

# Theory & Event

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## **Additional Information**

# Left Conservatism, II

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I'm pleased to be here, I had no idea this was a conference, I thought we were coming to a workshop—a small “cozy” workshop—to talk about things. So what I have with me is a paper that I gave at the Rethinking Marxism conference in December, 1992 and which is presently being published by *Social Text* (52–53) and *New Left Review*. I'm going to try to talk from it a little bit today.

I wanted to say first of all, that I'm not an organizer of this conference. Chris (Connery) organized it. I know that some of the emails have been burning up with distortion. I'm not an organizer of this conference. And if I had organized it—indeed, even if I had been given Chris's pamphlet before signing on, I would have said, “Chris, let's take some of those names out of the conference description,” because I object to seeing prominent feminists being targeted as exemplary of left conservatism, feminists I respect, even though some of them, unfortunately, don't return the sentiment. Being put in a list with Jacques Lacan is humbling to me, though not offensive, and I'm not even a Lacanian.

I also wanted just briefly to say that I agreed at least with this part of Paul Bové's remarks, that anti-foundationalism cannot secure a politics, that there is no political position that follows necessarily from anti-foundationalism, nor does it necessary destroy a politics. Its relationship to political formations strikes me as very different. It cannot be a foundation. This is an important point. If anti-foundationalism is what *secured* a politics, it would be taking the place of a foundation. If it is that which destroys a politics, it would still be in the place of that which ought to be a foundation. In other words, the whole debate

concerning the politics of anti-foundationalism takes place within a foundationalist imaginary, which I think is the problem.

I also want to make just a few remarks about Chris's introduction. He said that Left conservatism was an act and not an identity. I appreciated the citation of queer theory there. But I think that if that is true, then probably we ought not to be so concerned with the names of those who are exemplary of those concerns. Name-calling runs the risk of collapsing a complex body of scholarship and political work into a symptom, and I don't want to do that. On the other hand, it struck me coming in here that whereas I don't particularly like that part of the way in which this event is framed, I also thought that this interesting flyer that we received [from protesters of the workshop] was equally problematic. The flyer implies that if the organizers had their way, those who remain disinclined to accept poststructuralism, or rather, those who remain disinclined to be incorporated within something called "the postmodernist paradigm," would be excommunicated from the left, or denied tenure or job possibilities by those who work within such paradigms. This charge strikes me as off-base, offensive and sad, sad for all of us. If what worries those who wrote the flyer is that certain kinds of premises on the Left are being opened to inquiry, are being questioned, are being called into question, and are thus *not* being understood as foundational, does that mean that such terms are useless? To call into question the foundational status of such terms is *not* to claim that they are useless or that we ought not to speak that way, that terms like "objectivity," "rationality," "universality" are so contaminated that they ought not to be uttered any longer. A serious misunderstanding has taken place. Calling the foundational status of a term into question does not censor the use of the term. It seems to me that to call something into question, to call into question its foundational status, is the beginning of the *reinvigoration* of that term. What *can* such terms mean, given that there is no consensus on their meaning? How *can* they be mobilized, given that there is no way that they can be grounded or justified in any kind of permanent way. What is the task for politics when it invariably must use terms, must use the language of universality, for instance, precisely when the conventional usages of the term do not include the radical democratic uses of the term one has in mind for the term? Anybody who has worked in gay and lesbian human rights arenas knows that—you're stuck with the language of universality—you can't stay in a place where you're too pure to use the word. It seems to me that one is indeed inevitably contaminated by a language that is also invariably useful and invariably important. And then the question is: what is the strategic operation of such terms? How can they continue to be mobilized when they are no longer being supported by a foundationalist justification.

I think that Gayatri Spivak puts this well. I paraphrase here: To deconstruct a category is not to eliminate it, it is precisely to make an inquiry into a category that we cannot do without. An inquiry into a category that we cannot do without—so it is something we absolutely need and we cannot do without, and yet it is open to a certain kind of inquiry that also is not finally suppressible. If we were to say there is a certain point at which intellectual interrogation of a category must stop because we must use it, what have we

done? We have, at that moment, premised our politics on anti-intellectualism. We've paralyzed ourselves at that moment, because we make use of a category that we cannot possibly believe in, that we cannot possibly discuss, that we may not radically interrogate. *That* kind of self-censoriousness is a terrible, terrible move. And I'm afraid that sometimes anti-foundationalism is either figured as that censoriousness or subject to that very censoriousness. In any case, I would think that if the impulse, as I understand it, is to call things into question, then calling into question a vulgar formulation like "a postmodernist paradigm" would be fabulous. And that would be one of the things that a "postmodernist" would presumably most celebrate. It would be consistent with the principled inquiry that guides that self-critical enterprise. So I welcome it. Along the way, it will become possible, then, to distinguish forms of postmodernism and to distinguish postmodernism from poststructuralism. For what it is worth, I'm allied with the latter and not the former.

It seems to me that there are two claims that I've been hearing in the last couple of years, and one of them has to do with a debate within Marxism which suggests that Marxist scholarship has been reduced to the study of culture. (Note: The rest of this discussion draws heavily from my essay "Merely Cultural," in *Social Text*, 52–53, 1997). And the second one has to do with the notion that new social movements tend to be pre-occupied with the domain of the cultural, and that this domain of cultural politics is understood as factionalizing, identitarian and particularistic, that the vision of a common goal, or overarching aim for the Left has been lost in this culturalist and identitarian degradation of leftist politics. Now I think there are various forms that this argument has taken in the last year. And one of them is that cultural Leftism has somehow abandoned the project of Marxism, and that it fails to address questions of economic equity and redistribution, and it fails to situate culture in terms of a systematic understanding of social and economic modes of production, that the cultural focus of Left politics has splintered the Left into identitarian sects, and that we have lost a set of common ideals and goals, a sense of a common history, common set of values, language and we've lost objective and universal modes of rationality. One of the assumptions obviously at work in this kind of criticism is the notion that poststructuralism in particular has thwarted Marxism, and that any ability to offer systematic accounts of social life or to assert norms of rationality whether objective, universal or both, is now seriously hampered by a poststructuralism that has entered into the field of cultural politics. Poststructuralism is then construed as destructive, relativistic, and indeed politically paralyzing.

Now, of course, I think there is a certain paradox in the cultural form that this criticism has taken, in the sense that it has been explicitly opposed to a culturalist position. Indeed we hear that cultural studies looks at media stars, that there are too many studies of Madonna; that cultural studies is concerned with cultural iconicity. And yet, this very critique has assumed the media as its own cultural form. It even became a media item on the front page of the New York Times, etc. Some people are now establishing their own cultural credentials by virtue of *this* critique of culturalism, paradoxically reinvigorating the cultural domain as a site for politics. The effort to expose the cultural icons of the cultural

Left entails becoming *the one* or ones who expose them, and thus, through the exposure, to become the one who acquires and appropriates that very iconicity. So it strikes me as extremely interesting that the cultural position is denounced precisely by those who have become media-driven and media-centered and who now have a place within the media—are becoming, as it were, popular media stars, becoming as it were, the objects of cultural studies analysis. I think there may be a cultural logic at work in this ever inverting positioning. We might want to ask, what has happened to the structure of Leftist debate such that the critique of cultural iconicity is the means by which cultural iconicity is achieved.

Now, is the theoretical effort to separate Marxism from the study of culture, to rescue critical knowledge from the shoals of cultural studies, cultural specificity, is this a turf war? How do we understand this? What I worry about is that the charge that new social movements are “merely cultural” and that a unified and progressive Marxism must return to a materialism based in an objective analysis of class seems to presume that the distinction between material and cultural life is a stable one. And this recourse to an apparently stable distinction between material and cultural life marks for me the resurgence of a certain kind of theoretical anachronism, one that discounts the contributions, I think, of the last forty or fifty years of Marxist theory. Certainly, it discounts the Althusserian displacement of the base/superstructure model, as well as various forms of cultural materialism, and here I think of Raymond Williams, and Stuart Hall, Gayatri Spivak and, indeed, even locally I think of the important way in which Donna Haraway’s work has insisted on a kind of relation of mutual determination between the semiotic and the material. The untimely resurgence of the culture/material distinction is in the service of a tactic, it seems to me, that seeks to identify some social movements with the merely cultural and then the cultural with the derivative and the secondary, and what tends to happen then is that an anachronistic materialism becomes the banner for a new Left orthodoxy.

Now in particular, since I don’t have much time here, I just want to talk a little about the disparagement of the cultural, but how this disparagement of the cultural works in tandem with a renewed sexual and social conservatism on the Left. Sometimes this takes the form of trying to resubordinate race to class, failing to consider what Gilroy and Hall have argued, namely, that race may be one modality in which class is lived. In this way, race and class are rendered distinct analytically only to produce the realization that the analysis of the one cannot proceed without the other. A different dynamic it seems to me is at work in the critique of new sexuality studies. I think that sexuality is very often criticized as inessential to what is most pressing in material life, and queer politics in particular is regularly figured as the cultural extreme of politicization.

I would like to consider one view briefly here. It is a view of Nancy Fraser’s. Nancy Fraser is not a Left conservative. She is a good friend and we argue periodically with one another. And we continue to be good friends, and that’s also possible on the Left between people

who disagree. She has written a book, *Justice Interruptus*, an interesting book. In many ways she's trying to come to terms with some of the issues we are talking about today. She's worried about Left orthodox resistances to identity politics. She wants to claim that identity politics is used as a derogatory term for feminism, anti-racism, and anti-heterosexism. I think that is a correct diagnosis. She also suggests that these movements have everything to do with social justice, and that any Left movement must respond to their challenges.

But in the middle of this argument she reproduces a division that I think gets in the way of the realization of this worthy political goal. She posits a spectrum that spans political economy and culture, and she situates lesbian and gay struggles at the cultural end of this political spectrum. Homophobia, she argues, has no roots in political economy because homosexuals occupy no distinctive position in the division of labor. They are distributed throughout class structure and they do not constitute an exploited class. She writes, "The injustice they suffer is quintessentially a matter of recognition, thus making lesbian and gay struggles into a matter of cultural recognition rather than equality throughout the political economic sphere." Indeed, it is not a material oppression: in her view, it is a cultural one. Now of course, a question one has is why would a movement concerned to criticize and transform the ways in which sexuality is social regulated not be understood as central to the functioning of political economy? Briefly, of course, we know that the family, for instance which involves the reproduction of sexuality and the reproduction of gender was clearly established by both Marx and Engels as properly part of the materialist conception of social life. And it seems to me that in that Marxist paradigm that socialist-feminism so profited from the reproduction of gendered persons, of men and women, depended on the social regulation of the family and indeed on the reproduction of heterosexual family as a site for the reproduction of heterosexual persons. Sexuality was, indeed, part of the analysis of material life and linked clearly with the mode of production. But what I want to ask here is simply this: This very important socialist-feminist legacy understood the reproduction of persons and the social regulation of sexuality *as part of* the very process of production, and hence part of the materialist conception of political economy. How is it that suddenly sexuality goes from being part of material life to being merely cultural when the focus of critical analysis turns from the question, how is normative sexuality reproduced—the family, normative gender, etc.,—to the queer question, how is it that that very normativity is confounded by the non-normative sexualities it harbors within its own terms, as well as the sexualities that thrive and suffer outside those terms? Once that shift is made from normative to queer sexuality, why is it that the link between such an analysis and the mode of production is suddenly called into question? Why does it become merely cultural at that moment? Is it only a matter of cultural recognition when non-normative sexualities are marginalized and debased, or does the possibility of sustaining a life and a livelihood come into play? Is it possible to distinguish, even analytically, between a lack of cultural recognition and a material oppression when the very definition of legal personhood is rigorously circumscribed by

cultural norms that are indissociable from their material effects? For instance, is one's material livelihood not at issue in those instances in which lesbians and gays are rigorously excluded from state sanctioned notions of the family [not that I think we should all be included], but certainly when they are stopped at the border, deemed inadmissible to citizenship, selectively denied the status of freedom of speech, and freedom of assembly, denied the [questionable] benefit of being a member of the military who might speak his or her desire, deauthorized by the law to make emergency medical decisions about one's dying lover, to receive the property of own's dead lover, to have received from the hospital the body of one's dead lover? Is this not the holy family once again constraining the roots by which property interests are regulated and distributed? Is this simply the circulation of vilifying cultural attitude? Or do such disenfranchisements mark a specific operation of the sexual and gendered distribution of legal and economic entitlements? That's my argument there.

So I have more to say. I just want to say this too. What ever happened to all that great work in Marxist economic anthropology—I don't know, I read all this fabulous stuff, Karl Polanyi, and Marshall Sahlins' work, and others, the historical work of Marc Bloch and others who actually show that economic formations were deeply sedimented in cultural and symbolic orders and that the separation between them was itself an effect of capital. That that separation should now be heralded as the foundation of a new Marxism strikes me as a failure to read capital historically, a failure which is paradoxical at best.

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