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Actually Existing Left Conservatism

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“Left Conservatism: A Workshop,” sponsored by the Center for Cultural Studies, University of California, Santa Cruz, on 8 January 1998, was an event that became an affair, albeit a minor one, whose public airing was limited to the *Nation*, *Lingua Franca*, and occasional asides in more mainstream press articles. When these pieces came out, some friends sent consolations, saying that publicity itself was, in the end, a good thing: Better to have critical notice than no notice at all. I didn’t think so. I had found the event to be a stimulating and inspiring discussion that did not resolve neatly and simplistically into two clear sides. But the limited discursive range of the affair illustrated one of the phenomena that the event itself was designed to analyze: the critical vacuity and will to simplicity that infects U.S. journalism, if not the public sphere as a whole. I turned down opportunities for wider public airing of the affair—that afterlife of the event itself—in venues such as the nationally syndicated radio program *Radio Nation*, in part because the “debates” that were already circulating in semiprivate emails, and in which I participated, made clear how the very structuring of the public airing—the **[End Page 3]** debate form itself—would, in what was beginning to seem like a structural logic of U.S. journalism, preclude the kind of analysis that was the event’s original *raison d’être*.

Judging from reports I received of the workshop’s life as a discussion topic, in universities mostly, it had picked up a certain buzz—the sort of buzz that came out of the Alan Sokal/*Social Text* affair, which was itself supposed to have thrown some light on the stakes and the sides of critical practice, to have helped distinguish the real and the fake. Some of this buzz came from the term itself. *Left conservatism*: Was this a repetition, ironic

or not, of left sectarianist denunciation, as in *running dogs of reaction*, or was it like *politically correct*, always already ironized yet also capable of losing its irony when deployed in the appropriate polemic? Reactions to the term varied. I had reports of academics who were proud to identify ironically with left conservatism, doubtless intending something like, “I am a theorist and a leftist, but I can spot depoliticizing charlatanism as easily as the journalists can.” There were also those who adjured, “I am not a conservative,” like the journalist who referred to “that vile term” in a hostile email message to me. I suppose I should have foreseen that the term itself would become a primary focus in the life of the affair. A certain vertiginous logic ensued: The event was conceived in part as an analysis of a certain practice of reductive labeling—the “postmodernist ≠ leftist” mantra that the Sokal affair introduced into our public discourse—but then the organizers and panelists were attacked in large part for the work of labeling done by the term.

The event had a vertiginous quality as well. The organizers and panelists were a varied lot and certainly had not thought of themselves as representing a particular side in an issue, but they were attacked by a fairly well-organized group of “dissident” workshop attendees as being squarely on the side of a depoliticizing relativism that was against the foundational necessity of an “objective truth,” which was claimed as the *sine qua non* of leftism itself. The relativism issue, and the division so described, was, of course, recognized only in the minds of this group, and I enclose the word *dissident* in quotation marks because the coherence of the object of dissidence was also clear only to the dissidents themselves. The panelists made several broad interventions. They complicated precisely the binaries that the dissidents attempted to set, opening up a complex and multifaceted discussion of the relationship between work identified as “theoretical” and left politics as a whole. These interventions were the most interesting and thought-provoking aspects of the workshop for me and, I suspect, for most attendees as well. This aspect of the workshop, this central component of **[End Page 4]** the event, was, of course, wholly absent in the public life of the affair. We are grateful, therefore, to the editors of the electronic journal *Theory & Event* for publishing the proceedings in volume 2, issues 2 and 3, for without those records, the entire event would have been swallowed in the maelstrom of reduction and absent analysis that began before the event itself, and that continued thereafter at such high pitch, in the press and in email circles.

Several of the panelists themselves, as well as some sympathetic members of the audience, expressed reservations about the term *left conservatism*, particularly questioning the strategic value of an internecine left attack signified by its deployment. Although I felt at the time that the term was a useful and accurate description of a reductive critical position that itself had tried to classify as non- or antileft a varied body of work whose arguments were left unengaged or unspecified, I concluded my role as moderator by offering to “drop” the term in exchange for an end to the reductive trashing of a variety of critical and theoretical practices as simply “postmodern.” This didn’t happen, of course, and the media reports on the event portrayed my move, and other

hesitancies expressed about the term, as a victory for the “antirelativists.” These reports—and the whole life of the affair—have reconvinced me of the utility of the term and of the importance of clarifying the stakes of the controversies that the affair has ignited and obscured.

The congruence between the left conservative and the right conservative critiques of various critical practices within the academy was one of the central phenomena to which the workshop was a response. Sokal has made his critique of postmodernism while loudly identifying himself as a leftist, although the nature of his leftism has varied in different self-descriptions. He and his defenders often cite his work as a teacher in revolutionary Nicaragua, and he commonly claims that his crusade is inspired by his outrage that “fashionable nonsense” should lay claim to a left politics. This despite the fact that his inspiration for the *Social Text* parody was Paul R. Gross and Norman Levitt’s *Higher Superstition: The Academic Left and Its Quarrels with Science*, an antileft polemic that formed part of the broad right assault on new critical practices at U.S. universities, an assault aimed at silencing those practices and one that has had its consequences in the decisions of funding agencies, hiring committees, and university administrators. The right conservative gesture is, in some respects, the more coherent of the two: It sees its targets as dangerous, as undermining dominant ideological identification mechanisms and American “values.” Left conservatism generally holds up the banner of common sense, which, as common sense **[End Page 5]** must always be, is an unspecified amalgam of empiricism, transparency in language, ease of understanding, and style. The recurrent gesture in Sokal and Jean Bricmont’s *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals’ Abuse of Science* (English translation, 1998) is to quote a long passage from a French theorist and follow it with a laconically self-evident claim for its meaninglessness. It is the gesture that also marks Katha Pollitt’s *Nation* column of 10 June 1996, in which she concludes her discussion of the Sokal affair with a critique of “pomo”:

Pseudo-politics, in which everything is claimed in the name of revolution and democracy and equality and anti-authoritarianism, and nothing is risked, nothing, except maybe a bit of harmless cross-dressing, is even expected to happen outside the classroom.

How else explain how pomo leftists can talk constantly about the need to democratize knowledge and write in a way that excludes all but the initiated few? Indeed, the comedy of the Sokal incident is that it suggests that even the postmodernists don’t really understand one another’s writing and make their way through the text by moving from one familiar name or notion to the next like a frog jumping across a murky pond by way of lily pads. Lacan . . . performativity . . . Judith Butler . . . scandal . . . (en)gendering (w)holeness . . . Lunch!¹

Pollitt’s critique is more thorough and coherent than Sokal’s and finds an etiology of the situation she decries in the rise of careerism and a fashion-mongering self-

commodification in the contemporary academy, a set of phenomena that all the conference organizers and panelists would recognize and that none would defend. I will turn to that critique, and to her critique of the obscurantism of the writing, later in this discussion. Sokal's and Pollitt's rhetoric, echoed in Barbara Ehrenreich and Janet McIntosh's labeling of "cultural studies" critiques of science as "new creationism,"² suggests, however, a broad area of congruence with right conservatism: the categorical defense of the Enlightenment and its values—the particular values deployed differ, of course—against the perceived threats of relativism or irrationality. The right conservative distortion of Enlightenment thought to serve a primitive politics of greed, resentment, and hatred has, on the surface, little in common with the left conservative embrace of Enlightenment values of freedom, **[End Page 6]** justice, truth, and equality, yet the appeal that both make to universal values and good sense masks other similarities as well.

Eric Lott's recent identification of the "new Enlightenment-embracing front of boomer neoliberals, from Todd Gitlin to Paul Berman," is another way of describing the left conservative position.³ That this position would necessitate an attack on "postmodernists" is, no doubt, a consequence of the ambiguous status of left theory and politics in the post-cold war United States. In the United States, when the material effects of neoconservative or New Democratic criminal, welfare, health care, and racial policies are so clear, one could legitimately ask what need the Left had for theory or ideological critique. We in the United States had nothing like the Stuart Hall–Bob Jessop debate in the *New Left Review* in the mid-1980s, in which Hall's framing of Thatcherism's assault in explicitly ideological terms and Jessop's critique of Hall's "ideologism" allowed a public airing of the political stakes in British cultural studies itself. That kind of debate is, of course, possible only in a public sphere where socialist politics continues to be taken seriously, something that could hardly be claimed for U.S. journalism, with a few notable exceptions, such as the work of Alexander Cockburn. The prevailing antiacademic, antitheoretical, and anti-intellectual climate in the United States, an inseparable consequence of the location of the United States as the hegemonic center of advanced global capital, has drastically curtailed the character of critique.

Left Enlightenment embracers in the United States see, as Marx did, that any State's professed ideals can be used against the State, and it has long been easy for U.S. leftists to enlist the Founding Fathers in struggles against racism, sexism, and poverty. But the Enlightenment embracers generally do not subscribe, in the public sphere at least, to Marx's own antifoundationalism, which was directed at that most primary of foundations, the market itself, the critique of which is singularly absent from most left journalism in the United States. Thus, for leftists such as Sokal, or Ehrenreich and McIntosh, "science" needs to be defended first against the threat of a relativizing cultural studies and only secondarily, if at all, against its steady absorption into market relations and market instrumentality. The post-cold war right conservatives get to set the terms: Now that they can no longer plausibly describe academic leftism as a fifth column working for **[End Page 7]** the socialist world, they have shifted their target to the "politicization" of the academy,

confident that knowledge production, purged of politics, can be a neutral and truthful reflection of a naturalized market capitalism. Meanwhile, right “politics” is increasingly carried out at the level of the “cultural.” Left conservatism fails to see that this naturalization—of the market itself and of capitalist relations in general, a naturalization that is at the heart of the Enlightenment project—is the main issue and that both the academic interrogation of foundations and the turn to the “cultural,” so often decried in the left conservative critique, represent not an epiphenomenal diversion but a joining of the battle at one of the Right’s primary points of attack.

It is true, of course, that explicit critiques of the market do not exactly abound in U.S. academic theoretical discourse, particularly in those areas that the left conservatives would label as postmodern. It is also true that perhaps the majority of scholars who would identify themselves as postfoundationalist might not acknowledge the market as the primary foundation to which they are “post-.” The left conservative critique of postmodern academic style, as in Pollitt’s column from which I cited above, is in important respects an accurate critique of the market logic that prevails in U.S. academia, where “theory” so often functions as academic capital and where critical strategy can so easily coincide with career strategy. That academic culture should mirror the culture at large is to be expected, and I for one always welcome left critiques of historically specific coincidences between particular critical practices and market logic. This, however, is precisely what left conservatism time and again fails to provide. Rather, it is some unspecified bugaboo such as “theory” or “postmodernism” that becomes a generalized object of opprobrium. That very gesture—the reductive, antitheoretical, generalizing gesture—is, I would argue, at the heart of left conservatism. Right conservatism is clearer about the stakes: Right conservatism knows or intuits that the foundations are necessary and that a critique of one set of foundations implies a critique of them all, even of the market itself. Critique, the right conservatives realize, could have consequences. Granted, the likelihood of serious consequences for the domination of capital might seem at present to be rather slight. But there is no reason to assume that the present will last forever.

Indeed, the primary danger of a pro-Enlightenment consensus is precisely the damping down of possibility for ruptures and breaks. The last time the United States saw a confluence of theoretical politics, practical politics, and cultural politics—the 1960s—the Enlightenment legacies of reason and rationality took a considerable beating. For right conservatives such **[End Page 8]** as Roger Kimball, the “tenured radicals” are simply carrying on the cultural revolution of the 1960s in other venues. For anti-Enlightenment conservatives—Camille Paglia is the main example—those same tenured radicals are the nerds who were never Dionysian enough and thereby betrayed the liberatory antirationality of the 1960s. Left conservatism has a contradictory relationship to the 1960s: It generally embraces the political revolution but rejects more and more of the cultural revolution, as the relationship to the Enlightenment and its foundations suggests. Leon Wieseltier, a center-left conservative, is working on a reissue of the works of Lionel Trilling and argued in his recent pamphlet *Against Identity* not against identity in Theodor

Adorno's sense—the totalizing identity of all things in a pervasive logic of market exchange—but against identity in the multiculturalist sense of the post-1960s: Identity is bad; universals are good. As for poststructuralist work in the academy, it certainly has been enabled by the utopianism of the cultural revolution of the 1960s and the emergence in the 1960s of new subjectivities and new cultural politics—albeit with an occasional excessive valuation of microstrategies of “resistance”—but also by the global expansion of the market in those boom years for the knowledge industry.

Several of the workshop panelists made the point that neither foundationalism nor the critique of foundationalism guarantees a politics. I would argue, however, that particularly at this moment in history, the embrace of foundationalism is what most threatens to foreclose what Adorno referred to as “the good fortune of that minuscule freedom that lies in knowledge as such” (*das Glück der winzigen Freiheit, die im Erkennen als solchem liegt*). Adorno is writing a cautionary tale on entanglement (*Verstricktheit*), one directed primarily against the false comforts of intellectuals' imagined withdrawal from a society dominated by the exchange relationship, but one also written “from the standpoint of deliverance” (*vom Standpunkt der Erlösung*).⁴ It would be hard to take a stand against deliverance, though the ranks of both academic and public-sphere leftists contain many who despair of it. But why aren't left conservative public intellectuals sufficiently concerned enough about entanglement, about the foreclosure of “knowledge as such,” to think twice about those broad swipes against “postmodernists” that are so reminiscent of anti-intellectual criticism from the Right?

Whenever the United States stages the discussion about intellectuals and their declining public role as social and cultural critics, it is always the [End Page 9] intellectuals themselves who get blamed and never the character of the U.S. public sphere. But the nature of the public sphere is determined by those who participate in it, and this includes, of course, the prevailing practices of most of those who claim the role of public intellectuals. The anti-intellectual and antiacademic character of U.S. journalism, including most journalism on the Left, would seem extraordinary to readers of *La Jornada* (Mexico), the *Zhongguo shibao* (Taiwan), the *Frankfurter Rundschau* (Germany), or *Il Manifesto* (Italy), not all of which are even left publications. On the day that the *Nation* editorial on the left conservatism workshop appeared, for example, I read an interview with the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek in *Die Zeit*, a high-circulation center-left German weekly. It was about European unity, the fate of universalism, and Bill Gates. Žižek is the kind of thinker whom pomo-baiters love to hate, and it is inconceivable that such an interview would appear in any nonacademic U.S. weekly or monthly, with the possible exception of *Artforum*, which has a fairly specialized audience. I am not claiming that the richer nature of public intellectual life in Italy, Germany, Taiwan, or Mexico has necessarily weakened the domination of market relations there. This difference in public intellectual life is no doubt due in some part to nationally specific operations of cultural and intellectual capital. But who is to say what effects this greater critical latitude might have for the future of these countries?

Pierre Bourdieu's recent work on television suggests that there are "entry requirements" for access to the public journalistic sphere and that among these entry requirements is the internalization of the logic of the market.⁵ This might be a useful frame in which to view the willingness of so many U.S. public intellectuals on the Left to make a range of left conservative anti-intellectual gestures. Even the common left conservative complaint about academic writing, against those who "write in a way that excludes all but the initiated few," can be seen as a function of the market logic of common sense, whereby market share—an increasingly important measure of journalistic efficacy, even on the Left—is equated with democracy itself.

The U.S. humanities academy is filled, to be sure, with intellectual faddism and self-commodification, and commerce and market relations are making steady inroads into academic culture—at more and more universities, students are referred to as "customers," and our administrators exhort us to practice market relations with them. Still, why the left conservative [End Page 10] discomfort with the minuscule freedoms of new thoughts and new forms of expression? If the critique of foundations is indeed one of "postmodern" academia's entry requirements, then that is all to the good, and it should be defended: It is all the more important that younger academics not be swayed by the ridicule of left or right conservatism. In these times, that primary foundation—the market itself—seems more and more unassailable. Left public-sphere intellectuals might want to keep their ire focused in that direction. The space of critique that academic postfoundationalism keeps open may one day prove to have been more important than we now realize.

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Footnotes

- 1.** Katha Pollitt, "Pomolotov Cocktail," *Nation* 262, no. 23 (10 June 1996): 9.
- 2.** Barbara Ehrenreich and Janet McIntosh, "The New Creationism: Biology under Attack," *Nation* 264, no. 22 (9 June 1997): 11.
- 3.** Eric Lott, "Blinded by Science," review of *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals' Abuse of Science*, by Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont, *Voice Literary Supplement*, December 1998, 16.
- 4.** Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997), 23–24; my translation.
- 5.** Pierre Bourdieu, *On Television*, trans. Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson (New York: New Press, 1996).

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