

# Theory & Event

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## **Additional Information**

# Left Conservatism, I

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There is one thing that Chris left out of the genealogy of this conference which I want to note briefly. Originally neither Judith Butler nor I were supposed to be sitting here, but rather Wahneema Lubiano, Professor of English and African-American studies at Duke. For health reasons, she had to cancel, so between the two of us we're trying to make up for that loss, but I think you should consider it a two-thirds substitute for what Wahneema would have contributed.

I mention this also because the lure that Chris offered when we were invited to replace Wahneema was that what we were going to do was have a workshop—we would each say a few things at the beginning but mostly we would all converse with each other. On other occasions I might enter this conversation at the philosophical level of analysis that Paul modelled so finely, and in fact, last year, to a piece of this audience, I argued in philosophical terms that Marx was no believer in either the Real or the True with a capital R or T. But my understanding of the occasion today is much looser intellectually, and maybe loose-canon like politically. I'm not offering a tight argument or a direct encounter with some of the philosophical issues that are at the root of what has been cast as an intra-Left argument. Rather I just want to set out, in a very general way, what I consider to be some of its political stakes.

Being a conservative myself in many respects, I want to distinguish the provisional appellation "left conservatism"—and I'm not sure it's the right appellation—from the kind of conservatism that I hew to and defend. In academe, I'm the kind of conservative who

loves the classics and believes the old and great books ought to be absolutely central in a college education. I'm the kind who believes students ought to know the history of European modernity in order to understand the origins and development of many current institutions, including capitalism, liberalism, and neo-colonialism. I'm also the kind who believes in lectures, note-taking, and analytic paper writing, rather than free-form or do-it-yourself pedagogy. In all of these respects, I have been named a conservative and my leftist credentials have been challenged.

In culture, I'm the kind of conservative who believes in the transcendental qualities of great love, great music, and great art. I still think there is something unique and grand and tragic about humanity, something that is neither fully distinguishable from nor fully collapsible into animals, machines, gods, or virtual spaces.

In politics, I'm the kind of conservative who still believes that politics represents, among other things, a kind of semi-autonomous space concerned with public life and public things, and that politics is inappropriately reduced to, saturated by or allowed to saturate personal life, literature, art, ethics, and morality.

These are all, of course, contentious claims. They are not the ones in which I want to dwell, but I wanted to begin here because I think there are kinds of conservatism that aim to conserve things of value, things that seem to the conservative to be imperilled by contemporary formations, forces, or ideas. In other words, I don't think conservatism as such is a bad thing. I also think it is possible to be simultaneously conservative in certain ways and radically open to new historical developments, political formations, cultural expressions, and so forth. I think it is possible to be conservative toward some elements of the present and radically critical of others. It is possible to be invested in a radical critique of the present order and a radically different future, while caring for and wishing to conserve some dimension of the past and the present.

Now, what of this phenomenon provisionally being called left conservatism? First, I really want to call it provisional. I am not sure it will turn out to be useful or rightfully named. And here I want to gather us together before I distinguish us. The so-called left conservatives, the so-called left non-conservatives, presumably we all want to challenge the organization, the character, and the values of the present order in the name of something more egalitarian, more emancipatory, less exploitative, less punitive, less cruel, less injurious. Now what's provisionally being called "left conservatism" seems to me not to be only the conserving conservatism I just spoke of, but rather to contain certain elements of reaction and refusal. A good conservative critically assesses the value of what it is conserving and thoughtfully considers as well the forces that endanger that value. But what I'm loosely distinguishing as reaction doesn't do this—rather it kicks away and summarily condemns something that offends, unnerves, or disturbs its position, without that process of self-assessment.

So what we would seem to have today in parts of the Left is first of all a reaction to a set

of post-Marxist theoretical works, works that have been variously characterized as too dense, too obscure, too demanding to read, and/or as insufficiently political, or beside the point, politically. I think often these two things are understood to have some relationship with one another: these works are too dense, too obscure, *and hence* insufficiently political, or they're insufficiently political and therefore not worth going through the difficulty of reading and understanding them.

A second reaction is to a set of political-theoretical insights, drawn from these post-Marxist theoretical works, that seem to do a number of things. First, to decenter capitalism, or any single force as *the* engine of history. Second, to deground the so-called Real of capitalism and of all political forces, and to call into question whether one can find an empirical Real inside or underneath or alongside the discursive ways in which these things take shape. Third, these works have profoundly complicated our understanding of power. It is a complicating that I think of as in some ways inaugurated by Althusser but certainly today is most clearly associated with (although not exhausted by) Foucault. This is a way of understanding power as more than simply embodied in capital and labor, and the forces of capitalism, but also a way of understanding power that makes it more than what Lenin formulated as the who/whom question, "who does what to whom." (Lenin's formulation, for reasons I can't detail here, still remains important and we must all recur to it from time to time.) These recent formulations of power implicate all of us in it, implicate all elements of life in it, and don't restrict power's operation to any particular domain. These formulations, taken to heart, demand that we give up certain shibboleths about accountability and agency, about who has and doesn't have power, about who should therefore be reproached for having it, and about who should therefore be understood as having the truth because they don't have it.

In addition to decentering capitalism, degrounding the empirical Real, and complicating power, I think another political-theoretical insight that what is being called left conservatism is reacting to is the insight that what must be given up on as a political vision is total revolution, or the idea of revolution at all, what Marcuse called the Great Refusal, in short, all that has been embodied in the notion of "The movement," or "The revolutionary movement." And the final political theoretical matter that has garnered a substantial reaction is the tremendous emphasis on the part of some lefties, identified in one way or another with something "post," that has been given to language, words, the way in which things are talked about, at the seeming expense of deeds, forces, events, historical flows. In other words, there has been substantial reaction to a troubling of the convenient old division between the ideal and the material, the ideological and the real, words and forces.

What I have suggested so far is that I think there is a reaction, first, against a set of theoretical works, and second, against a set of political-theoretical gestures, insights and reframings. I also think there has been a reaction against a set of political formations that don't coalesce around a single and unifying analysis, enemy, or purpose. These political formations are often called identity politics but I think that is probably reductive on the

part of all of us. These political formations are often cast as heavily influenced by the new theory, and hence are thought to speak in incoherent ways or to dwell too much in the domain of words, culture, subject formation, and discursive strategies at the expense of apprehending and fighting the Real. In fact, these political formations are extremely attentive to the production of subjects in contemporary political societies, and also call into question not just the condition and position of the subordinated but the making of superordination, the making of dominance as something that courses through every inch of the social, political, economic, and cultural fabric. These political formations attend to superordination and dominance as something that saturates all domains of life and not just something that lives in a particularly demarcated group or structure—bosses, racists, and so forth.

Now what I 'm calling reactions to these challenges—to a set of theoretical works, to a set of disruptive insights, and to a set of political formations—these are really serious challenges to the orthodoxies of what was called the New Left, which we probably now have to call the Medium Old Left, a Left with which I very much identify. I think it is probably important to remember—and I think Jonathan Arac would have reminded us of this—that the challenges the New Left advanced to the Old were also terribly serious, terribly destabilizing, terribly infuriating, and I want to admit to being one of those Medium Old Lefties who sometimes feels challenged and destabilized and displaced by the insights and political formations that I've just briefly sketched. But my question for us *all* of us is: What are the possible rejoinders to these challenges?

One: We want the Real back. We want Truth with a capital T back. I won't spell out all the reasons why but I think one thing we might talk about today is why some of us think you can't have it back. I've been for the past week and a half teaching Machiavelli and it reminded me just how long the Real and the True have been called into question in the political realm. The experience of reading Machiavelli again reminds me that this thinker, whom we often identify as the quintessential political realist (and certainly that was part of Gramsci's attraction to him), actually recognized that politics transpires utterly at the level of appearances, performances, and reputations. And those who think there is a Real underneath it all will be looking in the shadows and images and performances for something that is not there. Scientific conceits about the transparent nature of the social and political world may comfort many of us but that doesn't make them either true or effective.

The second thing that one might say in response to these challenges is: We want materiality back. I don't think we can have that either. The particular form of materialism that Marx defined so brilliantly through the labor theory of value turned out not to have been any more exhaustive of the injuries and dynamics of capitalism than it was of the range of other injuries in societies that are striated along lines besides class. What is the materiality of racism, of sexism, of homophobia? And what criteria of material existence will be used to locate their materiality? What the past several decades of work these

terrains has suggested is that while you *can* find apparently material dimensions of these powers, probably as important is that the way that race, for example, as articulated in science, law, policy, pedagogy and elsewhere, constitutes and reproduces a racialized social order, indeed, constitutes race itself. The way that gender is articulated in language actually produces gendered orders, gendered beings, gendered pain and gendered suffering. And to call that immaterial, from a Marxist or Medium Old Left perspective is to put us back in the position of having to prove that gender is not, as it were, a secondary contradiction, or a secondary problem where class is fundamental. One can make the same argument about class today, namely that its materiality as Marx defined it is probably the least important thing to identify when trying to bring class back to the fore of American political and public discourse. (I actually think that some of Rorty's recent polemics about class have operated in a distinct immaterial or anti-material fashion in order to bring class back into political discourse.)

Now if social injury, social inequality and social domination function discursively, among other ways, then my question is: Why would those committed to emancipatory and egalitarian politics want to turn their back on this recognition? And I really mean that as a question, why would we want to turn away from a recognition of the ways in which race, gender, homophobia, and class are articulated discursively in politically significant ways, that cannot be reduced to materiality? One possible answer is that seeing these things as other than material, as less than obdurate, clear, and empirically definable, very deeply complicates and protracts the struggle against them. That is, I think despite the seeming pleasure that many take in discursive political struggle, it adds up to a less optimistic political vision than does a fight against an imagined material force.

Now a third rejoinder to the challenges that some poststructuralists analyses as well as some late modern political formations have offered is that we simply want a unified movement back. But to do what? To oppose what? To demand what? And in whose name? To return to the dream that abolishing capitalism will abolish everything else bad along the way? Who dreams that dream still? Who dreams the dream of total revolution, of one people united by a common critique and common vision? We might talk more about this as well, but I think the fantasy or the call for some kind of consensus in a unified movement tacitly contains that dream even as it formally disavows it.

Another rejoinder might be that we want a clear sense of accountable subjects and agency back, precisely what poststructuralism is said to destroy and what identity politics is thought not to be able to produce. In that cry for a clear sense of accountability and agency I wonder if we would do better to ask, What was it that accountability satisfied, at an emotional/political level, and what did it distract from politically? That is, what is satisfied by imagining all power to really be invested in something called an oppressor, or an oppressive structure, as opposed to understanding power as diffused through a variety of different sites, sources, and channels of culture, and indeed understanding ourselves as vehicles of our own subordination as that power courses through us? As for agency, I would

say that it is very clear that we need all the theoretical complexity we can muster to understand why effective action is so difficult to plot in our time. We need to know why subjects today mostly don't act on behalf of their own emancipation, to understand how our political desires are constrained and turned against us, to understand how indeed we participate in or passively witness our own subordination.

Another tacit, or non-overt rejoinder is simply that we want working class heroes back—we want the Joe Hills and the Union Maids that we don't have today. We don't want the terribly ambiguous icons of Mapplethorpe and Anita Hill and Rodney King and Mumia Jamal and Humboldt County Earth Firsters and, god help us, Paula Jones and Monica Lewinski. We Lefties can't rally around them, we can't stand by them, we can't identify with them. Alas, they are the icons we are handed in this political order. Now I am not, as I keep trying to make clear, entirely unsympathetic. A good enemy, a good union struggle, a righteous civil rights movement, a clearly imperialist war to resist, these things are inspiriting and inspiring. But I want to suggest that we don't have to jettison these things to recognize that most of contemporary political life is far more trying and ambiguous and also demands Left attention. I also think there is a certain projection of blame for the character of contemporary political life from what's being called here the conservative left, a blame for losses that we "posties" can't possibly shoulder. Without swaying too far into the psychoanalytic, it does recall for me a bit the ways that families and friends so often turn upon each other angrily in the face of certain unbearable losses.

It would be a far better thing, I think, if we could all converse seriously about the political losses and political impasses we face today: Our collective difficulty on the Left of projecting an emancipatory future, our difficulty in sustaining as objects of critique, liberalism, capitalism, and the state, critiques that have quite literally defined the left for the last century, but no longer are the main subject of almost anyone's critique, including those being called left conservatives. Our difficulty in believing that there will ever be viable alternatives to capitalism, at least ones that the Left brings about. Our difficulty in believing that there's very much left to the history of class struggle in Euro-Atlantic nations. Our difficulty in imagining that the extraordinary powers of contemporary global capitalism and the state can ever be contested let alone brought down. Our difficulty in imagining that today's often nihilistic, apathetic, consumerist and media-saturated, increasingly wired population could ever be rallied for emancipatory struggle. And our difficulty in recalling whether the '60s we thought we lived through ever really happened, especially as we trace its faint yet vulgar traces in the current Presidency.

These are not easy times for something we still call the Left. I think an enormous number of Left promises, Left premises and Left dreams have lost their ground. But rather than reproaching the difficult texts of Derrida or Homi Bhaba or the politically ambiguous ones of Michel Foucault for these kinds of ills, rather than imagine that politically inclined youth have been corrupted or distracted by too much discourse theory and too little Baron and Sweezy, I think we have to face just how disheartening a time this is for Left visions and

dreams, and just how complex the enemy, as it were, has become. And then we might begin a conversation together about what it takes to understand this late modern time of ours, and what possible visions we could coin out of the present that disheartens us and the past that has failed us.

Finally, I just want to make one note about the relationship between academic and political life that has been carried in the charge of obscurantism and political irrelevance on the part of some of those Chris cited at the beginning. I think it is a terrible mistake to conflate or identify academic and political work. To see Left academics as necessarily confining their intellectual endeavors, their theorizing, the texts they love, their reflections, to that which is politically useful in an immediate way, is, I think, a serious error. It is a mistake just as it would be a mistake to claim that Alan Sokal is no Leftist because he is a physicist and is poorly versed in social theory, and I would never make such a silly claim. But I think it is equally silly to suggest that everything any of us ever write or say must have immediate political cache. What we do in the academy is think, and to constrain that thinking entirely to what is understandable and useful outside the academy is basically to eliminate the point of the academy's existence. It is to constrain the space of imagination, open-ended search, and inquiring into our own knowledge and beliefs, all of which are the life-blood of intellectual work. For me, to stop calling into question that which I believed yesterday, to stop examining ideas I have always been attached to, would literally be to stop thinking. It would be to go into a kind of political automatic, as opposed to using the great privilege of being an intellectual, to keep digging up the political ground we stand on. It would also be to constrain the space of original critique that has always been so vital to Left projects. And if what has been called left conservatism champions a certain kind of anti-intellectualism, if it wants to constrain all of that, then, sadly it is a reaction not only to the losses I chronicled at the political level but also to its own origins in the project of intellectual criticism. Who ever found "On *The Jewish Question*" or even *Das Kapital* transparent and common-sensical, and who could read these works and fail to see Marx working very hard with and against his intellectual heritage to think through a political, intellectual, theoretical, set of problems that kept transforming his work as he worked on them. Is the work of Lukacs or Marcuse easy to decipher? Does their difficulty make them useless? Irrelevant to political thinking? Are they "needlessly obscure?" Who decides what is needful, and by what measure?

Perhaps turning against these origins, what I'm calling the origins of Left intellectual work, is itself a symptom of a certain frustration with its failure to deliver politically. Perhaps there is a response to a certain sense of betrayal by the tradition of left theory that is at work here. But that is a discussion for another time.

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## Additional Information

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