the notion of cultural diversity was to be found only in the 'vocabulary of a small and technical group of professional anthropologists'. Today, everyone and everything seems to have its own culture. From anorexia to zydeco, the American philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah has observed, there is little that we don't talk about as the product of some group's culture.

In this age of globalisation many people fret about Western culture taking over the world. But the greatest Western export is not Disney or McDonalds or Tom Cruise. It is the very idea of culture. Every island in the Pacific, every tribe in the Amazon, has its own culture that it wants to defend against the depredation of Western cultural imperialism. You do not even have to be human to possess a culture. Primatologists tell us that different groups of chimpanzees each has its own culture. No doubt some chimp will soon complain that their traditions are disappearing under the steamroller of human cultural imperialism.

We're All Multiculturalists Now observed the American academic, and former critic of pluralism, Nathan Glazer in the title of a book. And indeed we are. The celebration of difference, respect for pluralism, avowal of identity politics - these have come to be regarded as the hallmarks of a progressive, antiracist outlook and as the foundation of modern liberal democracies. Ironically, culture has captured the popular imagination just as anthropologists themselves have started worrying about the very concept. After all, what exactly is a culture? What marks its boundaries? In what way is a 16-year old British-born boy of Pakistani origin living in Bradford of the same culture as a 50-year old man living in Lahore? Does a 16-year white boy from Bradford have more in common culturally with his 50-year-old father than with that 16-year old 'Asian'? Such questions have led most anthropologists today to reject the idea of cultures as fixed, bounded entities. Some reject the very idea of culture as meaningless. 'Religious beliefs, rituals, knowledge, moral values, the arts, rhetorical genres, and so on', the British anthropologist Adam Kuper suggests, 'should be separated out from each other rather than bound together into a single bundle labelled culture'. 'To understand culture', he concludes, 'we must first deconstruct it'.

Whatever the doubts of anthropologists, politicians and political philosophers press on regardless. The idea of culture, and especially of multiculturalism, has proved politically too seductive. Over the past two decades, nations such as Australia, Canada and South Africa have created legal frameworks to institutionalise their existence as multicultural societies. Other countries such as Britain have no formal recognition of their multicultural status but have nevertheless pursued pluralist policies in a pragmatic fashion. Even France, whose Republican tradition might

seem to be the nemesis of multiculturalism, has flirted with pluralist policies. In 1986 the Collège de France presented the President with a report entitled *Proposals for the Education of the Future*. The first of ten principles to which modern schools should subscribe was 'The unity of science and the plurality of cultures': 'A carefully fabricated system of education must be able to integrate the universalism inherent in scientific thought with the relativism of the social sciences, that is with disciplines attentive to the significance of cultural differences among people and to the ways people live, think and feel.'

'There is a certain way of being human that is my way', wrote the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor in his much discussed essay on 'The Politics of Recognition'. 'I am called upon to live my life in this way... Being true to myself means being true to my own originality'. This sense of being 'true to myself' Taylor calls 'the ideal of "authenticity"'. The ideal of the authentic self finds its origins in the Romantic notion of the inner voice that expressed a person's true nature. The concept was developed in the 1950s by psychologists such as Erik Erikson and sociologists like Alvin Gouldner into the modern notion of identity. Identity, they pointed out, is not just a private matter but emerges in dialogue with others.

Increasingly identity came to be seen not as something the self creates but as something through which the self is created. Identity is, in sociologist Stuart Hall's words, 'formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways in which we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems which surround us'. The inner self, in other words, finds its home in the outer world by participating in a collective. But not just any collective. The world is comprised of countless groups - philosophers, truck drivers, football supporters, drinkers, train spotters, conservatives, communists and so on. According to the modern idea of identity, however, each person's sense of who they truly are is intimately linked to only a few special categories - collectives defined by people's gender, sexuality, religion, race and, in particular, culture. A Unesco-organised 'World Conference on Cultural Policies' concluded that 'cultural identity... was at the core of individual and collective personality, the vital principle that underlay the most authentic decisions, behaviour and actions'.

The collectives that appear significant to the contemporary sense of identity comprise, of course, very different kinds of groups and the members of each are bound together by very different characteristics. Nevertheless, what collectives such as gender, sexuality, religion, race and culture all have in common is that each is defined by a set of attributes that, whether rooted in biology, faith or history, is fixed in a certain sense and compels people to act in particular ways. Identity is that which is given, whether by nature, God or one's ancestors. 'I am called upon to live my life in this way'. Who or what does the calling? Apparently the culture itself. Unlike politically defined collectives, these collectives are, in philosopher John Gray's words, 'ascriptive, not elective... a matter of fate, not choice'. The collectives that are important to the contemporary notion of identity are, in other words, the modern equivalents of what Herder defined as volks. For individual identity to be authentic, so too must collective identity. 'Just like individuals', Charles Taylor writes, 'a Volk should be true to itself, that is its own culture'. To be

true to itself, a culture must faithfully pursue the traditions that mark out that culture as unique and rebuff the advances of modernity, pragmatism and other cultures.

This view of culture and identity has transformed the way that many people understand the relationship between equality and difference. For the Enlightenment philosophes, equality required that the state should treat all citizens in the same fashion without regard to their race, religion or culture. This was at the heart of their arguments against the ancien regime and has been an important strand of liberal and radical thought ever since. For contemporary multiculturalists, on the other hand, people should be treated not equally despite their differences, but differently because of them. 'Justice between groups', as the political philosopher Will Kymlicka has put it, 'requires that members of different groups are accorded different rights'.

An individual's cultural background frames their identity and helps define who they are. If we want to treat individuals with dignity and respect, many multiculturalists argue, we must also treat with dignity and respect the groups that furnish them with their sense of personal being. 'The liberal is in theory committed to equal respect for persons', the philosopher Bhikhu Parekh argues. 'Since human beings are culturally embedded, respect for them entails respect for their cultures and ways of life.' The British sociologist Tariq Madood takes this line of argument to make a distinction between what he calls the 'equality of individualism' and 'equality encompassing public ethnicity: equality as not having to hide or apologise for one's origins, family or community, but requiring others to show respect for them, and adapt public attitudes and arrangements so that the heritage they represent is encouraged rather than contemptuously expect them to wither away.' We cannot, in other words, treat individuals equally unless groups also treated equally. And since, in the words of the American scholar Iris Young, 'groups cannot be socially equal unless their specific experience, culture and social contributions are publicly affirmed and recognised', so society must protect and nurture cultures, ensure their flourishing and indeed their survival.

One expression of such equal treatment is the growing tendency in some Western nations for religious law - such as the Jewish halakha and the Islamic sharia - to take precedence over national secular law in civil, and occasionally criminal, cases. Another expression can be found in Australia, where the courts increasingly accept that Aborigines should have the right to be treated according to their own customs rather than be judged by 'whitefella law'. According to Colin McDonald, a Darwin barrister and expert in customary law, 'Human rights are essentially a creation of the last hundred years. These people have been carrying out their law for thousands of years'. Some multiculturalists go further, requiring the state to ensure the survival of cultures not just in the present but in perpetuity. Charles Taylor, for instance, suggests that the Canadian and Quebec governments should take steps to ensure the survival of the French language in Quebec 'through indefinite future generations'.

The demand that because a cultural practice has existed for a long time, so it should be preserved - or, in Charles Taylor's version, the demand that because I am doing

X so my descendants, through 'indefinite future generations', must also do X - is a modern version of the naturalistic fallacy, the belief that ought derives from is. For nineteenth century social Darwinists, morality - how we ought to behave - derived from the facts of nature - how humans are. This became an argument to justify capitalist exploitation, colonial oppression, racial savagery and even genocide. Today, virtually everyone recognises the falsity of this argument. Yet, when talking of culture rather than of nature, many multiculturalists continue to insist that is defines ought.

In any case, there is something deeply inauthentic about the contemporary demand for authenticity. The kind of cultures that the Enlightenment philosophes wanted to consign to history were, in an important sense, different from the cultures that today's multiculturalists wish to preserve. In the premodern world there was no sense of cultural integrity or authenticity. There were no alternatives to the ways of life that people followed. Cultures were traditional but in an unselfconscious fashion. Those who lived in such cultures were not aware of their difference, let alone that they should value it or claim it as a right. A French peasant attended Church, an American Indian warrior painted his face not because they thought 'This is my culture, I must preserve it' but for pragmatic reasons. As the political philosopher Brian Barry suggests, in the absence of some compelling reason for doing things differently, people went on doing them in the same way as they had in the past. Cultural inertia, in other words, preserved traditional ways because it was the easiest way to organise collective life.

Multiculturalists, on the other hand, exhibit a self-conscious desire to preserve cultures. Such 'self-consciousness traditionalism', as Barry calls it, is a peculiarly modern, post-Enlightenment phenomenon. In the modern view, traditions are to be preserved not for pragmatic reasons but because such preservation is a social, political and moral good. Maintaining the integrity of a culture binds societies together, lessens social dislocation and allows the individuals who belong to that culture to flourish. Such individuals can thrive only if they stay true to their culture - in other words, only if both the individual and the culture remains authentic.

Modern multiculturalism seeks self-consciously to yoke people to their identity for their own good, the good of that culture and the good of society. A clear example is the attempt by the Quebecois authorities to protect French culture. The Quebec government has passed laws which forbids French speakers and immigrants from sending their children to English-language schools; compel businesses with more than fifty employees to be run in French; and bans English commercial signs. So, if your ancestors were French you, too, must by government fiat speak French whatever your personal wishes may be. Charles Taylor regards this as acceptable because the flourishing and survival of French culture is a good. 'It is not just a matter of having the French language available for those who might choose it', he argues. Quebec is 'making sure that there is a community of people here in the future that will want to avail itself of the opportunity to use the French language'. Its policies 'actively seek to create members of the community... assuring that future generations continue to identify as French-speakers'.

An identity has become a bit like a private club. Once you join up, you have to abide by the rules. But unlike the Groucho or the Garrick it's a private club you must join. Being black or gay, the philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah suggests, requires one to follow certain 'life-scripts' because 'Demanding respect for people as blacks and gays can go along with notably rigid strictures as to how one is to be an African American or a person with same-sex desires'. There will be 'proper modes of being black and gay: there will be demands that are made; expectations to be met; battle lines to be drawn'. It is at this point, Appiah suggests, that 'someone who takes autonomy seriously may worry whether we have replaced one kind of tyranny with another'. An identity is supposed to be an expression of an individual's authentic self. But it can too often seem like the denial of individual agency in the name of cultural authenticity.

'It is in the interest of every person to be fully integrated in a cultural group', the sociologist Joseph Raz has written. But what is to be fully integrated? If a Muslim woman rejects sharia law, is she demonstrating her lack of integration? What about a Jew who doesn't believe in the legitimacy of the Jewish State? Or a French Quebecois who speaks only English? Would Galilleo have challenged the authority of the Church if he had been 'fully integrated' into his culture? Or Thomas Paine supported the French Revolution? Or Salman Rushdie written *The Satanic Verses*? Cultures only change, societies only move forwards because many people, in Kwame Appiah's words, 'actively resist being fully integrated into a group'. To them 'integration can sound like regulation, even restraint'. Far from giving voice to the voiceless, in other words, the politics of difference appears to undermine individual autonomy, reduce liberty and enforce conformity. You will speak French, you will act gay, don't rock the cultural boat. The alternatives, the French philosopher Alain Finkielkraut suggests, are simple: 'Either people have rights or they have uniforms; either they can legitimately free themselves from oppression... or else their culture has the last word.'

Part of the problem is a constant slippage in multiculturalism talk between the idea of humans as culture-bearing creatures with the idea that humans have to bear a particular culture. Clearly no human can live outside of culture. But then no human does. 'It's not easy to imagine a person, or people, bereft of culture', observes Kwame Appiah. 'The problem with grand claims for the necessity of culture', he adds, 'is that we can't readily imagine an alternative. It's like form: you can't not have it.' Culture, in other words, is like oxygen: no living human can do without it, but no living human does.

To say that no human can live outside of culture is not to say they have to live inside a particular one. Nor is it to say that particular cultures must be fixed or eternal. To view humans as culture-bearing is to view them as social beings, and hence as transformative beings. It suggests that humans have the capacity for change, for progress, and for the creation of universal moral and political forms through reason and dialogue. To view humans as having to bear specific cultures is, on the contrary, to deny such a capacity for transformation. It suggests that every human being is so shaped by a particular culture that to change or undermine that culture would be to undermine the very dignity of that individual. It suggests that

the biological fact of, say, Jewish or Bangladeshi ancestry somehow make a human being incapable of living well except as a participant of Jewish or Bangladeshi culture. This would only make sense if Jews or Bangladeshis were biologically distinct - in other words if cultural identity was really about racial difference.

The relationship between cultural identity and racial difference becomes even clearer if we look at the argument that cultures must be protected and preserved. If a 'culture is decaying', the sociologists Avishai Margalit and Joseph Raz argue, then 'the options and opportunities open to its members will shrink, become less attractive, and their pursuit less likely to be successful'. So society must step in to prevent such decay. Will Kymlicka similarly argues that since cultures are essential to peoples' lives, so where 'the survival of a culture is not guaranteed, and, where it is threatened with debasement or decay, we must act to protect it'. For Charles Taylor, once 'we're concerned with identity', nothing 'is more legitimate than one's aspiration that it is never lost'. Hence a culture needs to be protected not just in the here and now but through 'indefinite future generations'.

A century ago intellectuals worried about the degeneration of the race. Today we fear cultural decay. Is the notion of cultural decay any more coherent than that of racial degeneration? Cultures certainly change and develop. But what does it mean for a culture to decay? Or for an identity to be lost? Will Kymlicka draws a distinction between the 'existence of a culture' and 'its "character" at any given moment'. The character of culture can change but such changes are only acceptable if the existence of that culture is not threatened. But how can a culture exist if that existence is not embodied in its character? By 'character' Kymlicka seems to mean the actuality of a culture: what people do, how they live their lives, the rules and regulations and institutions that frame their existence. So, in making the distinction between character and existence, Kymlicka seems to be suggesting that Jewish, Navajo or French culture is not defined by what Jewish, Navajo or French people are actually doing. For if Jewish culture is simply that which Jewish people do or French culture is simply that which French people do, then cultures could never decay or perish - they would always exist in the activities of people.

So, if a culture is not defined by what its members are doing, what does define it? The only answer can be that it is defined by what its members should be doing. The African American writer Richard Wright described one of his finest creations Bigger Thomas, the hero of *Native Son*, as a man 'bereft of a culture'. The Negro, Wright suggested, 'possessed a rich and complex culture when he was brought to these alien shores'. But that culture was 'taken from him'. Bigger Thomas' ancestors had been enslaved. In the process of enslavement they had been torn from their ancestral homes, and forcibly deprived of the practices and institutions that they understood as their culture. Hence Bigger Thomas, and every black American, behaved very differently from his ancestors. Slavery was an abomination and clearly had a catastrophic impact on black Americans. But however inhuman the treatment of slaves and however deep its impact on black American life, why should this amount to a descendant of slaves being 'bereft of a culture' or having a culture 'taken from him'? This can only be if we believe that Bigger Thomas should be behaving in certain ways that he isn't, the ways that his ancestors used to behave.

In other words, if we believe that what defines what you should be doing is the fact that your ancestors were doing it. Culture here has become defined by biological descent. And biological descent is a polite way of saying 'race'. As the cultural critic Walter Benn Michaels puts it, 'In order for a culture to be lost... it must be separable from one's actual behaviour, and in order for it to be separable from one's actual behaviour it must be anchorable in race.'

The logic of the preservationist argument is that every culture has a pristine form, its original state. It decays when it is not longer in that form. Like racial scientists with their idea of racial type, some modern multiculturalists appear to hold a belief in cultural type. For racial scientists, a 'type' was a group of human beings linked by a set of fundamental characteristics which were unique to it. Each type was separated from others by a sharp discontinuity; there was rarely any doubt as to which type an individual belonged. Each type remained constant through time. There were severe limits to how much any member of a type could drift away from the fundamental ground plan by which the type was constituted. These, of course, are the very characteristics that constitute a culture in much of today's multiculturalism talk. Many multiculturalists, like racial scientists, have come to think of human types as fixed, unchanging entities, each defined by its special essence.

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The real value of diversity

Kenan Malik

What does it mean to live in a multicultural society? Few questions have been posed more sharply by the events of the past year from the riots in Bradford, Burnley and Oldham to the aftermath of the events of September 11.

There have, in recent months, been two broad responses to this question. For some the violence between whites and Asians in the northern mill towns, and the seeming rejection by some British Muslims of the core values of their chosen country, all reveal the failure of the liberal dream of cohesive, tolerant multicultural society. Writing in the *Spectator*, Enoch Powell's biographer Simon Heffer suggested that Powell's forebodings about the future of Britain have been borne out. Powell's infamous 'rivers of blood' speech, Heffer wrote, 'can, and should, be seen as the first blast of the trumpet against the dangers of multiculturalism'.

Despite Heffer's advocacy, Powell's little Englander attitudes carry little currency these days. The dominant view is that the events of the past year reveal even more clearly the need for a tolerant multiculturalism, in which all people can enjoy their own culture, while respecting those of others.

Both these responses are, I believe, flawed. One embodies a vision of British (or, more usually, English) identity pickled in aspic. It is a notion of identity rooted in John Major's bucolic vision of 'old maids on bicycles and cricketers playing on the village green'. The other response has abandoned the very notion of a common identity or of shared values except at a most minimal level. Britishness is simply the toleration of cultural diversity.

What both sides in the debate fail to recognise is that shared values and common identities can only emerge through a process of political dialogue and struggle, a process whereby different values are put to the test, and a collective language of citizenship emerges. Shared values cannot, as Heffer believes, be rooted in a mythical past, in an England that does not exist and probably never did. But the wrongness of the Powellite argument does not make the proponents of multiculturalism right. A cohesive notion of citizenship cannot be based simply on the idea that we should respect other people's values. It requires a positive articulation of the values to which we should all aspire.

In December both the home secretary David Blunkett, and a raft of reports on the inner city riots, attempted to address this problem of 'Britishness'. Blunkett suggested that immigrants should be required to speak English and urged ethnic minorities to become 'more British'. The Home Office-sponsored report into the riots, chaired by Ted Cantle, recommended that all immigrants be required to swear an 'oath of allegiance' to Britain. David Ritchie, author of the independent report on the Oldham riots, criticised the 'self-segregation' of ethnic minorities, and the failure of ethnic minority leaders to encourage greater integration.

This castigation of minorities misses the point. The Asian youth who rioted in Oldham, Burnley and Bradford probably spoke better English than the white youth who threw petrol bombs. And the white youth were undoubtedly as alienated from any notion of Britishness as were the Asians. The problem is not that ethnic minorities are alienated from a concept of Britishness but that there is today no source of Britishness from which anyone - black or white - can draw inspiration.

The belief that the problem of race relations in Britain revolves around the question of the 'difference' of ethnic minorities has been at the heart of policy debate throughout the postwar period, and is at the heart of the arguments of both multiculturalists and their critics. The two sides in the multiculturalism debate have very different views of the Britain they wish to see. Both agree, however, that Britain has become a multicultural nation because immigrants (and their children) have demanded that their cultural differences be recognised and be afforded respect. Supporters of multiculturalism urge the state to see such diversity as a public good; opponents use it to make a case against immigration and, in some cases, for repatriation. I want to show, however, that multiculturalism, far from being a response to demands from local communities, was imposed from the top, the product of government policies aimed at diffusing the anger created by racism.

To understand this better, we need to look again at the history of postwar race relations policy in Britain. The arrival of large numbers of black immigrants in the 1950s from India, Pakistan and the Caribbean created conflicting pressures on policy-makers. While they welcomed the influx of new labour, there was at the same time considerable unease about the impact that such immigration may have on traditional concepts of Britishness. As a Colonial Office report of 1955 observed, 'a large coloured community as a noticeable feature of our social life would weaken... the concept of England or Britain to which people of British stock throughout the Commonwealth are attached'.

Even in the fifties, though, it was clear that such a simple notion of Britishness could not be sustained for long. For a start, it was a form of national identity rooted in a Britain and in an Empire that was already crumbling. Moreover, the experience of Nazism and the Holocaust had rendered virtually unusable the kind of racial exclusiveness embodied in this notion of national identity. In any case, by the end of the fifties black immigrants were already a fact of life in British. Despite the continued attempts by politicians from Enoch Powell to Margaret Thatcher to Norman Tebbit to formulate a racially exclusive concept of Britishness, it was already apparent by the end of the fifties that British identity would have to be reformulated to include the presence in this country of black citizens.

In the 1960s, therefore, policy-makers embarked on a new 'twin track' strategy in response to immigration. On the one hand they imposed increasingly restrictive immigration controls specifically designed to exclude black immigrants. On the other they instituted a framework of legislation aimed at outlawing racial discrimination and at facilitating the integration of black communities into British society.

The twin track strategy helped promoted the idea of Britain as a tolerant, pluralistic nation that was determined to stamp out any trace of discriminatory practice based on racial or ethnic difference. Britain, in the words of Labour home secretary Roy Jenkins, set out to create 'cultural diversity, coupled with equal opportunity, in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance'. At the same time, though, the linking of immigration and integration implied that social problems arose from the very presence in Britain of culturally-distinct immigrants. As the (liberal) Tory shadow home secretary Reginald Maudling put it in a parliamentary debate in 1968, 'The problem arises quite simply from the arrival in this country of many people of wholly alien cultures, habits and outlooks.' From the beginning, then, the problem of race relations was viewed not as one not so much of racial discrimination, but rather of cultural differences, and of the inability of black immigrants to be sufficiently British.

While the question of integration and of cultural differences preoccupied the political elite, it was not a question that particularly troubled black Britons. First generation black immigrants were concerned less about preserving cultural differences than about fighting for political equality. They recognised that at the heart of the fight for political equality was a commonality of values, hopes and aspirations between blacks and whites, not an articulation of unbridgeable differences.

Throughout the sixties and seventies, three big issues dominated the struggle for political equality: opposition to discriminatory immigration controls; the fight against racist attacks; and, most explosively, the issue of police brutality. These struggles politicised a new generation of black activists and came to an explosive climax in the inner city riots of the late seventies and early eighties. The authorities recognised that unless black communities were given a political stake in the system, their frustration could threaten the stability of British cities. It was against this background that the policies of multiculturalism emerged.

Local authorities in inner city areas, led by the Greater London Council, pioneered a new strategy of making black communities feel part of British society by organising consultation with black communities, drawing up equal opportunities policies, establishing race relations units and dispensing millions of pounds in grants to black community organisations. At the heart of the strategy was a redefinition of racism. Racism now meant not simply the denial of equal rights but the denial of the right to be different. Black people, many argued, should not be forced to accept British values, or to adopt a British identity. Rather different peoples should have the right to express their identities, explore their own histories, formulate their own values, pursue their own lifestyles. In this process, the very meaning of equality was transformed: from possessing the same rights as everyone else to possessing different rights, appropriate to different communities.

The multicultural approach appears to be a sensitive response to the needs of black communities. In fact it is undergrid by the same assumption that has dogged the debate about race relations from the start: the idea that black people are in some

way fundamentally different from 'British' people and that the problem of race relations is about how to accommodate these 'differences'.

By the mid-eighties the political struggles that had dominated the fight against racism in the sixties and seventies had became transformed into battles over cultural issues. Political struggles unite across ethnic or cultural divisions; cultural struggles inevitably fragment. Since state funding was now linked to cultural identity, so different groups began asserting their particular identities ever more fiercely. The shift from the political to the cultural arena helped entrench old divisions and to create new ones.

The city of Bradford provides a very good example of how the institutionalisation of multiculturalism undermined political struggles, entrenched divisions and strengthened conservative elements within every community. In April 1976, 24 people were arrested in pitched battles in the Manningham area of Bradford, as Asian youth confronted a National Front march and fought police protecting it. It was seen as the blooding of a new movement. The following year the Asian Youth Movement was born. The next few years brought further conflict between black youth and the police, culminating in the trial of the Bradford 12 in 1981. Twelve young Asians faced conspiracy charges for making petrol bombs to use against racists. They argued they were acting in self-defence - and won. Faced with this growing militancy, Bradford council drew up GLC-style equal opportunity statements, established race relations units and began funding black organisations. A 12-point race relations plan declared that every section of the 'multiracial, multicultural city' had 'an equal right to maintain its own identity, culture, language, religion and customs'.

By the mid-eighties the focus of anti-racist protest in Bradford had shifted from political issues, such as policing and immigration, to religious and cultural issues: a demand for Muslim schools and for separate education for girls, a campaign for halal meat to be served at school, and, most explosively, the confrontation over the publication of The Satanic Verses. This process was strengthened by a new relationship between the local council and the local mosques. In 1981, the council helped set up and fund the Bradford Council of Mosques. By siphoning resources through the mosques, the council was able to strengthen the position of conservative religious leaders and to dampen down the more militant voices on the streets. As part of its multicultural brief to allow different communities to express their distinct identities, the council also helped set up two other religious umbrella groups: the Federation for Sikh Organisations and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, both created in 1984. The consequence was to create divisions and tensions within and between different Asian communities as each fought for a greater allocation of council funding.

There had always been residential segregation between the black and white communities in Bradford, thanks to a combination of racism, especially in council house allocation, and of a desire among Asians to find protection in numbers. But within Asian areas, Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus lived cheek by jowl for much of the postwar period. In the eighties, however, the three communities started dividing. They began increasingly to live in different areas, attend different schools and

organise through different institutions. New council-funded community organisations and youth centres were set up according to religious and ethnic affiliations. By the early nineties even the Asian business community was institutionally divided along community lines with the creation in 1987 of the largely Hindu and Sikh Institute of Asian Businesses; of the Hindu Economic Development Forum in 1989; and of the Muslim-dominated Asian Business and Professional Club in 1991. The Asian Youth Movement, the beacon in the 1970s of a united struggle against racism, split up, torn apart by such multicultural tensions.

Multiculturalism was not simply the product of demand from black communities for their cultural differences to be recognised. That demand itself was created through official policy in response to the black militancy of the 1970s and early 1980s. Instead of tackling head-on the problems of racial inequality, social deprivation and political disaffection, the authorities, both national and local, simply encouraged communities to pursue what the Cantle report calls 'parallel lives'.

In places like Bradford, Oldham and Burnley multiculturalism has helped segregate communities far more effectively than racism. Racism certainly created deep divisions in these towns. But it also helped generate political struggles against discrimination, the impact of which was to create bridges across ethnic, racial and cultural divisions. Multiculturalism, on the other had, has not simply entrenched the divisions created by racism, but made cross-cultural interaction more difficult by encouraging people to assert their cultural differences. And in areas where there was both a sharp division between Asian and white communities, and where both communities suffered disproportionately from unemployment and social deprivation, the two groups began to view these problems through the lens of cultural and racial differences, blaming each other for their problems. The inevitable result were the riots into which these towns descended last spring.

The real failure of multiculturalism is its failure to understand what is valuable about cultural diversity. There is nothing good in itself about diversity. It is important because it allows us to compare and contrast different values, beliefs and lifestyles, make judgements upon them, and decide which are better and which worse. It is important, in other words, because it allows us to engage in political dialogue and debate that can help create more universal values and beliefs. But it is precisely such dialogue and debate, and the making of such judgements, that multiculturalism attempts to suppress in the name of 'tolerance' and 'respect' - as for example in David Blunkett's attempt to outlaw incitement to religious hatred. The result is not a greater sensitivity to cultural differences but an indifference to other peoples' lives, an indifference that lies at the heart of the 'parallel worlds' inhabited by different communities in towns like Bradford, Burnley and Oldham.

Cultural diversity only makes sense within a framework of common values and beliefs that enable us to treat all people equally. And to create such a framework requires us to be a bit more intolerant and to show a bit less respect.

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How 'diversity' breeds division

Munira Mirza

'That is what they want; to play on people's legitimate fears, to create division and destroy the mutuality on which our society depends.' David Blunkett, home secretary.

In his three years as UK home secretary, Blunkett has painted a terrifying picture of racist thugs roaming the streets of Britain and religious extremists stoking up hatred between communities. The government has toughened penalties for racial and religious hate crime, and plans to introduce an offence of incitement to religious hatred.

In its consultation paper, *Strength in Diversity*, published in July 2004, the Home Office promised even more measures and laws to eradicate racism (2). The implication is that ordinary people are vulnerable and in need of protection from an army of race and diversity policy advisers. This view is shared by much of the race relations industry, with fears of growing Islamaphobia since 9/11 and far-right extremism in the guise of the British National Party (BNP).

But first we ought to question how racist society is today, and whether greater regulation of speech and behaviour might do more harm than good for race relations.

While everyone in the policy world is talking about the rising problem of racism, the reality is almost the opposite. While there are still serious cases of racial discrimination, on the whole the British Social Attitudes survey shows a dramatic decline in racist attitudes over the past two decades. Of people surveyed today, twice as many view racial discrimination by employers as wrong, as compared with gender discrimination. Indicators such as the rising numbers of interracial relationships suggest a high level of social integration.

The curious paradox is that while people may be less racist than before there is a widespread perception that racism is growing. Forty-three per cent of people surveyed by the Home Office felt that there was more racism now than five years ago. Interestingly, it was white people who were more likely to say this, while ethnic minorities were more likely to say that there had been an improvement. This suggests that heightened sensitivity to racism does not accord with the lived experience of ethnic groups. At a time when race relations have never been so smooth, increasing numbers of people are pessimistic about racial issues.

I would argue that this trend reflects the impact of race relations policies introduced by the government after the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry in 1999, headed by Sir William Macpherson. A raft of new legal and policy measures was initiated to eradicate institutional racism - the most significant of which was the Race Relations Amendment Act 2000. This places a duty on over 43,000 public authorities to

'promote…good relations between persons of different racial groups' - effectively requiring bodies to prevent acts of racial discrimination *before* they occur. Social institutions such as the police force, education system, and health service are now legally obliged to monitor people's interaction with each other in order to tackle racism.

But the more public authorities talk about racism and devise anti-racist policies, the more they racialise people's everyday experience. It seems that everyone today is seen as a potential racist who needs to be monitored and every member of an ethnic minority as a potential victim of racism.

Race relations policies are having a dramatic impact in the modern workplace, by encouraging the growth of diversity training throughout the private and public sector.

Diversity training is supposed to help 'promote good relations' between different ethnic groups and capitalise on workforce diversity. However, there is warranted scepticism about whether such training alleviates tensions or exacerbates them. Much of the content of this training is overreliant on pop sociology and pseudo-therapeutic techniques. Participants are expected to talk about stereotypes they harbour deep in their subconscious, and disclose feelings of harassment and victimisation. Trainers claim to eliminate stereotypes in the workplace, yet in talking about 'different cultural perspectives' they end up generating new and more insidious stereotypes in their stead.

Participants are instructed in the 'correct' ways to engage with people of other cultural groups and how to tread carefully around their different values. Yet the little evaluation that has been done on diversity training schemes shows their spectacular failure. A recent in-depth study by the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) on diversity training in the police force admitted that a large proportion of officers felt their training was patronising, and resented the implication that they were closet racists.

The CRE's inquiry also revealed the extent to which such schemes create a heightened sense of racial difference and anxiety among officers about 'causing offence' to other racial groups. The authors noted that black and Asian officers in the Metropolitan Police Service were up to two times more likely to be subjected to internal investigations and written warnings. The reason given was that 'supervisors often lacked the confidence or experience to tackle problems informally with ethnic minority officers, that they were wary of *doing the wrong thing*' - so they were more likely to report these cases to the professional standards department, which happened to be overzealous in its approach to handling complaints. Unsurprisingly, ethnic minority officers felt that they were being unfairly targeted.

A typical workplace is knee-deep in office politics that need to be managed effectively, but the duty to 'promote good relations' is so vague that it risks conflating acts of serious racial harassment with people just not getting on with each other. When tensions between individuals are labelled as racist by a third party, it

can frustrate the efforts people sometimes have to make to get on together. Ethnic minorities are also encouraged to be on guard and report the 'unwitting prejudices' of their colleagues, making them more likely to view bad experiences as racial victimisation.

Where diversity schemes are introduced in an institution or community, the number of reported racial incidents often rises. The clearest example of this trend is in the USA, where diversity training is already a mature, multi-billion dollar industry populated by consultants and video and guidance literature. Its most notable achievement has been a year-on-year increase in complaints and racial harassment litigation.

Institutions are not the only targets of diversity management. Since the mid-1990s, whole communities have been subject to such policies and practices. The town of Oldham provides the clearest example of what can happen when public authorities take on the role of diversity managers.

In the 1990s, the Oldham police force began a deliberate strategy to raise awareness of racially motivated crimes in the area. Officers were so keen to demonstrate their commitment to dealing with racism that they treated crimes between whites and Asians as racially motivated, even when they were not reported as such.

Along with other UK public institutions, the Oldham police used Macpherson's open-ended and highly subjective definition of a racist incident as 'any incident which is perceived to be racist by the victim or any other person'. As a result, the number of racial incidents recorded in Oldham between 1997 and 1998 was 238, almost twice as many as the next highest division, Rochdale, which recorded 122, and over four times higher than in any other division in Greater Manchester. These statistics do not prove that Oldham is more racist than its neighbouring town, only that the police drew more attention to the issue. In the absence of interrogation, such 'statistics' gave the misleading impression that community relationships in the borough were deteriorating.

Oldham was also unique in that the majority of victims of racial incidents were white - 116 out of 204. The local BNP was strongly vilified in the media for pointing to this figure as evidence of white victimisation by ethnic minorities, but it was the police who promoted such explosive statistics in the first place.

Indeed, much of the BNP's opportunistic strategy has piggybacked on the racial divisions flowering under official policy. Long before the BNP started to make an impact, Oldham council's multicultural policies had begun to racialise communities and make divisions seem like a natural fact of life. When white people in Oldham are constantly told in the classroom, the police station and the local library about how culturally different their Asian neighbours are, perhaps we should not be surprised if some of them start thinking that Asian people inhabit an alien world. In the wake of policing and other diversity policies, the perception of hatred between Asians and whites gathered pace. Part of the result was the explosion of racial tension in Oldham in the summer of 2001.

So what about those people who are racist - how do we deal with genuine prejudice where it surfaces? The first step must be honest debate and the freedom to challenge prejudices out in the open. Free speech is important not so that extremists can have their say, but because in a democratic society people are trusted with the right to listen to anyone and form their own opinions.

On the night of Oldham's local elections in 2001, all the elected candidates were banned from speaking on the grounds that they might fuel racial tensions. Implicit here is the notion that the people of Oldham cannot be trusted to listen to their elected representatives and debate with each other without descending into fanatical violence. Many residents felt that the decision was patronising and fuelled a sense of disenfranchisement. More importantly, it closed down debate on race issues in Oldham, perhaps where such debate is needed most.

While diversity policies are supposedly introduced in the name of protecting ordinary people they inevitably result in policing and managing them, making race relations worse. Left to their own devices, individuals today are more tolerant and willing to engage with each other than in the past. But as government and policy-makers implement diversity policies in institutions and communities, they risk storing up distrust and anxiety for the future.

(August 2004 – Source: http://www.spiked-online.com/index.php/site/article/2265/)

Black Immigrants, 'Model' Minority?

By Debra J. Dickerson

In my interview with Don Imus last Wednesday, I finally got around to talking about something I rarely get to - black immigrants. More on that in a minute. It's amazing how much we fawn over Senator Obama's being 'black' without displaying any interest in that blackness, as if being a half-Kenyan mostly ex-pat tells us all we need to know about him. All that's interesting. That's what I was trying to get at generally in my book, The End of Blackness, and in this infamous piece. I finally got to it on, of all places, the Don Imus show.

Damned if Imus hasn't been doing yeoman's work in moving America's neurotic race obsession forward. I've been talking and writing about race for 12 years now, but I was gobsmacked on the air. Imus schooled a sister. When he said he was through apologizing for Rutgers, I took that to mean he was through talking about it. But he's certainly not through thinking about it, and he's been doing his homework.

Usually, people have me on for conversations that go like this: "I'd really like to know what you think about X race topic." [I attempt to address the question]. "Uh, excuse me, I don't mean to interrupt and I really want to know what you think, but what I think is _." Then the person orates for a long time on the dusty, pre-conceived, self-justifying notion they (black or white, liberal or conservative) have no intention of changing. The 'question' always turns out to be, "Haven't I just brilliantly ended the whole race thing?"

With rare exceptions, I've long known I'm invited on by "enemies" (liberals and conservatives, blacks and whites) as a mere visual aid "proving" their open-mindedness. I might as well be wearing an evening gown, smiling and vamping in the background like Vanna White. I'm just window dressing for a soliloquy. All I can do is hope that somewhere in the audience someone is actually listening, and will actually go back and read what I said and might have talked about if allowed to.

Print interviews with 'liberal' black journalists (they're really quite conservative; you must be black in exactly the way they demand) are the worst. They already 'know' I'm a Tom and talking to me serves two purposes, none of them reportorial: it proves they're 'objective' even though nothing I say or write every makes a difference and it gives them fodder to dine out on with the other 'real' black people. "You wouldn't believe how self-hating she is." They call me names but they don't engage in actual debate. Kneejerk doesn't begin to cover it. Don seems to have done the impossible and moved beyond that.

Of course, it must be said that Imus sandbagged me. I was, let's say, surprised by the invitation and mulled it over for a week. When I thought I could be professional and said yes, it was supposed to be about the election and it was supposed to be

short. It was neither; homey went straight to Black History month, everything I'd ever written about race, everything in the black canon about race and—unbelievably—Rutgers. See how The Man is always setting us up?

Two kids, two books, two cities, and about 15 jobs ago, I wrote a Washington Post column that I can't now find, pleading for someone in public life to admit to sexism or racism or immorality so that the rest of us could. Two of my examples where Justice Thomas admitting to having been a pig towards Anita Hill and Rev. Sharpton admitting that he'd been wrong about Tawana Brawley and paying what he owed to the man whose life and career he'd ruined with his ultimately false accusations. Until someone in public life manned up in that way, we'd all just have to go on lying about our all too human failings, waiting in vain for an example of confession and atonement.

Until then, no one could be forgiven, publicly or privately, for our momentary -ism's and we all are guilty of something sometime. Never thought that person in public life would be Don Imus and damned if the whole forgiving thing isn't much, much harder than I could have possibly imagined. What is it they say about being careful what you ask for? Offended as I initially was to be asked, I'm glad I did the show. He made a mistake, he took responsibility, he asked for forgiveness. Done, Don.

Now, black immigrants.

At The Root, a new black site from the Washington Post, Meri Danquah, a Ghanaian immigrant, writes all too briefly about the invisibility that black immigrants face in America. When, that is, they are not facing outright hostility, mostly from slave-descended blacks. She writes:

> ...Excited by the fact that I, a newly naturalized citizen, was about to vote for the first time, I asked my editor if he would be supporting Sen. Barack Obama, my chosen candidate.

> "He doesn't do nothing for me," my editor said. "When I vote for a black man, I want it to be somebody who's really black, somebody who knows the black American experience, somebody whose great-great granddaddy was a slave, like mine. You know, those Africans come over here and just reap the rewards of everything we've worked for. They think they're better than us and white folks love 'em because they're…"

> I bit my lip and listened to his diatribe against African immigrants. Surely, I thought, he's forgotten who he's talking to. That didn't come as much of a surprise. I find that a lot of people forget I'm an immigrant; more precisely, an African immigrant.

This, simply, is what I meant when I said Obama isn't black. The way the term is used, all it means is: descendant of West African slaves brought here to labor for whites against their will. How many times can I say this: I'm describing a politico-cultural reality which I reject. Yes, Shirley Chisholm and Malcolm X were of West Indian immigrant stock. They achieved mainstream black power because they kept that side of themselves out of the public eye and focused on the battle with whitey. Had they not, we'd not know their names. (My hero, W.E.B. DuBois, cruelly mocked and isolated the ostentatiously West Indian Marcus Garvey precisely because he was so ostentatiously West Indian.)

I'm critiquing the notion that all that's important about us is our historic relationship of antagonism with American whites, a relationship that immigrant blacks do not have (however similar their histories are to ours). I'm critiquing the notion that knowing someone, at some point, came from Africa provides us any useful information, if they are not descended from slaves. That, we know but we don't know diddly about black immigrants and we don't care to, black or white. I reject this.

What, exactly, do I and an immigrant Nigerian cab driver with a doctorate he can't use here in common beyond the label 'black'? Only they know, because they're not allowed to be 'black' outside of our binary slavery/Jim Crow/police brutality/segregation continuum. Native blacks see to that: when have we ever advocated for immigrant blacks unless they stray into Jim Crow territory (Diallo, etc). Our hostility to immigration is legendary; if we're all 'black,' why haven't we carved out a protective exemption for black immigrants? Because we don't feel a kinship, we don't want them talking outside the box, we don't want them changing the subject to entrepreneurship and immigration reform. And we certainly don't want them taking 'our' jobs and affirmative action slots. Too bad for 'us' they don't need them.

As Clarence Page points out, black immigrants are America's true 'model minority,' not that anyone, outside of admissions offices and hiring offices, cares.

> Do African immigrants make the smartest Americans? The question may sound outlandish, but if you were judging by statistics alone, you could find plenty of evidence to back it up.
>
> In a side-by-side comparison of 2000 census data by sociologist John R. Logan at the Mumford Center, State University of New York at Albany, black immigrants from Africa average the highest educational attainment of any population group in the country, including whites and Asians.

That trend continues in their offspring. From The Guardian:

> The joint University of Pennsylvania-Princeton report found that although immigrant-origin black students make up only 13 percent

of the black population in the US, they now comprise 27 percent of black students at the 28 top US universities surveyed.

And in a sample of the elite Ivy League universities the figures were even more dramatic. More than 40 percent of black students in the Ivy League now come from immigrant families. Overall, however, black students still make up only 6 percent-7 percent of Ivy League students, while 12 percent of the general US population is black. In the non-ivy league selective colleges studied, such as Berkeley, Emory, Stanford, Tufts, Wesleyan, Barnard and Smith, black students make up between 3 percent and 9 percent of the population.

This should cause jubilation at the NAACP, right? Wrong. Also from The Guardian (emphasis added):

"Immigrant and second-generation blacks are over-represented at these schools, while overall black students are still too few," says Dr. Camille Charles, sociology professor at the University of Pennsylvania and one of the report's co-authors, "which means the problem of access for African-Americans - that group which has the longest history of oppression in the US - is of even greater concern than we thought."

Charles doesn't want immigrant black students to have less access, but she is concerned that African-Americans whose families have been in the US since before the civil war and whose forefathers were slaves are doubly losing out. There is a worry that selective, usually private, universities are taking an "any black student will do" approach to diversity.

If we're all 'black', why won't any black student do?

You have to read the piece to have your mind blown. The words don't even cohere as 'black,' 'African,' and 'African American' try to make sense of themselves. Blacks who run affirmative action programs are quoted being incensed by the 'over representation' of immigrant blacks, and that 'blacks' who've fled war and rape in Haiti are seen as having 'sexier' admission essays than 'blacks' who've overcome South Central.

'Black' is simply a label which obscures more than it illuminates. That's all I was trying to say.

Mother Jones, February 25, 2008

Race Obsession Harms Those it is Meant to Help

Kenan Malik

Should public policy be colour blind? Or must governments and public institutions take account of people's ethnicity and culture in formulating policy? It is a debate that has been reignited by President Nicolas Sarkozy's attempt to introduce ethnic monitoring in France.

Unlike in Britain, where public institutions routinely collect information about people's ethnic origins, it is illegal in France to classify people in this fashion. The foundation stone of the secular French republic is that all citizens should be equal and free from distinctions of race or religion. But senior politicians have begun to recognize that France remains deeply disfigured by racism. To combat this, Sarkozy argues, it is necessary to collect ethnically-based data. He should look again at the British experience which suggests that such policies often do more harm than good.

Common sense would seem to suggest that you can't counter discrimination without monitoring it. Yet the issue is not so straightforward.

Two assumptions underlie the argument for ethnic monitoring: first, that ethnicity and culture are the most important labels we can place on people; and second that there is a causal relationship between membership of such a group and disproportional outcomes between groups. If Bangladeshis are over-represented in poor housing or if African Caribbeans are under-represented in higher education this is viewed as a consequence of belonging to those particular groups. Neither assumption is valid. Minority groups are not homogenous entities but are as divided by issues of class, gender, age, and so on, as the rest of the population. These factors often shape individuals' lives far more than do race, ethnicity or culture.

Take, instance, the question of educational attainment in Britain. We all know that Asians excel at school and that African Caribbeans perform worst. Except that they don't. Pupils of Indian origin tend to do well, but the performance of Bangladeshis and Pakistanis is similar to that of African Caribbeans. Bottom of the class come white working class boys.

Children of Bangladeshi and Pakistani origin used to be labelled 'Asian'. Now they are more likely to be seen as 'Muslim'. When they were Asians they were bracketed together with children of Indian origin, and the differences between the groups were largely ignored. Now that they are Muslims, the poor performance of Bangladeshis and Pakistanis has attracted attention, but is often put down to 'Islamophobia'. To improve the educational possibilities of all these groups - Bangladeshis, Pakistanis, African Caribbeans and working class whites - we have to understand what they have in common, which derives less from their race than their class. Bangladeshis and Pakistanis in this country come largely from poor rural areas, and African

Caribbeans are predominantly working class. A system obsessed by ethnic categories, however, is rarely able to make those kinds of connections.

The criminlogists Marian Fitzgerald and Chris Hale have demonstrated a similar problem with discussions of race and crime. Black people are over-represented in robbery statistics (both as perpetrator and victim) leading to the widespread belief that there is something about black culture (or even black nature) that gives rise to criminality. Fitzgerald and Hale have shown that with careful analysis of the data, race and ethnicity drops out of the picture entirely. Street crime is much more likely in areas in which there is a high population turnover and a combination of young people living in poverty alongside others who are not just more affluent but also trendy enough to own gadgets like mobile phones or iPods that are both valuable and possess street cred. It just so happens that young blacks live disproportionately in such areas. But where such areas contain large numbers of poor young whites, they too are represented in the robbery figures.

The category 'lives in an area of high population turnover with a mixture of poor people and affluent trendies' is not a politically salient group. The category black is. So we tend to associate street robbery with blackness. The result is what Fitzgerald calls 'statistical racism'. Because the relationship between blacks and robberies seems statistically so fixed, so people start believing that little can be done to change that relationship and there develops notions of innate black criminality. Ethnic monitoring both makes us see racism where none exists and creates new racial stereotypes.

Ethnic monitoring does not just produce misleading data. The process of classification often creates the very problems it is supposed to solve. Local authorities have used ethnic categories not only as a means of collecting data but also as a way of distributing political power – by promoting certain 'community leaders' – and of disbursing public funds through ethnically-based projects. Once the allocation of power, resources and opportunities becomes linked to membership of particular groups, then people inevitably begin to identify themselves in terms of those ethnicities, and only those ethnicities.

Take Bradford. The majority of Muslims in the city come from the Mirpur area of Pakistan. But few identified themselves as Muslims – until the local council began rolling out its multicultural policies in the 1980s. Declaring that every community had 'an equal right to maintain its own identity, culture, language, religion and customs', the local authority looked to the mosques to act the voice of the Muslim community and funded social projects along faith and ethnic lines. The council itself helped create a Muslim identity that had barely existed before. In 1990, the city's Mirpuri community boasted 18 mosques. Fourteen of them had been built in the previous decade, in the wake of the council's multicultural policy. A community that had worn its faith lightly now became defined almost entirely by that faith.

National government has pursued a similar policy. Rather than appealing to Muslims as British citizens, with a variety of views and beliefs, politicians of all hues prefer to see them as people whose primarily loyalty is to their faith and who

can be engaged only by other Muslims. Should we be surprised then if, as a consequence, many Muslims come to see themselves as semi-detached Britons? This week the government published CONTEST 2, its new anti-extremism strategy. But it still has not understood the extent which its own multicultural policies have helped fan the flames of Islamic radicalism.

A policy of ethnic monitoring could have even more disastrous consequences across the Channel. In 2005 violent riots swept through French *banlieus* as predominantly North African youth, subject to years of discrimination and harassment, vent their frustration and anger on police and property. Both radical Islamists, and commentators hostile to Islam, tried to portray the rioters as 'Muslim'. In fact religion played almost no role in the violence; the riots were more akin to the disturbances that set British inner cities ablaze in the early 1980s. But had the French authorities already introduced ethnic monitoring, North Africans would probably have been labelled as 'Muslims' and the riots seen as a confrontation between Islam and the French state. That, I suspect, would have done little to improve race relations or dampen Islamic radicalism in France.

Ignoring racism on the grounds that all citizens are equal and hence that racial or cultural differences are immaterial, as happens is France, is unacceptable. But so is labelling individuals by race, culture or faith and creating conflicts by institutionalising such differences in public policy.

We need to distinguish between colour blindness and racism blindness. In principle, the French assimilationist resolve to treat everyone as citizens, not as bearers of specific racial or cultural histories, is an important step in the fight against racism. In practice the French authorities have turned a blind eye not just to skin colour but also to discrimination. The French policy of corralling hundreds of thousands of the poor and disadvantaged into sink estates, exposing them to unemployment rates of up to 40 per cent and subjecting them to daily discrimination at the hands of employers and the police is not designed to produce *liberte, egalite et fraternite*. Citizenship has no meaning if different classes of citizens are treated differently, whether through racism or through multicultural policies.

29 March 2009

(Source: http://www.kenanmalik.com/essays/st_monitoring.html)

Eurocentric Anti-Eurocentrism

Ellen Meiksins Wood

Like any good socialist, I fervently believe that the struggle against racism, imperialism, and European "cultural arrogance" is absolutely essential to our project. I also believe that scholarship designed to combat "Eurocentrism" has often produced extremely important results by challenging the idea—which comes in many different forms—that "the West" has always been, for one reason or another, superior to all other civilizations and is destined to remain so. But there are certain things about the fight against Eurocentrism that I've never understood.

There are, to begin with, serious problems involved in lumping together a very wide variety of writers in the category "Eurocentrism," as if they were all centered on Europe in the same way, and as if they all shared the same contempt for non-Europeans. The category includes racists who insist on the natural superiority of Europeans over Asians, Africans, and indigenous Americans; cultural chauvinists who think that, for whatever reason, "the West" has achieved a higher level of cultural development and "rationality" which has given it an advantage in every other respect; environmental determinists who believe that Europe has some distinct ecological advantages; non-racist historians who don't give enough attention to the role of Western imperialism in European history; and Marxists who are neither racists, nor cultural chauvinists, nor ecological determinists, nor inclined to underestimate the evils of imperialism, but who believe that certain specific historical conditions in Europe, which have nothing to do with European superiority, produced certain specific historical consequences—such as the rise of capitalism.

But despite these problems in the concept of "Eurocentrism," no one can deny that there is such a thing as European "cultural arrogance," and we do have to accept that there are more than enough reasons to challenge conceptions of history that place Europeans at the center of the universe, to the detriment, or the exclusion, of everyone else. The idea of "Eurocentrism," for all its faults, should at least put us on guard against such cultural practices.

That's why I'm so puzzled by anti-Eurocentric histories, especially the histories of capitalism. What puzzles me most about them is that, without exception (as far as I know), they are based on the most Eurocentric—not to mention bourgeois—assumptions.

Inverting Eurocentrism

Let's look first at the standard "Eurocentric" account of how and where capitalism began. Conventional non-Marxist European accounts of capitalist development from at least the eighteenth century have been based on two fairly simple assumptions. Beginning with a conception of capitalism as simply "commercial

society" (as it was called by Adam Smith and others), they assume that it was largely the result of growing towns and trade; and second, that this process of commercialization reached maturity when a critical mass of wealth was collected.

We can call these two assumptions the commercialization model of capitalist development, and the classical theory of primitive accumulation. What is missing in these accounts of capitalist development is any conception of capitalism as a historically specific social form, a system with historically unprecedented conditions, certain very specific relations of production or social property relations, which generate very specific and unique "laws of motion." There is no acknowledgment that capitalism is a system of social relations in which profit-maximization and a constant need to revolutionize the forces of production are basic and inescapable conditions of survival, as they have never been in any other social form.

Instead, capitalism is conceived as a more or less natural outcome of age-old and virtually universal human practices, the activities of exchange, which have taken place not only in towns since time immemorial but also in agricultural societies. In some versions of this commercialization model, these practices are even treated as the expression of a natural human inclination, in Adam Smith's famous phrase, to "truck, barter and exchange."

In other words, in these accounts capitalism doesn't really have a beginning, and its development doesn't really involve a transition from one mode of production to a very different once. They tend to take capitalism for granted, to assume its latent existence from the dawn of history, and to "explain" its development, at best, by describing how obstacles to its natural progression were removed in some places as distinct from others.

Of course, in these narratives it is the West that was most successful in removing such obstacles. The main impediments have been "parasitic" political and legal forms, like feudalism or certain kinds of monarchy, which were cast off by the West. There have also been certain external barriers, like the closing of trade routes by "barbarian" invasions of one kind or another, so that capitalism really took off when the trade routes were reopened.

Other impediments often cited in the conventional accounts are "irrational" superstitions and certain kinds of religious or cultural beliefs and practices. So another common corollary of this view is that economic development in the West was associated with the progress of "reason," which means anything from Enlightenment philosophy to scientific and technological advances and the "rational" (i.e., capitalist) organization of production. It tends to follow from these accounts that the agents of progress were merchants or "bourgeois," the bearers of reason and freedom, who only needed to be liberated from feudal obstruction so that they could move history forward along its natural and preordained path.

How, then, do anti-Eurocentric histories differ from these classic explanations of the origin of capitalism? The critiques generally take one or both of two forms.

First, they deny the "superiority" of Europe and emphasize the importance, in fact the dominance, of non-European economies and trading networks throughout most of human history, as well as the level of technological development achieved by some of the main actors (for example, Andre Gunder Frank's argument about the Asian-dominated world economy, which, he argues, lasted until 1750-1800 [See note 1]; and/or second, they emphasize the importance of European imperialism in the development of capitalism.

Often this second thesis has to do with the role of British imperialism, particularly the profits of sugar plantations and the slave trade, in the development of industrial capitalism, though 1492 is also a major milestone in the earlier rise of capitalism, as it is for J.M. Blaut, who attributes European economic development in large part to the riches plundered from the Americas. [See note 2]

These two theses may be combined in the argument that the dominant non-European trading powers could and probably would have produced capitalism (or maybe even did, though further development was thwarted), if only they hadn't been ripped off by Western imperialism.

Now clearly, no serious historian today would deny the importance of trade and technology in Asia and other parts of the non-European world, or, for that matter, the relatively modest level of development attained by Europeans before the rise of capitalism. Nor would any such historian, especially on the left, deny the importance of imperialism in European history and the tremendous damage it has done. The question, though, is what this has to do with capitalism, and on that score, the anti-Eurocentric arguments tend to fall into precisely those Eurocentric (and bourgeois) traps they are meant to avoid.

The remarkable thing about anti-Eurocentric critiques is that they start from the same premises as do the standard Eurocentric explanations, the same commercialization model and the same conception of primitive accumulation. Traders or merchants anywhere and everywhere are seen as potential, if not actual, capitalists, and the more active, wide-ranging, and wealthy they are, the further they are along the road of capitalist development. In that sense, many parts of Asia, Africa, and the Americas were well on their way to capitalism before European imperialism, in one way or another, blocked their path.

None of these critics seems to deny that at some point, Europe did diverge from other parts of the world, but this divergence is associated with "bourgeois revolution" and/or with the advent of industrial capitalism, once enough wealth had been accumulated by means of trade and imperial expropriation. Since trade was widespread in other parts of the world, imperialism was the really essential factor in distinguishing Europe from the rest, because it gave European powers the critical mass of wealth that finally differentiated them from other commercial powers.

So, for instance, J.M. Blaut talks about "protocapitalism" in Asia, Africa, and Europe and argues that the break which distinguished Europe from the rest occurred

only after wealth acquired by looting the Americas made possible two types of revolution in Europe, first the "bourgeois" and then the "industrial." "I use the word `protocapitalism'," he says, "not to introduce a technical term but to avoid the problem of defining another term, `capitalism.'" [See note 3]

This evasion is disarmingly candid, but also revealing. Since Blaut does not conceive of capitalism as a specific social form, he can have no clear conception of non- or precapitalist modes of production with different operating principles, and no conception of a transition from one to the other. Commercial practices shade into "protocapitalism," which grows into "modern" capitalism.

"Protocapitalism," argues Blaut, finally matured in "modern" capitalism because of wealth accumulated from the colonies. Here, Europe had a distinct "locational" advantage because the Americas were relatively accessible to European empires. It was this crucial geographic advantage, Blaut believes, that gave Europe privileged access to the wealth required to jump-start their bourgeois and industrial revolutions.

The "bourgeois revolutions," which, according to Blaut, first truly distinguished Europe from the rest of the world, finally gave political power to the classes that had been enriched especially by colonial wealth, and allowed them to get on with the business of capitalist development unhindered by non-capitalist forces. Once they took power, they were able to mobilize the state to facilitate accumulation and create the infrastructure for industrial development. From then on, the Industrial Revolution, though it did not happen overnight, was inevitable.

In this version, the echoes of the old Eurocentric and bourgeois narrative are truly uncanny: Not only is European development basically the rise to power of the bourgeoisie, but advanced and wealthy non-European civilizations seem to be cases of arrested development because, even if through no fault of their own, they never did throw off their shackles by means of bourgeois revolution. And here too, just as in classical political economy and its notion of "primitive accumulation," the leap forward to "modern" capitalism occurred because the bourgeoisie had managed, in one way or another, to accumulate sufficient wealth.

Blaut tries to dissociate himself from the notion of "primitive accumulation" but seems to miss the point completely. [See note 4] Accumulation from the American colonies, he argues, was not some "primitive" form of accumulation but, from the start, "capital accumulation: of profit." But this proposition simply confirms his affinity to the classic conception, in which "primitive accumulation" is indeed the accumulation of "capital."

"Capital," in that conception, is indistinguishable from any other kind of wealth or profit, and capitalism is basically more of the same, just as it is for Blaut. "Primitive accumulation" is "primitive" only in the sense that it represents the accumulation of the mass of wealth required before "commercial society" can reach maturity. In that sense, it's very much like Blaut's own conception of early "capital accumulation," which, after 1492 and the looting of the Americas, reached the critical mass that

made "mature" capitalism (or, in the terms of classical political economy, "commercial society") possible. Like classical political economy, Blaut's argument evades the issue of the transition to capitalism by presupposing its existence in earlier forms.

As we'll see in a moment, a decisive break from the classic model came with Marx's critique of political economy and its notion of "primitive accumulation," his definition of capital not simply as wealth or profit but as a social relation, and his emphasis on the transformation of social property relations as the real "primitive accumulation." Yet critics of Eurocentric history have more or less returned to the old notion.

Even at the point where they diverge most emphatically from the classic Eurocentric histories, in their emphasis on imperialism, they simply invert an old Eurocentric principle. In the old accounts, Europe surpassed all other civilizations by removing obstacles to the natural development of "commercial society"; in the anti-Eurocentric inversion, the failure of non-Europeans to complete the process of development, despite the fact that they had already come so far, was caused by obstacles created by Western imperialism.

So here again there seems to be no conception of capitalism as a specific social form, with a distinctive social structure, distinctive social relations of production, which compel economic agents to behave in specific ways and generate specific laws of motion. And here again there is no real transition. In much the same way that the old Eurocentric arguments took capitalism for granted, this one too avoids explaining the origin of this specific social form—or to be more precise, denies its specificity and hence evades the question of its origin—by assuming its prior existence ("protocapitalism," not to mention even earlier forms of trade and mercantile activity).

There is no explanation of how a new social form came into being. Instead, the history of capitalism is a story in which age-old social practices, with no historical beginning, have grown and matured—unless their growth and maturation have been thwarted by internal or external obstacles.

There are of course variations on the old themes, most of all the attack on imperialism. There are also other refinements like the idea of "bourgeois revolution"—though even this idea, no matter how much it is dressed up in Marxist trappings, is not fundamentally different from Eurocentric-bourgeois accounts which treat the bourgeoisie as agents of progress and credit them with throwing off the feudal shackles that impeded it. But whatever variations are introduced into the story, basically capitalism is just a lot more of what already existed in protocapitalism and long before: more money, more urbanization, more trade, and more wealth.

Challenging Eurocentrism

This kind of argument seems to me a regression, which forfeits much of the progress historians have made in challenging the Eurocentric model. The real breakthroughs in opposing that model have come from historians—mainly Marxists, but also an economic historian like Karl Polanyi—who have undermined the naturalization of capitalism, the view that capitalism is basically a natural extension of certain universal human practices, which would itself have become universal if only all the world's peoples were as rational and free as Europeans.

By insisting on the historical specificity of capitalism, they have dealt a fatal blow to the most Eurocentric principle of all: that the European path of development culminating in industrial capitalism is the natural order of things and that non-European civilizations that did not take that path, or faltered somewhere along the way, failed because they were somehow fatally flawed.

The challenge begins with Marx's critique of classical political economy and its notion of "primitive accumulation." In some of his own historical sketches (for instance, in the Manifesto) Marx never completely dissociated himself from the old model (which I call the "bourgeois paradigm"). There, the origin of capitalism was not so much explained as presupposed, as a new social form waiting to be released by the rising bourgeoisie when it finally threw off its feudal shackles.

For Marx's truly distinctive "Marxist" approach, we have to look to his critique of political economy. Although that approach was obviously much more developed in his revolutionary analysis of contemporary capitalism, in his dissection of "the so-called primitive accumulation" in volume I of Capital, he applied his critique to the historical question of the system's origin.

Here Marx did decisively break with the old paradigm and laid a foundation for important elaborations by later Marxist historians. He insisted that wealth by itself wasn't "capital," that capital was a social relation, that the mere accumulation of wealth was not the decisive factor in the origin of capitalism, and that a transformation of social property relations—the expropriation of direct producers, specifically in England—was the real "primitive accumulation."

The point of Marx's critique of "the so-called primitive accumulation" (and people too often miss the significance of the phrase "so-called") is that no amount of accumulation, whether from outright theft, from imperialism, from commercial profit, or even from the exploitation of labor for commercial profit, by itself constitutes capital, nor will it produce capitalism.

The "primitive accumulation" of classical political economy is "so-called" because capital, as Marx defines it, is a social relation and not just any kind of wealth or profit, and accumulation as such is not what brings about capitalism. Of course some accumulated wealth is necessary, but the specific precondition of capitalism is a transformation of social property relations that generates capitalist "laws of motion": the imperatives of competition and profit-maximization, a compulsion to

reinvest surpluses, and a systematic and relentless need to improve labor-productivity and develop the forces of production.

The critical transformation of social property relations, in Marx's account, took place in the English countryside. In the new agrarian relations, landlords increasingly derived rents from the commercial profits of capitalist tenants, while many small producers were dispossessed and became wage laborers.

Marx regards this rural transformation as the real "primitive accumulation" not because it created a critical mass of wealth but because these social property relations generated new economic imperatives, especially the compulsions of competition, a systematic need to develop the productive forces, leading to new laws of motion such as the world had never seen before.

At the heart of this argument was Marx's insistence on the historical specificity of capitalism. This meant that capitalism had a historical beginning and therefore a conceivable end. Capitalism was not the product of some inevitable natural process, nor was it the end of history. It had emerged in very specific historical conditions. If it was spreading throughout the world, this wasn't because of any "diffusion" of inherently superior Western ideas and practices but because of capitalism's own specific imperatives, its ruthless drive for self-expansion.

Marx's insights were elaborated by later Marxist historians, especially in the famous "Transition Debate" which began in 1950 in Science and Society. [See note 5] Here, the main issue was whether the transition from feudalism to capitalism was brought about by external factors—in particular, the growth of trade (as in the "commercialization model")—or by internal factors, a development in social property relations.

In that debate, historians such as Maurice Dobb and R.H. Hilton challenged the commercialization model. At least, they showed how the dissolution of Western feudalism and the transition to capitalism was not brought about by the expansion of trade, by urbanization, or by the increasing monetization of the economy. Feudalism—a system constituted by a relation between peasants in possession of the means of subsistence and lords whose self-reproduction depended on "extra-economic," coercive surplus extraction—was, they argued, compatible with a considerable degree of urbanization, while trade was an essential feature of the system.

Even the spread of money rents, instead of rent in kind or labor services, did not fundamentally change the logic of feudalism. Instead, the critical factor in bringing about the transition was the social property relations and class struggle between lords and peasants.

This was an important challenge to the commercialization model of capitalist development, but it still shared significant assumptions with that old model. Although these Marxist historians had moved the center of gravity from the city to the country, and from the expansion of trade to relations and struggles between

exploiting and exploited classes, they were still assuming too much of what needed to be explained.

They too tended to attribute the emergence of capitalism to the removal of obstacles—even though this time, the breakthrough was not the liberation of the bourgeoisie ("protocapitalists") from feudal chains but class struggle by peasants. Freed of their feudal impediments, they could, according to this explanation, start taking advantage of commercial opportunities and bring about the transition to capitalism simply by growing from petty commodity producers into full-fledged capitalists.

Robert Brenner built on the foundation created by these Marxist historians and especially their emphasis on the class relations between lords and peasants. [See note 6] But he clearly felt that his predecessors were still conceding too much to the old model. So, instead of assuming the prior existence of capitalism, either as "protocapitalism" or as petty commodity production trying to break out of feudal fetters to become a mature capitalism, he set out to explain the emergence of a new and historically unprecedented social form.

In other words, Brenner set out to explain a real transition from one mode of production to another. He laid out a detailed explanation of how social property relations were transformed so that they set in motion a new historical dynamic, the imperatives of competition, profit-maximization and a tendency to relentless and systematic development of the productive forces.

His explanation had to do with the emergence of what he calls "market dependence," a condition in which economic units depend on the market for everything they need, for the most basic requirements of subsistence and self-reproduction. This contrasted, for instance, with those peasants who, because they remained in possession of their means of subsistence, were shielded from competition and free of the market's compulsions, even if they were involved in market exchange.

Brenner's original argument concentrated on England, where certain very specific social property relations made both landlords and tenants dependent on the market and created an economy subject to market imperatives. But he has since elaborated an argument seeking to show that in parts of the Netherlands, there was a different route to market dependence. [See note 7]

For Brenner, the divergence of European development, or, more precisely of capitalist development in part of Europe, lies here, in the emergence of a system of market dependent social property relations, not in "bourgeois revolutions" or in the later development of industrial capitalism. He clearly conceives of capitalism as a system of market imperatives—that is, as a system in which the market functions not just as an opportunity to exchange some goods for others, or even to make profit and acquire wealth, but as a necessity, a compulsion, which imposes on production and social reproduction certain inescapable requirements of competition, profit-maximization, and increasing labor-productivity.

Like other Marxist historians such as E.P. Thompson, Brenner understands industrialization not as a transhistorical process of technological change, nor the simple product of accumulated "capital" (i.e.; just wealth), nor the cause of Europe's distinctive economic development, but the end product of those specific economic imperatives which resulted from very distinctive social property relations. The so-called Industrial Revolution was the outcome of an economy already structured by capitalist social property relations, which shaped the development of both agriculture and industry.

Brenner's argument even challenged the old conception of "bourgeois revolution." He criticized it as just another way of avoiding the question of transition by assuming the prior existence of capitalism, in the person of the "protocapitalist" bourgeoisie, just waiting to break free of feudal chains. His argument is significant also because it broke with the old Eurocentric habit of treating the development of capitalism as a general European process, as if it were somehow the product of European racial or cultural superiority.

Brenner not only insisted on the specificity of capitalism as distinct from other commercial societies outside of early modern Europe but also identified the social conditions that distinguished one European society from another, giving rise to capitalism in England but not, say, in France. The issue, of course, was not the superiority of England over France, or of Western Europe over Eastern, or of Europe over everywhere else. It was simply a question of the very specific historical conditions in which a very specific social form emerged, the historically specific social property relations of capitalism.

There is, in my view, much more to be done. We need, for instance, to explain the dynamics of highly commercialized societies that did not become capitalist, at least not until they came under pressure from already existing capitalist economies elsewhere. Various kinds of non-capitalist commerce existed both in Europe and elsewhere, long before capitalism and well into the capitalist era. Some commercial powers achieved great wealth and cultural richness, and trade in these centers was sometimes associated with substantial production, both at home and in colonies.

Yet in the absence of certain transformations in social property relations, which made competition, profit-maximization and relentless development of the productive forces necessary conditions of survival and systemic reproduction, even the wealthiest and most advanced of these commercial societies did not set off the self-sustaining process of economic development which, in part of Europe, gave rise to capitalism and eventually its industrial form.

What makes these cases even more interesting is that in some of them, the level of commercial, cultural, even technological development substantially exceeded that in England at the point where it took off on its distinctive path of capitalist development. China, for instance, was for a long time far ahead of Europe in general, not least in technology (and its achievements were, by the way, never more lavishly acknowledged than in the Eurocentric Enlightenment).

Even conventional economic histories will acknowledge the importance of the Indian economy and especially its textile industry. Nor would it be news to even the most reactionary Western historian that Europeans in the medieval period borrowed massively from the Arabs, whose scientific accomplishments in particular were far superior. This catalogue of non-European superiority could go on and on, citing accomplishments of various kinds in Africa and the Americas. And even within Europe itself, late medieval and Renaissance Florence, on any measure of commercial sophistication, domestic manufacture or cultural achievements, was well ahead of the backwater that England was before its capitalist transformation.

But the point is precisely that superiority in cultural, technological, or even commercial development had nothing to do with the specific conditions that generated capitalism in one place and not in another. Anti-Eurocentric historians are right to emphasize the backwardness of Europe, and especially of England. But that argues against, not for, the basic assumptions of the commercialization model and the classical theory of primitive accumulation, in both the old Eurocentric model and its anti-Eurocentric inversion.

The emergence of capitalism is hard to explain precisely because it was not connected to any prior "superiority" or more advanced development.

Capitalism and Imperialism

But if we still have a long way to go, the basic elements of a serious challenge to Eurocentric history are already there, and it seems to me a backward step to give up the gains we have made. It is particularly counter-productive to deny the specificity of capitalism by diluting its meaning to cover any conceivable pattern of historical development in which there is commercialization and the "primitive accumulation" of wealth. And again, it seems more than a little unhelpful to lump together under the rubric of "Eurocentrism" everything from rabid racism to Marxist histories that insist on the historical specificity of capitalism.

The irony is that the standard anti-Eurocentric arguments tend to hinder our understanding not only of capitalism but also of imperialism. This isn't to deny that they have provided us with a wealth of important and disturbing information about the evils of Western imperialism, but we tend to lose sight of how and why it operated as it did.

The first and most obvious point is that all the major powers in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe were deeply engaged in colonial ventures, conquest, plunder, oppression and slavery. Yet these ventures were associated with very different patterns of economic development, only one of which was capitalist.

In fact, the one unambiguous case of capitalist development, England, was notoriously slow in embarking on overseas colonization, or even dominating trade routes; and the development of its distinctive social property relations—the process

of "primitive accumulation" not in the sense of classical political economy but in the Marxist sense, the transformation of social property relations in the countryside—was already well underway by the time it became a major contender in the colonial race.

At the same time, Spain, the dominant early colonial power and the leader in "primitive accumulation" of the classical kind, which amassed huge wealth especially from South American silver and gold mines, and was well endowed with "capital" in the simple sense of wealth, did not develop in a capitalist direction. Instead, Spain expended its massive colonial wealth in essentially feudal pursuits, especially war and the construction of its Habsburg empire in Europe. Having overextended and overtaxed its European empire, it went into a deep and long-term decline in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

So we're still left with the question of why colonialism was associated with capitalism in one case and not another. Even those who are less interested in the origin of capitalism than in the "Industrial Revolution," at a time when England really had become a preeminent imperial power, still have to explain why the association of capitalism with imperialism produced industrial capitalism in this case and not in others.

It seems to me very hard to avoid the conclusion that much, if not everything, depended on the social property relations at home in the imperial power, the particular conditions of systemic reproduction associated with those property relations and the particular economic processes set in motion by them. The wealth amassed from colonial exploitation may have contributed substantially to further development, even if it was not a necessary precondition of the origin of capitalism. And once British capitalism, especially in its industrial form, was well established, it was able to impose capitalist imperatives on other economies with different social property relations.

But no amount of colonial wealth would have had these effects without the imperatives generated by England's domestic property relations. If wealth from the colonies and the slave trade contributed to Britain's industrial revolution, it was because the British economy had already for a long time been structured by capitalist social property relations. By contrast, the truly enormous wealth accumulated by Spain and Portugal had no such effect because they were unambiguously non-capitalist economies.

Ireland: The New Colonial Model

There is, though, more to the story. If England was a late bloomer in overseas ventures, it did get an earlier start closer to home. Domination of Ireland was England's first real imperial enterprise. But, although there had been a long history of efforts to extend English rule and English law to "the wild Irish," as well as other parts of the British Isles, a concerted campaign for outright colonization, by means of conquest and large-scale "plantation," really took off in the late sixteenth

century—at just the time when English domestic property relations were undergoing their own significant developments.

A new pattern of colonization emerged which was less the cause than the result of England's transition to capitalism. This pattern also became the model for English colonization of the New World.

The point here is that, in Ireland and then elsewhere, the English developed a form of colonialism different from the imperialism of its European rivals. Compared to other European empires, the British was notable, first of all, for the prominence of white settler colonies, as distinct from other forms of imperial domination, such as trading empires or conquests for the purpose of appropriating precious commodities like silver; and there are some clear connections between this kind of colonization, in its specifically British form, and the development of capitalism at home.

The settlement of Ireland differed even from other European colonial settlements and reflected the logic of early agrarian capitalism. The Spanish had their encomienda system, subjecting local populations to a form of slavery. The French in New France had their quasi-feudal seigneuries. The Dutch had their trading posts and settlements to facilitate commerce and provision merchant ships. Slave plantations for the production of highly marketable commodities like sugar became a common feature of both the old and the new imperialisms. But the pattern of England's early colonial ventures had certain distinctive features which reflected its distinctive domestic developments (not least, a surplus population dispossessed by agrarian capitalism).

The English in Ireland spelled out quite explicitly their intention of displacing traditional indigenous property forms and social relations with the property relations of south-eastern England, the birthplace of agrarian capitalism. They did this partly by imposing the new system on Irish tenants, but more particularly, by dispossessing the Irish altogether and replacing them with English and Scottish settlers, who were supposed to transplant a productive and profitable commercial agriculture.

It was in Ireland, too, that the English began to develop an ideological apparatus for justifying the dispossession of indigenous peoples on the grounds that they were unproductive, that is, not producing efficiently and for commercial profit—in terms exactly like those used to justify enclosure at home in England. Dispossession for the purpose of "improvement," the promotion of productivity for profit, continued to be the object in the New World—except that clearing the land of its indigenous inhabitants increasingly took an even more violent, final, and genocidal form.

There is obviously a great deal more to be said about the various aspects of British imperialism, both in the New World and then in Africa and in Asia where it took different forms. There is much to be said about how even older forms, including slavery, were shaped by the logic of capitalism.

But the main point here is that, however much we emphasize the role of imperialism in European economic development, we are still left with essential questions about why the various kinds of European imperialism were what they were and had the particular and varied consequences that they did. While we can understand the early Spanish empire, both its purposes and its results, without invoking capitalism, it is simply impossible to comprehend the British Empire without situating it in the context of capitalist development.

Conclusion

One of the most important lessons we can learn from Marx and the best Marxist historians is that we don't have to take capitalism for granted. Capitalism is a historically specific social form, with its own distinct systemic logic and its own specific contradictions, which came into being by means of intelligible processes of change, in specific times and places, for specific historical reasons. This is vitally important not only because we need to understand those specificities in order to combat the system, but also because there is something profoundly liberating about understanding capitalism in this way and because without it socialism is literally inconceivable.

Understanding capitalism as a specific historical form is liberating in other ways too. Just as freeing the world of capitalism is an indispensable condition of freeing it from imperialism, insisting on the historical specificity of the capitalist system has always seemed to me essential to liberating the world from Western "cultural arrogance."

It has never occurred to me that this emphasis on the historical specificity of capitalism, its distinctive nature and its specific historical origin, is a brand of Eurocentrism. On the contrary, I know of no more effective way to puncture the Western sense of superiority than to challenge the triumphalist conviction that the Western path of historical development is the natural and inevitable way of things.

It seems completely self-defeating to try and challenge this triumphalism by appropriating its most basic assumptions about the nature of capitalism. It is surely even more perverse to validate the superiority of capitalism by treating it as the universal standard of merit and progress.

It is as if, by claiming capitalism for itself, Europe is appropriating all that is good and progressive, as if a different historical path represents failure, and as if we can affirm the value of other societies only by claiming that they really did develop capitalism (or at least protocapitalism), or that they could and would have done so had history been allowed to take its natural course.

Notes

1. Andre Gunder Frank, Reorient: Global Economy in the Asian Age (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

2. J.M. Blaut, The Colonizer's Model of the World: Geographical Diffusionism and Eurocentric History (New York and London: Guilford Press, 1993; and Eight Eurocentric Historians (Guilford, 2000).

3. Colonizer's Model, 165.

4. Colonizer's Model, 187-88 and 210 n.20.

5. The original debate, with some additions, was republished in R.H. Hilton, ed. The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism (London: Verso, 1976).

6. See especially his chapters in eds. T.H. Aston and C.H.E. Philpin, The Brenner Debate (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). On "bourgeois revolution," see his "Bourgeois Revolution and Transition to Capitalism," in A.L. Beier et al., eds., The First Modern Society (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

7. Brenner's argument on the Netherlands will appear in a forthcoming issue of the Journal of Agrarian Change. I have some doubts about that argument, which I spell out in an article also appearing in JAC some time after his comes out.

(Source: Against the Currnt #, May-June 2001 - www.solidarity-us.org/node/993)
Ellen Meiksins Wood is an advisory editor of Against the Current.

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After an introduction critiquing the 'Marxism' of the academy, Hutnyk provides
detailed critical analyses of the approaches and theorists of cultural studies.

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it could ever be held by anyone. But when people are caught believing something that isn't reality-
based, most believe it far more rigidly than they believe facts.

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in their disciplines. Irwin calls Said's book 'Orientialism' "a work of malignant charlatanry."

The German Ideology
Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels
1845
Marx and Engels take on the "philosophic charlatanry" and pettiness and "parochial narrowness" of
the pseudo-radicals of their time, "in particular the tragicomic contrast between the illusions of these
heroes about their achievements and the actual achievements themselves."

Higher Superstition: The Academic Left and its Quarrels with Science
Paul Gross, Norman Levitt
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Describes attacks on science, and on concepts of truth and rationality, in areas of the humanities.

The House of Wisdom: How the Arabs Transformed Western Civilization
Jonathan Lyons
Bloomsbury Press, New York, 2009, CX9479
Arab scholars were exploring and extending the great works of the Persian, Hindu, and Greek civilizations. There were striking advances in the sciences and mathematics, but more fundamentally, the Arabs taught the importance of experimentation and rational thought. Eventually, through the efforts of men like Adelard, the accomplishments of the Arabs got through to the West, and shaped it.

The Illusions of Postmodernism
Terry Eagleton
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Ulli Diemer
http://www.diemer.ca/Docs/RadicalDigressions5.htm#August102008
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Argues that people who advocate a vision of distinct communities that speak different languages, keep apart from each other, and communicate with the structures of the larger society only through interpreters, are doing more harm than good. What they are advocating is not diversity but entrenched division.

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The Invention of the White Race:
Volume One: Racial Oppression and Social Control
Volume Two: The Origin of Racial Oppression in Anglo-America
Theodore W. Allen
Allen's study includes a complete debunking of the myth that race and skin colour are the same thing. He argues that the propertyless classes in continental Anglo-American and United States society have been recruited into the "intermediate buffer control stratum" (the so-called "middle class") through anomalous white-skin privileges.

The Nazis and Deconstruction: Jean-Pierre Faye's Demolition of Derrida
Loren Goldner
http://home.earthlink.net/~lrgoldner/faye.html
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A review of Jean-Pierre Faye's book 'La raison narrative', which traces the Nazi origins of deconstructionist and post-modernist concepts and terminology. Faye shows, for example, that the concept of 'deconstruction' was introduced in a Nazi journal edited by M.H. Goering, and he shows how theorists who based themselves on Heidegger's writings, such as Derrida, Lyotard, and Lacoue-Labarthe, whitewashed Heidegger's Nazism, treating it as a mere 'detail'.

The No-Nonsense Guide to Class, Caste & Hierarchies
Jeremy Seabrook
Concentrates mainly on the history of social hierarchy in Western civilization, and particularly the struggles of the working class.

Nothing Mat(t)ers: A Feminist Critique of Postmodernism
Somer Broberibb
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Ontological "Difference" and the Neo-Liberal War on the Social: Deconstruction and Deindustrialization
Loren Goldner
http://home.earthlink.net/!lrgoldner/preface.html
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We have today legions of people with a smattering of knowledge turning out reams of books filled with buzz words that could be (and have been) produced by a computer program, and could be (and are) picked up in peer-group shop talk in a few months at the nearest humanities program or academic conference. Everyone these people don't like is trapped in a "gaze"; everyone "constitutes" their "identity" by "discourse"; to the fuddy-duddy "master narratives" that talk about such indelicate subjects as world accumulation these people counterpose "pastiche" and "bricolage", the very idea of being in any way systematic smacking of "totalitarianism"; it is blithely assumed that everyone except heterosexual white males now and for all time have been "subversives" (one wonders why we are still living under capitalism); a crippling relativism makes it somehow "imperial" to criticize public beheadings in Saudi Arabia or cliterodectomy practiced on five-year old girls in the Sudan.

Postmodernism Disrobed
Richard Dawkins
1998.
On the 'daffy absurdity' of postmodernist intellectuals.

Postmodernism Generator
Andrew C. Bulhak
http://www.elsewhere.org/pomo/
CX8316
A computer program written by Andrew. C. Bulhak using the Dada Engine, a system for generating random text. Each time you click on the page, it generates a brand-new postmodernist essay, completely meaningless, but superficially plausible, just like 'real' postmodernist essays.

Problems of Knowledge and Freedom: The Russell Lectures
Noam Chomsky
Lectures exploring Bertrand Russell's work on empiricism, morality, linguistics and politics.

Reading Orientalism
Daniel Martin Varisco
University of Washington Press, 2008 CX9579

The Responsibility of Intellectuals
Noam Chomsky
www.chomsky.info/articles/19670223.htm
1967, CX5319

The Retreat from Class
Ellen Meiksins Wood
Schocken Books, 1986, 1999, CX11437
A critical survey of influential trends in 'post-Marxist' theory. Wood argues that by abandoning class analysis, academic trends such as post-modernism amount an acceptance of the inevitablility of capitalism.

Strange Fruit: Why Both Sides Are Wrong in the Race Debate
Kenan Malik
Malik makes the case that most "anti-racists" accept the belief, also held by racialists and outright racists, that differences between groups areinherent and of great importance. While racialists attribute the differences to biology, anti-racists attribute them to deep-rooted cultural traditions which are typically seen as inherent in the group. Malik argues that these positions are actually quite similar, and makes the case that racism and racial inequality are best combatted by focusing not on our differences but on what unites us. Malik also strongly criticizes the cultural relativism of many anti-racists, and their increasing tendency to reject science as some kind of western imperialist conspiracy to oppress the rest of the world.

The Trouble with Theory: The Educational Costs of Postmodernism
Gavin Kitching
Penn State Press, 2008, CX9347
Postmodern theory has engaged the hearts and heads of many students because of its apparent political and social radicalism. Yet Kitching writes:"At the heart of postmodernism is very poor, deeply confused, and misbegotten philosophy. As a result even the very best students who fall under its sway produce radically incoherent ideas about language, meaning, truth, and reality."

Vanguard of Retrogression: "Postmodern" Fictions as Ideology in the Era of Fictitious Capital
Loren Goldner
Queequeg Publications, 2001, CX8045
When one probes the terms of the debate, what is truly amazing is that the ostensibly anti-Eurocentric multiculturalists are, without knowing it, purveying a remarkably Eurocentric version of what the Western tradition really is. The ultimate theoretical sources of today's multiculturalism are two very white and very dead European males, Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger.

Where Do Postmodernists Come From?
Terry Eagleton
Monthly Review, Vol. 47, No. 3, July-August 1995, New York, US, CX8307
Eagleton argues that left-leaning intellectuals have adopted postmodernism out of a sense of having been badly defeated, a belief that the left as a political tendency has little future. Culturalism, he argues, involves an extreme subjectivism combined with a deep pessimism, a sense that it isn't worth the effort to learn about the world, to analyze social systems, for instance, because they can't be changed anyway.

Wittgenstein's Lectures, 1932 - 35
Ludwig Wittgenstein
Edited by Alice Ambrose
Blackwell, 1979
Lectures by Wittgenstein on philosophy

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