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Yeah, and I'm Scared, Too

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The only theory worth having is that which you have to fight off, not that which you speak with profound fluency. . . . [M]y own experience of theory—and Marxism is certainly a case in point—is of wrestling with the angels—a metaphor you can take as literally as you like.

—Stuart Hall, “Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies,” in
Cultural Studies,
ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula A. Treichler

(This is not what I would have presented at Chris Connery’s “Left Conservatism” workshop. And the fact that I am calmer now doesn’t necessarily mean that this is more interesting to read.) I’m writing in the wake of the workshop, the audience response, the articles and letters that ran in the *Nation*, the postings on various Internet list serves, and the conversations I’ve both taken part in and only heard about. I hear provocations, I hear what I consider to be indecorous arguments, and I hear, sometimes even in my sleep, my own responses—often subsumed in the responses of others. **[End Page 13]**

What accounted for my willingness to be part of the workshop was what had become, in the mainstream press and in a number of left publications, fairly routine, and often routinely sloppy, criticism of and a lumping together of various kinds of poststructuralist discussions, queer theory, the “cultural Left,” cultural studies, multiculturalism, feminist theory—all of which generally are deemed to be the “fault” or “problem” of certain kinds of academic work and/or certain academics. Two quick notes here: (1) for the remainder of

this rhetorical occasion, rather than continually repeat the list of objects of ire, I will simply refer to that “lumping” as *us*; and (2) while I know that *us* includes some people who promote different theories and different kinds of institutional work, and that many of them wouldn’t sit next to each other in a room if there were a choice, still, there’s a body of discussion that I’m addressing.

I couldn’t attend the workshop; I’m sorry. But here’s my chance to say something. And damn, I’m out of steam! Not because things have changed so very much but because I have been hindered by my fear of failure. Every time I tried to write this, I found myself reaching for what I found interesting in the work of others, and, after looking at that work, I couldn’t bring myself to repeat any of it, or to refer to it, or to add to it, because the analysis had already been done, the complexities already articulated, crude attacks already answered with eloquence and productive thought. Finding that much help out there actually made it harder, not easier, for me to write, because I was tripped up by thinking that all the proper responses had already been made. There was nothing to add. Since the other responses hadn’t done the job, what could I possibly add? And if I *did* say something, it wouldn’t be new. Then I realized that I was repeating within my own thinking some version of what I was objecting to in the writing and speechifying of a group of folks I had been thinking of as “left conservatives”—a lot as varied as we who are their targets.

While I know that the very use of the term *left conservative* was provocative (even, given the responses, enraging), I thought it was useful to thus identify what seemed to be a tendency run amok in many of our critics, a tendency to want to preserve what is established—which is what I understand conservatism to be. And *the Left* was, at least to my mind, a way to identify those for whom I felt some comradeship but who seemed to be manifesting that tendency. I wouldn’t have wasted any time attending a workshop addressing what *political* conservatives (or the Right) said about *us*. I don’t care about, wouldn’t talk with, and am not interested in making common cause with them. “Left conservatism” was, for me, a call or appeal **[End Page 14]** to allies whom I thought just didn’t understand, and their lack of understanding articulated itself in language that directed *us* (1) back to that from which we were departing and leading others to depart; (2) back to that against which we were producing apolitical thinking, or wrongly political thinking, or thinking that could serve only to support capitalism and the interests of the U.S. state; and (3) back to the terms from which we were fracturing. In other words, *us* were/are being directed back to what has already been said and done. *Us* were/are being called names, admonished, and excoriated in the service of our departure from what otherwise would (or, at least, might) be unstoppable momentum toward the coming together of a real Left. (And who would have thought that some of those who have written paragraphs, pages, and column inches, calling *us* everything but children of God, would, in turn, have had their feelings hurt by the appellation *left conservative*?)

As I said earlier, I’ve run out of steam with regard to the kind of intervention I would like to have made because, first, I would have to list exactly with whom I imagined myself

arguing. And that would take many paragraphs and demand subgroups. Then I would have to sort out what I wanted to say to each subgroup about their particular criticisms and/or diatribes. That sort of thing is a lot of work—which is why, I suspect, the critics of *us* don't do it. I have, however, additional, more intellectual reasons for running out of steam. What I hear and read in the criticism of *us* is a demand for work/theory/inquiry that will bear immediate fruit and be immediately recognizable as contributing to something already apparent and with a clear trajectory. In this vein, some critics are suspicious that the antifoundational and antihumanist aspects of *us* would make politics impossible. (Some of *us* aren't precisely antifoundational—which itself is a foundational position, as it were; and some others of *us* are humanist and foundational to a fault, but no matter.) Other critics say *us* aren't saying anything new—which means, I suppose, that the antihumanist and antifoundational, or the foundation-critical, or the foundationally challenged, among *us* are simply finding new ways to say old stuff. Saying old stuff in newish ways must be as great a sin as saying something new and insufficiently humanist and/or foundational. Still, other critics simply say *us* are wrong.

The work of poststructuralist theory, queer theory, cultural studies, the cultural Left, and what I and others call radical multiculturalism is to think about/engage what we already know and to push on to know something else. I began with the quote from Stuart Hall because it seems to me that the engine of *us* is both engagement with what so many of us already care about in some way—some kind of Marxism, a theoretical fluency that **[End Page 15]** demands we work with and from it. For myself, my critical thinking finds resonance in and with Marxism as well as feminist theory, black radicalism, queer theory, various discourses of poststructuralism, and the often tension-filled spaces around and within each of those rubrics. And I am not kept awake at night by the incommensurabilities, because the work of pushing against the limits and possibilities of those incommensurabilities is what I find productive. It is what I understand intellectual and/or any other activity complexly understood as political to require.

In fact, I'm finding it hard to write on/to this occasion, because in this really fraught moment, I've begun (wrongly) to desire and to establish a ground to which I restrictively return my own thinking; that desire speaks a kind of conservatism. By this I mean that when I read or hear the responses of some of *us* in different places—books, essays, letters to editors of magazines, list serves, conferences, lectures, and so forth—I find myself feeling some contempt for my own thinking. It's a contempt engendered by seeing what I'm reading as *the* masterful responses. It's a contempt that is not unlike what I see and hear in the writing and thinking of some critics of *us*. I read and then think that others have already said all that needs to be said; I think that I can't add anything new. And I despair that if what they've written, said, and thought won't do the work of establishing some understanding, won't make clear the nature of our projects and what they offer to the Left, then nothing I can add will do it.

In other words, I see and hear in this debate, from our critics, an insistence that our

theories, our work, our struggle in the institutions ought to have immediate, discernible outcomes. I see and hear the concern that if the work we do doesn't produce direct results, then it isn't worthwhile. Worse, I see and hear the concern that such work actually gets in the way of things; that if the work we do isn't discernible against what has already been said and done, then it isn't worth doing; that if the trajectory of the work we do isn't clear, then it has no possible progressive political use. This is a concern that our "insufficient mastery" blocks or undermines what was a necessary and sufficient mastery in some other past work (despite actually existing evidence to the contrary). Our work isn't held to be worth sustaining because it isn't immediately translatable into language that has already been accommodated by a larger public. Our work isn't allowed to make its way without guarantees because it goes on against a backdrop of fear that time is running out.

Well, I have my own axes to grind with various journalists, other academics, and other particular groups of thinkers. Yet right at this moment, **[End Page 16]** my biggest obstacle to thinking and writing about an encounter of tremendous importance to me—addressing the split between *us* and our critics—is that I am trying to work my way out of a conservative hobble in my own thinking. I feel compelled to say something that will be not only immediately efficacious in this debate but also immediately transformative. I want to transform our critics into our allies. And since I see the proper arguments and analyses already circulating in the work of many of *us*, I despair that my own contribution would have anything to offer. It is my desire (and the despair it produces) that I'm calling conservative and crippling: my newly awakened desire for always already transformative mastery. And in the face of that desire, my thinking stops cold.

What I want to train myself and the critics of *us* away from is a tendency to think that all the smart work has already been done and that that work itself must have immediately and directly instrumental transformative effect, because we know (or ought to know) that intellectual work of any kind changes and diffuses unevenly and often indirectly.

So, while I may want our critics to instantly turn and recognize *us*, that can wait.

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