

Theory & Event

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Volume 2, Issue 2, 1998

Johns Hopkins University Press



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The Flyer

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A spectre is haunting U.S. Intellectual life: the spectre of Left Conservatism. Within academia and without, in events such as the Sokal affair, in the anti-theory polemics in *The Nation* and the *Socialist Review*, in work by authors such as Katha Pollitt, Alan Sokal, Nancy Fraser, and Barbara Ehrenreich, there is evidence of a phenomenon which could properly be labelled Left Conservatism; that is, an attack by self-proclaimed “real leftists” on those portrayed as theory-mongering, hyper-professional, obscurantist pseudo-leftists. Left Conservatism tends in general to be as hostile to the radical anti-rationalist politics of the 1960s as it is to anti-foundationalist theoretical work in the eighties and nineties. The current polemics raise long unresolved questions about how the left conceives the nature and stakes of critical work, over the past fifty years and into the future.

There seems to be at present an attempt at consensus-building among Left Conservatives that is founded in notions of the real, and of the appropriate language with which to analyze it. We can see, in the work of some of the writers listed above and in other work, claims for a certain kind of empiricism, common sense, and transparency. Post-structuralist thought, often lumped together in all its varieties, is in the Left Conservative view guilty not only of its own intellectual failings, but of taking the wrong turn for left analysis in general. Polemics against “postmodernism” by Ehrenreich and Roger Kimball have more in common than Ehrenreich would perhaps like. And Alan Sokal has written that he was moved to write his parody after reading Paul Gross and Norman Levitt’s *Higher Superstition: The Academic Left and Its Quarrels with Science*, an openly anti-left polemic.

A discussion of the stakes in this division is important and timely. U.S. University humanities departments are among the few locations in this country where critical analysis of society, culture, thought, and ideology takes place, and the attacks on critical theory are not without effect. Identifying Left Conservatism, and discussing its historical, political, ideological, and theoretical character, is the focus of this one-day workshop at UC Santa Cruz.

The workshop is structured to encourage discussion and debate. There will be considerable time for discussion following our participants' presentations.

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Additional Information

ISSN	1092-311X
Print ISSN	2572-6633
Launched on MUSE	1998-01-01
Open Access	No