

# Theory & Event

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## **Additional Information**

# Left Conservatism, III

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What I have is to offer not really a position, but rather a set of general reflections on certain divisions which are evident within leftist thought. Last year I heard Judith Butler give a paper at the Rethinking Marxism conference at the University of Massachusetts. (The paper has just published in *Social Text*.) Following the delivery of her paper I heard the phrase, “left conservatism” used and discussed in informal discussions in the corridors outside the main conference room. At that time, I wondered, for reasons I will explain in the paper, whether I would fall into the category of a left conservative. So I’m not here to argue for one side against another; and you will see at the end of my rather scattered reflections why I feel uncomfortable by the effort to determine whether one is a “left conservative” or not. Nonetheless, I am convinced that if this were not a battle but a provocation for reflection, it could prove very valuable.

As the flyer announcing the workshop states, the current polemics about the leftist, or non-leftist, or pseudo-leftist character of poststructuralist thought, “bring to the fore long unresolved questions about how the left conceives the nature and stakes of critical work over the past fifty years and into the future.” This is undeniably the case; yet one is also compelled to ask: to whom do these questions matter, and why is it worth the effort to try to resolve them? To the overwhelming majority of the population, these questions are not just uninteresting but incomprehensible. Indeed, most will never even hear about them; whereas many of those vaguely aware of the controversy—normally through some journalistic account or slick, more caricatured version of it—are either mildly amused by it, or angered by the fact that well-paid professors are busily engaged in esoteric debates

when they should be imparting to their sons and daughters the kind of “useful” knowledge and profitable (or marketable) skills for which they are paying astronomical tuition fees; or else they are rubbing their hands in glee at the prospect of assorted leftists, radicals, and crypto-communists annihilating one another.

So, is the discussion of these questions yet another example of the huge divide separating the intellectuals ( and, more specifically, in this context, left intellectuals), from the “people?” In a sense it is; and because left intellectuals are especially sensitive to and concerned with the plight of subaltern, subordinated, exploited and repressed social groups, they spend a lot of time lamenting, arguing about, and blaming one another for this divide or rift. To be sure, there are many good reasons to be worried about this, and I don’t mean to suggest in any way that the issues and problems pertaining to the relations between left intellectuals and “the people” should be set aside. In fact, the debates surrounding these issues are often conducive to salutary auto-criticism. Not infrequently, however, they are also debilitating and even paralyzing—and never more so than when they fail to take into account the extent to which the seemingly arcane philosophical, theoretical, and critical work carried out by left intellectuals has not just contributed to but, in many instances, prepared a good deal of the necessary groundwork for struggles and initiatives that resulted in the amelioration of the social and/or economic status of those very same “people” who are ignorant of that work, or fail to understand it, or ridicule it, or worse still, revile it.

However, that they are beyond the grasp, crude and instrumental though that may be, of political commentators and polemicists, who are not especially known for their theoretical sophistication, and have no patience for the intricacies of the critical exchanges among academic intellectuals. By way of an example, I’m going to quote a passage from a commentator, whom you have all heard about, but I doubt you have read. His name is Rush Limbaugh. (We normally don’t read this stuff; but being a Gramscian, I subscribe to Gramsci’s view that you also need to read the trash to know what’s going on. He read whatever was available in the prison library and he said he learned a lot from it. So I picked Limbaugh’s book, *See, I Told You So*, at Barnes and Noble:—it was remaindered; and I came across this passage.

Isn't it ironic that as America is celebrating its victory in the Cold War over communism [this is being written in 1993, by the way] . . . we're moving more quickly than ever toward socialism and statism. Why? Because we have lost control of our major cultural institutions . . . This is no accident. In the early 1900s an obscure Italian communist by the name of Antonio Gramsci theorized that it would take a long march through the institutions before socialism and relativism would be victorious . . . Gramsci theorized that by capturing these key institutions and using their power, cultural values would be changed, traditional morals would be broken down, and the stage would be set for the political and economic power of the West to fall. The key, according to Gramsci, was to change the way the whole society thinks about its problems. For starters, he wrote, you have to subvert and undermine the belief in God . . . Now the name Gramsci is certainly not a household name . . . But trust me, when I tell you that his name and theories are well known and understood throughout intellectual leftist circles. Leftist think tanks worship at Gramsci's altar. Gramsci succeeded in defining a strategy for waging cultural warfare—a tactic that has been adopted by the modern left, and which remains the last great hope for chronic America-bashers.

(Rush Limbaugh, *See, I Told You So* (New York: Pocket Books), 1993, 87.)

I do not want to delve into the motivations behind Limbaugh's histrionic fabrication of this fantasy—for us a fantasy, for his sympathizers a nightmare. Rather, I want to bring into relief two ironic elements that are quite different from the irony that Limbaugh himself imagines. The first is this: many of those who subscribe to Limbaugh's views and applaud his venomous attacks on "intellectual leftist circles" have themselves been the beneficiaries, in some way or another, of social, political, and economic changes that have been brought about, at least in part, by oppositional movements that to a greater or lesser degree were/are inspired by theoretical insights and critiques produced by intellectuals "waging cultural warfare"—in the sense that they challenge the dominant cultural values and question the basis of traditional morals. One would need to engage in a very lengthy analysis to explain this failure to recognize and acknowledge the positive effects that left movements have had on the lives of those who denounce the left. The factors involved are many—and they have to do with much more than the effectiveness or otherwise of any given leftist strategy. Indeed, they have as much, if not more, to do with the resilience of old hegemonies and the wealth and resources of the prevailing hegemony as with any particular failures of the active/activist left. In any case, this irony is indicative of how difficult it is (and how much needs to be done) to, first, understand the formation of "common sense"—in Gramsci's sense of the term; and secondly to transform it.

On this question of common sense there is much that can be said, and that should be said, but I'll restrict myself to one observation. Many on the left (and I'm not talking about intellectuals only here) express dismay or are aghast when left intellectuals go against or

defy “common sense.” They see it as a manifestation of elitism and regard it as deeply injurious to the leftist cause because it widens the rift with the masses, it alienates the masses, which the left is supposed to rally. What such criticism fails to take into account is that appeals to the ensemble of contradictory and unexamined ideas, notions, etc., that constitute common sense do not make the left stronger, but rather deform it—they do not make it popular, but populist. Also, the critique of left intellectuals which challenge the “common sense” of the people often lapses into a condescending posture vis-a-vis the people. (See for example, Michael Walzer’s critique of Gramsci in his book, *The Company of Critics* (New York: Basic Books, 1988)).

The second irony, following from Limbaugh’s passage, is that while a die-hard conservative such as Limbaugh (like many others of the same ilk) perceive, albeit in a grossly hyperbolic and alarmist manner, the potential transformative effects of what he calls “cultural warfare,” there is a growing cohort of left intellectuals that not only questions and debates (which, in itself, is a desirable and necessary activity for it induces the elaboration, refinement, and revision of ideas), but openly denounces (sometimes through derisive parody, at other times with the hurling of nasty epithets, etc.) the theoretical and critical work of other left intellectuals, who are daring to subject to the very intense scrutiny the most deeply rooted and fundamental philosophical and moral assumptions of our culture. And I maintain that there is a real difference between vigorous critique or impassioned debate and denunciation. For example, when I read Terry Eagleton’s *Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), I came across a number of things I need to think about and respond to seriously; but when you come across things like, for example, Michael Sprinker denouncing the *Rethinking Marxism* group like a bunch of fools with no arguments and so on—that is denunciation with no fruitful outcome. So what bothers me is that there is something destructive at work here, destructive not only because these denunciations—especially in the American context—threaten to sever the already tenuous links that hold different currents of the left in some semblance of unity, but also because they contribute to the marginalization of those currents of intellectual inquiry (which, though quite diverse, are generally lumped together in these polemics as “postmodernism” and “theory”) that for the last thirty years or so have rescued the left from the atrophy that comes from automatic and lazy reliance on old verities, and have given it the vitality (and many of the critical instruments) to rethink and reconceive itself in a manner that better enables it to confront the problems of the present time. One need only look back to the 1970s to see how impoverished orthodox Marxism had become. At that time there emerged a clear recognition of the importance of cultural struggle and so on. The left started to turn to hitherto ignored or marginalized theories and theorists, such as Antonio Gramsci, yet it was the Communist Party that initially prevented the text of Gramsci’s prison notebooks from being published, in its entirety. Why? Because it was not orthodox. So, if anything, the past should make any leftist—whether of the traditional kind or not—very cautious about attacking or denouncing currents that try to steer thought in completely new and even previously unimagined ways.

The destructive impulse to which I am referring was nowhere more evident than in the so-called “Sokal affair” and its aftermath. Without contributing anything substantial to the debate in which he purported to intervene, Sokal, with the help of the sensationalistic press, managed to confirm the uninformed prejudices of many who had never had the opportunity to seriously examine the ideas and issues he thought he had dismissed in one fell swoop—and in the process he became the champion of those who delight in portraying radical thought as hollow or worse. The effects of the kinds of attacks launched by Sokal and other self-proclaimed intellectuals, commentators, journalists against other left intellectuals have been succinctly described by Judith Butler, in her recent essay “Merely Cultural,” where she points out that they reinscribe

a factionalization in the left, at the very moment in which welfare rights are being abolished in the United States, class differentials are intensifying across the globe, and the right wing has successfully gained the ground of the “middle,” effectively making the left itself invisible within the media—except on that rare occasion in which one part of the left swipes at another, producing a spectacle of the left for mainstream liberal and conservative left consumption, which is all too happy to discount every and any faction in the service of radical social change.

(*Social Text*, 52/53. 1997).

In this way, then, one part of the left becomes—unintentionally, I assume—the ally of conservatives like Rush Limbaugh in the so-called “culture wars.”

Now back to the question I started with: to whom do these questions matter, and why is it worth the effort to resolve them? They matter to the entire archipelago of groups, currents, movements, etc., that together constitute the left in the United States. And they need to be resolved in order to prevent the left from becoming so marginalized as to become utterly ineffectual. Perhaps, one could start by examining the reasons for these divisions and by identifying as clearly as possible those differences in theoretical and strategic thought that are most difficult to reconcile. In her essay, Judith Butler suggests that the divisiveness we are currently witnessing stems, at least in part, from the perception or “the notion that poststructuralism has thwarted Marxism”—and that this has given rise to “an explicitly Marxist objection to the reduction of Marxist scholarship and activism to cultural studies” or at least to the kind of cultural studies associated with poststructuralist theory and criticism.

I believe this to be the case to some extent; but there is more to it than that. There many Marxist who have responded to poststructuralism in an open and fruitful manner. (For example, at the same conference at which Judith Butler delivered this paper, there was a wonderful talk by Etienne Balibar which one could never instrumentalize to illustrate any fundamental divisions between poststructuralist theory and Marxist thought.) On the other hand, there are also non-Marxist left critics and theorists who are hostile to many important aspects of poststructuralism. There are, furthermore, poststructuralist theorists

and critics who have failed to deal adequately with the legacies of Marxism. And then there are Marxists who have used selectively theories and positions often associated with poststructuralist thought—for example, anti-humanism—to attack left intellectuals who are neither Marxist nor quite poststructuralist. See for example, the Ajaz's attack on Edward Said his polemical book *In Theory* (New York: Verso, 1992). How and where does one start to make sense of all of this?

It is not an easy task, nor is it easy to carry it out in a manner that is serious, rhetorically sober and restrained—at least, restrained enough not to exacerbate divisions while at the same stimulating vigorous debate. That is one of the reasons I confess to being somewhat uncomfortable with the phrase, “left conservatism.” There is probably nothing more noxious to a left intellectual than to be labelled conservative, especially now that it is possible to look back, and see more poignantly than ever before the extent to which orthodox/conservative Marxists impeded and retarded the elaboration of left theories and strategies adequate to the present time. Who would not react with horror at the very suggestion that he or she still harbors the doctrinaire, dogmatic, and retrograde impulses of a now virtually defunct current of Marxism. In other words, even though it may have a legitimate descriptive purpose, the phrase “left conservatism” is bound to be seen as a term of abuse.

I am also afraid that once such a phrase starts to circulate, it will be applied indiscriminately, giving rise to great confusion. I recall finding myself being labelled conservative several years ago at a conference in Italy, where I made some critical comments about the way in which the Italian Communist Party undertook to dissolve itself and recreate itself as a new party—the party that is now, the PDS, the Democratic Party of the Left. In that debate those members of the party who opposed changing the Italian Communist Party into the Democratic Party of the Left, were labelled by some people within the party and outside as the “right,” or the “conservative” wing of the party. Those labels were meant to portray them as traditionalists who wanted to hang on to the old ways rather than come to terms with the new realities in the aftermath of the tragedy of Tienanmen Square and the events of 1989. By describing their opponents as the “right,” “conservative” wing of the party, those who favored the abolition of the Italian Communist Party and favored the creation of the PDS were obviously positioning themselves as the left, or progressive wing of the party. The situation was also complicated by the fact that some of the self-styled progressives of the party associated themselves with what I call a sort of journalistic postmodernism. One of the philosophers they lionized was Gianni Vattimo with his idea of “weak thought.” As it turned out, of course, the PDS while never relinquishing its claim to the leadership of the political left, drifted rightward (or toward the center), so that now its positions are virtually indistinguishable from those of mainstream liberals. Indeed, Tony Blair and Bill Clinton would not feel uncomfortable joining that party at all. Meanwhile, many of those labelled as traditionalists, conservatives, and so on, by their former of confreres, left the party and joined a new formation—i.e., the PRC, the Partito Rifondazione Comunista. The PRC is the only party in

Italy currently struggling to restrain the powerful drive to demolish the welfare system, and doing what it can to protect immigrants and refugees from the draconian measures of the putatively leftist PDS minister of the interior. Now the PRC is described by many of its opponents as “extremist,” and by the *New York Times* as “hardline.”

Having said that, I hasten to add that it is important to make distinctions. In other words, I recognize that significant problems arise if in the interest of preserving unity under the umbrella of an all-encompassing term “Left” one could end up reducing the meaning of the term to a brief list of the “lowest common denominator.” The negative consequences of such a move are strikingly evident in works such as Norberto Bobbio’s *Destna e Sinistra* (1994). Not accidentally, Bobbio, who for many years was a member of the Italian Socialist Party (which is now defunct and its former leader, Bettino Craxi is dodging the law on the beaches of Tunisia), and a severe critic of the Italian Communist Party is now held in the highest esteem by the intellectual circle most clearly affiliated with the PDS.

Whatever my hesitation might be about the division of the left into “left conservative,” “left left,” and so on, I have no doubts whatsoever about the need to resist the creation of a division between what one may loosely call a “cultural left” and a “socio-economic left.” One would have thought that given the widespread use of the concept of hegemony by so many different currents of the intellectual left, there would be no longer any doubts about the inseparability of the “cultural” from the “economic.” Unfortunately, however, the full significance and fruitfulness of this valuable concept are not widely recognized. I wish I had time here to explain exactly how the concept of hegemony makes it impossible really to separate the two. Since I can’t, let me conclude by quoting a passage from an essay by Stewart Hall, wherein he stresses the inseparability of the cultural/ideological dimension from the economic element (and vice versa) in hegemony as Gramsci understood it.

All those who therefore gloss Gramsci's concept of hegemony with the qualifying idea that it is ideological are doing a great disservice to his thought. Gramsci is deeply alive to the ethical, moral, intellectual, ideological, and cultural *dimensions* of the struggle for hegemony, but hegemony as a concept is not ethical and cultural alone. The culturalist reading of Gramsci has done profound damage. On the other hand, for Gramsci, hegemony cannot be economic alone, in either the first or the last instance, since it is by definition something that includes and transcends "the corporate limits of the purely economic class," something that must be able to "become the interest of other subordinating groups too" and can thus "gain the upper hand, propagate itself throughout society—bringing about not only the unity of economic and political aims, but also intellectual and moral unity, posing all questions around which the struggle rages, not on a corporate, but on a 'universal plane,' and thus creating the hegemony of a fundamental social group over a series of subordinate groups—the motor force of a universal expansion, of the development of all the 'national' energies." This Gramsci equates with the "passage from the structure to the spirit of the complex superstructures," a process that for him is analytically irreversible.

(In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Cultures*, edited by Cary Nelson and Larry Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press), 1987, 54).

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