

# Theory & Event

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## **Additional Information**

# Question and Answer Period UC, Santa Cruz, 1/31/98

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### **AUDIENCE:**

There were two hours worth of discussion and I think that is one of the questions that I would have about the format. Also, it is very hard to respond to everyone's points, especially since they were strongly made. In fact, I feel a little bit like a mosquito at a nudist colony: I don't know where to begin.

### **CHRIS CONNERY:**

Maybe start with one of your questions, and then we can move on.

### **AUDIENCE:**

I have two basic responses. Both of them are directed to Professors Butler and Brown. First, I want to point out the rhetorical strategy of the panelists, which I thought was quite brilliant, but I want to reveal the legerdemain and how it was done. Second, I want to talk about the political implications of the kind of knowledge which I think you are espousing in this discussion.

First, I'm a paranoid mosquito, according to Professor Butler. I was one of the people who in fact helped draft the statement, and I can't speak for the others except to say that we felt some response was in order. If you look at the left conservatism workshop description, it starts with "a specter is haunting intellectual life in the United States." In fact that's the brilliance of what you folks have done, a kind of jujitsu of what you are trying to do, which is to attack people who criticize or depart from your version of the '60s, your version of theory — which as I'm going to suggest is a teleological version of theory — by using ridicule. I mean, to call me and other people paranoids, to yuk it up, is, I think indicative of the slight of hand. Or, as Professor Butler said, to talk about or

ridicule people who think texts are too difficult, or too hard to read — I disagree with your positions which I've read at great length —

**BUTLER:**

You can call me by my first name.

**AUDIENCE:**

OK. I didn't mean to be disrespectful. So, on the one hand you're saying that there are all these left conservatives or people who are intemperately attacking all the common sensical, or ironically, true versions or theory, like Alan Sokal or whatever, and at the same time you then talk about how people who don't accept your position are reactionary. You talk about this reactionary refusal, and I think that is quite ingenious the way you've constructed your rhetorical argument. In terms of the element of your rhetoric, I want to point out that both of your positions, Wendy and Judy, operate, or seem to me to work from straw arguments. You are accusing the left conservatives of lumping all the postmodernists together, even though Wendy, you use the term, we posties, at one point. But you set up this kind of fictional, economic Marxist who hasn't existed since Plekonov, or before — for instance, the idea that the material world is transparent, that we can just know things, or the Truth, with a capital "T," which has been problematized, not only by Gramsci, but by Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, and a lot of other thinkers, and obviously you'd have to be a total ignoramus not to see these things.

In fact, what I am hearing in your critique, Wendy is a sort of New Left critique of the old Left, which was very important, but that was thirty years ago. And I don't know anyone who defends the notion that we should bring back the working class hero, or that the base-superstructure model, as Professor Butler was saying, hasn't been — even Marx didn't believe in this kind of duality. A man named Sayer has a book called "The Violence of Abstraction" on this issue. So, to sum up, just in terms of the rhetoric, I think that it is just a complete straw argument, the whole way through, because I disagree with your positions, ok, but I don't believe in any of things you said. So that struck me as curious.

This brings me to my second set of comments, which is the political implications of the kind of knowledge that you're putting forward here. I want to point out that you're very good at genealogy, but not self-genealogy, that is, to say, to look at the social and historical origins of your own thought, or the possibility that your own thought is historically constituted, that its origins are contested — you talk about Foucault and Althusser, well let me tell you there are people, E.P. Thompson, for one, who was a humanist Marxist, who in *The Poverty of Theory*, bitterly attacked Althusser's anti-humanist position.

We are living in a moment when Nietzscheanism is in vogue in the university, and I think that is worth intellectual reflection. So I would just say that it is interesting — for instance, Wendy you keep referring to insights of theory over the past thirty years — well I don't accept that those are insights, in terms of poststructuralist thinkers. I get a lot out of Foucault and Nietzsche and so forth, but I think there are real problems. But it is a

*telos* that is underneath it all, because it is Althusser that finally shows us the like.

So on the one hand you are ridiculing the positions of the people who you disagree with, by saying that they believe in Truth with a capital “T,” which is preposterous, and, on the other hand, you’re sort of saying that there is a self-evidence that there are these insights that we have gained through our wisdom and collective efforts over the past thirty years. And I think that ultimately this is a kind of crypto-positivism. You know, there’s a kind of collapse of time in the way you conceive of praxis, so that what exists is in a sense the best that things can be, and we might as well live up to the fact there is no alternative to capitalism, or other systems of oppression. You know, power is everywhere, there is nothing that can be done, really, except to micro-tune it. But to me, Professor Buttegieg’s points on Gramsci were quite to the point, because Gramsci spoke of hegemony as a concrete myth, used Machiavelli’s *Prince* as the model, say the idea of a forward dawning in Ernst Bloch’s sense, of a utopian praxis where you’re working but not just for the sake of doing things, but to get somewhere.

And you, Wendy, in your work, you do talk about political vision, which I think is great, but you fail to elaborate on it. Ultimately, I think that what you are doing, that this whole thing is in a sense a bad faith on the part of intellectuals, who no longer — it is true, I agree with you Wendy, it is true that it is no longer clear what is to be done. There is a kind of frustration of the left and a kind of imbroglio of practice. But just because we can’t imagine an alternative to the current system doesn’t mean that there isn’t one, right? And certainly people who give their lives in Mexico or wherever the heck it is — give their lives for this idea that there might be an alternative — are not utopians, and they’re not deluded. And I think there is a kind of hubris in the way you present this, as these are decided questions.

Finally, I am sorry I am going on so long, but there was obviously a lot to respond to. Wendy, you know, I’ve read some of your stuff. You’ve suggested that the left is in a crisis and therefore because it lacks a utopian vision, a vision of the alternative, and because its old view of the world as a working class hero, and all that has crumbled, all it can do is be reactive. And that is the way you couch this attack, as you see it, on poststructuralism or anti-foundationalism, I’m not sure what the terms of it are. But behind it you kind of suggest that there is a *ressentiment*, that is to say, that’s Nietzsche’s view of the kind of seething slave mentality of the masses. I mean Nietzsche was incredibly anti-democratic, an incredible elitist. So the idea is if the left doesn’t have a project all it can do is fall back on its moralizing. I want to submit first of all that a moralist in your definition, which I think is underlying your view here, is someone you disagree with. I’m a moralist and I’m paranoid because I disagree with you, just by virtue of the way you set up the discussion.

To close this off, I just want to bring this back to the idea of knowledge and what is theory for. I don’t agree with your Crocheism, and you quote Croche in your work, Wendy, particularly about this almost ontological split between theory and practice,

again, another straw argument, that we intellectuals in the university should always be doing work that is immediately useful to practice. That's not a position that I agree with or I think anyone agrees with. It is a false view of things, and I think that this whole discussion is a way to map out a kind of alibi for why intellectuals today are impotent. So that's all I want to say.

**CHRIS CONNERY:**

If there are some brief articulations of similar positions that might profit by coming in a row and then by having our panelists respond all together, maybe we could do that. Maybe we could have that happen and then our panelists would like to respond in that way.

**AUDIENCE:**

I don't know how similar or different this is to [the last speaker]. I have a number of related questions that I want to set up and hopefully it will be relatively brief. I guess I have to say I am sort of at a loss right now about what this conference is actually about, i.e., what is left conservatism? I want to ask some specific, definitional, questions regarding the usefulness of that category. Judith Butler talked about an almost sad paranoia on the part of the people who produced the flyer, yet, I have to admit I signed the flyer too, out on my opposition mainly to the conference bulletin, the way the positions were represented in that bulletin. Yet at the same time I keep hearing these terms "left conservative" and "left conservatism" flying around, and Judith Butler — I agree with a lot of what you have to say — you actually go so far as to claim there is the emergence of a kind of new orthodoxy that wants to revive an economistic Marxism as a tactic toward marginalizing feminism and queer movements, and to subordinate race to class, and these kind of things. I'm not really sure who these people are who are saying this. More importantly, I'm not sure what left conservatism *is*. If I could really briefly try to recap some of what I've heard, to try to make some sense of it, and then whoever wants to can respond or clarify.

Chris Connery sort of disavows the bulletin that you claimed credit for, the part that uses the term left conservatives as a signifier for people. The bulletin actually does use that term, but you don't want to characterize people that way, and [instead] what you want to characterize is an act. But you *name* Katha Pollitt, and Barbara Ehrenreich, and Michael Moore and note their right-wing affinities, you name these people as sort of instances of this act.

Now, Professor Bové, I think you gave a really excellent critique of Richard Rorty, who came here last year — and a lot of us were here, and myself and Wendy Brown and others — and gave some pretty severe criticism of the kind of what I would characterize as a kind of liberal nationalism that he was promoting at that time.

Now Judith Butler, if I am hearing you right, you want to disclaim that Pollitt and Ehrenreich should be included in this left conservative category, but you want to talk about these sort of neo-conservative Marxists without naming any names. I mean Alan

Sokal, he came here last year also, and I sort of snagged him at the break and he said that he wasn't even a Marxist and he thought debates over whether class or race or gender was more important were just sort of silly. He just didn't understand them or have any affinity for engaging in them. I agreed with almost everything you said about the relationship of materiality and culture, and those are all important things, but I just don't know who disagrees with that right now. I don't know who wants to revive the kind of economism that is characteristic of only maybe the Spartacus League or some group of this nature. I don't see them in academia or theory, or even as a dominant or visible presence on most of the left.

Now Wendy Brown, you define left conservatism — again if I am characterizing you right — as a reaction against a certain set of theoretical works and insights, but I am still not sure how the objections to these particular theoretical claims are conservative, or, I am not sure whether you would agree with this term, anti-theoretical, as Chris Connery used in the bulletin. All I can see is that they are different positions than your own.

So what I really want to ask is a really sharp short list of definitional questions that really address the usefulness of this category of left conservatism, and anyone who cares to can respond to these. First of all, what is the definition of a radical politics, or a left? What is the definition of conservatism? What is the definition of anti-theoretical? What are the criteria for defining anyone who disagrees with particular epistemological positions, reading from Chris Connery's bulletin or Wendy Brown's presentation, or any other kinds of positions, as conservative? What are the criteria for defining people who disagree these positions as anti-theoretical? What are your criteria for defining yourselves as radicals or as leftists, if you do indeed do so? What should define a left or a radical politics? What should its goals be? Should values have anything to do with this definitional process, and if so, what kind of values, which values? And what are your practical suggestions for how to reconstitute a viable left or radical politics in the United States and/or internationally? Finally, what does this term left conservatism and/or this conference have to do with any of this?

The final point, this is a side-note and tangent, Chris, I really want to — I don't know you, Professor Connery — I think we can talk about this later, if it comes up, but I think your reading of Katha Pollitt was almost a classic instance of a decontextualization of an argument, almost making her say something very different than I think in fact she was saying, and we can talk about that, and I have the column here if anyone wants to take a look at it. Thank you.

**CONNERY:**

You can give your names if you'd like.

**AUDIENCE:**

I'm Pat Sand. I'm a HisCon grad student.

**CONNERY:**

OK, Robert, would you like to? And if there are points of some overlap, if you could stick

to the new stuff, so that we could get through more.

**AUDIENCE:**

A number of things. I'm Barbara Epstein, I'm in the History of Consciousness department. The first thing is, I think it is clear that there are many of us who are quite disturbed about the way in which this conference has been organized and the way in which it was described in the bulletin that was sent out. I think it is a very bad idea to set up something that is described as or should be a discussion/debate/dialogue, by putting one side of that debate on the podium, and leaving others out. That's point number one and I do think that I appreciate Wendy's and Judith's statements about that. I am glad they were uncomfortable about it, but I think it could have been rectified. I don't see why it was set in stone as of a month ago.

Second thing is, I think it is more disturbing to name people in the description of the conference, and to attack them, and then not invite them to the conference. I think it sounds as if there is general agreement on that here. What I am actually more disturbed by is the use of the term left conservative — and by the way I very much appreciate Professor Buttegieg's rejection of that, because I think that is exactly what we should do. It seems to me that the term is essentially an insult, it is an attempt to pin a label on people that they vigorously reject. I assume, by the way, that I am included in that, I certainly reject that term, and I don't know anybody who doesn't, other than presumably, there are people who are conservatives who are critics of poststructuralism, antifoundationalism, whatever one might want to call it. But those us who are on the left do not appreciate being called conservatives, and if there is a desire to continue a discussion/dialogue/debate, that term is unacceptable. It will stop that discussion dead in its tracks. And I don't think that should be a surprise to anybody.

I also just want to tell you briefly that I got in touch with the people who were attacked. I sent the description to them because I thought they should know about the conference. I was not able to reach Barbara Ehrenreich. I did reach Katha Pollitt. I had a number of discussions with her. She was very upset about being called a left conservative. She also pointed out to me ways in which she disagrees with everyone else who was named on that list. And one of the things I want to point you is that this is not a camp, it is not a group of people who have a common position, it is a group of people who share a critique of what I've called poststructuralism, I'm happy to call it anti-foundationalism if that is what people want. But the point is that it is a position that people are criticizing from various angles and from various positions who do not necessarily agree with each other on other things. The only person actually who didn't emphasize that was, when I reached Alan Sokal, he said that first of all he is not a left conservative, because he's not a conservative, secondly, he's not a Marxist, and thirdly he said, he's utterly thrilled to mentioned in the same breath with Katha Pollitt and Barbara Ehrenreich.

What I'm saying is that I think this debate has been misconstrued. It is not as if there is a left conservative position. So, then the question is what is going on here, because

obviously there is a debate that is of great and enormous importance to all of us and to other people. This may fall into the category of repeating what has been said before but I think there is a habit on the anti-foundationalist's side of this debate of exaggeration and distortion of the positions put forward by critics. And I would say, particularly by critics of the left. I don't think that the positions of apolitical or conservative critics are distorted in the same way. I have heard these distortions throughout the talks. For instance, Paul Bové talked about Alan Sokal's rejection of social constructionism. It is not a rejection of social constructionism, it is a view that there is both the socially constructed and the essential, and they play off against each other, each is necessary to the other. The criticism of what's being called anti-foundationalism is actually the desire to pit those two against each other, and to either see everything as socially constructed or see the act of naming something as socially constructed to be somehow scoring a point.

What I have tried to argue is that there are both. There is both the socially constructed and there is the ground out of which social construction takes place. And those things rely upon each other, you can't have one and not have the other, any more than you can have up and not down, or cold and not hot. Wendy talked about the critics of anti-foundationalism as believing in the real and Truth with a capital T. I don't know of anybody who does that. The question is do we believe that there is truth which we hopefully can approach or do we think that there is no truth at all? We can have a long debate about that and I think that is a useful debate. But linking those of us who are criticizing these claims sound as if we are fools, I don't think really helps the discussion.

Judith Butler talked about the description of new social movements as entirely cultural. I don't know anybody who says that. It is clear that those movements are a complex combination of the cultural, the economic, the political — I don't even think it is useful to try to figure out where one stops and the other begins. But I think it is simply a distortion to say that those of us who have raised questions are claiming that it is all cultural, and therefore all useless.

The final example is Wendy talks about, distinguishes between anti-foundationalists who have acknowledged the deterioration of the left, the deterioration of a clear unified project, and therefore are able to mourn it, and those of us who criticize anti-foundationalism as living in a kind of rosy world, in which we don't recognize that these things have happened. Well, maybe there's some people like that, but I haven't met them. And as a matter of fact, my experience is in meeting after meeting of saying the left is in terrible trouble, we have to look at it, and people on both sides of the fence, but what I'm most familiar with is the anti-foundational side of the fence, looking at me and saying, you're not supposed to say that, things are going just fine. Now I appreciate much of your argument, Wendy, particularly about the destructiveness of moralism on the left. I think that is very important. But I don't think it is necessary to distort the critics of anti-foundationalism in this way, and I don't think it promotes the discussion.

The last thing I want to say is that along the lines of if these are in fact distortions, what is going on here? What is the debate about? Well, point number one, I think there is a fundamental contradiction in the anti-foundationalist position, and that is, that it has risen to a position of near hegemony or hegemony within certain arenas of the intellectual world, and academia, in large part by virtue of claims to radicalism, transgression, subversiveness, marginality, being in a position of being the critic. Well what that means is that it is very disconcerting when other people come along and say we don't like anti-foundationalism, we have basic criticisms of it, and we are also critics of the existing order. So there is a way in which those differences have to be suppressed, and also a way in which rising to a position of intellectual hegemony and engaging in a kind of triumphalism over it and at the same time continuing to claim the position of critic leaves one open to certain charges of hypocrisy. And I think that is part of what is going on.

I do think we are in an odd situation at this moment, where being the outsider, the marginal one, is more easily deployable for power than acknowledging that one has reached the inside to some degree. And I think there are certain dishonest claims being made about occupying the position of critic. And this, by the way, is the reason that I think that by and large the critique of anti-foundationalism coming from the left, or from people who are on the left, makes anti-foundationalism angrier and is more liable to be distorted than critiques coming from an apolitical position or from other points on the political spectrum.

The last thing I want to say is that I think part of what we've got going here is a question of values and a question of subcultures. The values that I see operating in the subculture of anti-foundationalism revolve around being smart and sophisticated and easily slide over into a kind of snideness toward other people. Judith mentioned the problem of censoriousness. Well I think that is a real problem. I actually would not use the word censoriousness myself because that implies something more explicit and more active than I think goes on. I think that what we've seen in the name of anti-foundationalism is a kind of intellectual intimidation — a use of ostracism, a creation of an in-group and an out-group, a failure to engage with critics, a tendency to sneer at critics rather than taking them on. Many people have told me they are afraid to raise criticisms of it, they are afraid they would be made fun of, they are afraid that they would be seen as not smart, not sophisticated. I think this is an extremely serious problem, and I do not think that this kind of culture is consonant with what I would call left values.

And the last thing that I would say is that in fact what this debate is about ultimately is about values. Do we want this kind of frankly, nasty culture, in which there is a great deal of competition for who is the smartest person in the room, who is the most sophisticated, and in which the values are to be the smartest and the most sophisticated, or do we want a culture which is based on more humane and cooperative values?



**CONNERY:**

There is a que of positions that were perceived to have some commonality and after this que, perhaps we'll do another que or perhaps individual questions, and this is the last speaker from that que.

**AUDIENCE:**

My name is Osha Newman. I do not work in an academic setting. I'm an attorney in Berkeley so I am a little unfamiliar with the culture that Barbara was describing. But it did strike me, when I saw the blurb on the conference, was that it seemed to me that there was some way — I don't know if you still use the term Freudian slip — but there was a political Freudian slip in the way it was formulated. A conference about a specter which is haunting US intellectual life, the specter of left conservatism, and it calls to mind, of course, *The Communist Manifesto*, and therefore, after many, many years I went to *The Communist Manifesto*, and look up the equivalent opening section, which reads: "A specter is haunting Europe, the specter of communism. All the powers of all of Europe have entered into a holy alliance to exorcise this specter. Pope and tzar, Metternich and Guizot, French Radicals and German police spies."

So where are we at, then? It is as Barbara says, that what this is somehow implying is that this in fact is the conservative hierarchy which is threatened by the left conservatives when it is fact a reversal of what is being put here, and whether that really perhaps is a hidden meaning of what is going on.

The other remark is simply that I am a person I think who believes in the Real, and the True, not only with capital letters, but with neon lights. The times when I have experienced this have been the times of the most intense and immediate political struggle. Where there's meaning for me, is, for example, in the south, in the height of the civil rights movement when people stand up against police dogs and go to jail and I see that. In that moment, it seems to me, there really is a vision of something Real and something True, and everything else seems very false and seems to be a lie. And I've had the privilege of sometimes experiencing that in my life, and what I would very much like to hear now, would be a discussion and a dialogue and a theory that allowed me to believe in that truth, allowed it to be extended, allowed it to become permanent in some way. And I am afraid that the theory both of materialism and some kind of relativism don't allow that.

**JUDITH BUTLER:**

I want to thank those respondents. I realize that probably the appropriate way for this event to have been conceived would have been in fact to enlist such respondents as part of the structure of the program. Maybe something like that could happen in the future, I think it would be a terrific idea. In any case, I appreciated the thoughtfulness and the carefulness and the good will with which those serious questions and criticisms were posed. I think that probably when I called this paranoid, it was a slightly intemperate moment, and I apologize for that, but let me think a little bit seriously about paranoia. Actually, I know that, for instance, Barbara has done some important work on paranoia

in and as political discourse, and I think it is probably something to which we are all somewhat subject. So I don't want to use it as a term that is diagnostic or pathologizing. I actually think it is a question that is important for our collective deliberation.

I think the question is, who is being addressed? Here is a discussion of left conservatism, one of the questions that is posed is, is this me? I don't recognize myself. I understand myself to disagree with poststructuralism but I do not recognize myself as the person who is being caricatured or characterized in this description, or in the papers that have been given. It seems to me that paranoia is about the desire to recognize oneself at the center of what is being said. Unfortunately, we are all in a slightly disjointed relationship to the discourses that are emerging about us. "That's not me! I don't believe in an economism, right? I don't know anybody who does," et cetera. The field, the political field is complicated. There is a variety of ways of being skeptical of poststructuralism where that skepticalness is not the same as a poststructural skepticalness. There are a variety of ways of wanting a different kind of left than that which is involved in poststructuralist critique. And in fact, I think the map has become extremely complex.

One of the nice things about paranoia is that it economizes the world. There is that person who is speaking to me and I am at the center. Suddenly you get an adversarial situation where you pretend for the moment that positions are two, and in fact I think they are not. I think that is one of the important differences among us. Certainly it is very important not to confuse the Brown/Butler subject position. There are differences among us, it is part of our eroticism. . . . And she is more of leftist, o.k., let's give her credit.

**BROWN:**

You see, no leftist would ever say that in public.

**BUTLER:**

That's right. Now one of the things that I think is at stake here is giving up the excitement of a good fight. I feel like this has the excitement of a good fight. A lot of people came in here thinking, we're going to have the excitement of a really good fight. And I think what probably has to be relinquished is the satisfaction that might be gotten from a really good fight for a more sober and decidedly less erotic task, which is that of figuring out how we got into this strangely adversarial position when the people we probably oppose most passionately are not here, and would not be caught dead being here.

I take Barbara's point to be an important one, if a conversation with Barbara or others who share a similar position to her's is going to take place. She is saying, "Don't call me a conservative, that is not a way to enter into a conversation with me." I think that is to be respected. I think that is a perfectly good way to lay down a condition for dialogue. Similarly, I think, though, I would have some intellectual criticisms — I don't consider this to be ridicule and I don't consider this to be attack — on some of the comments that were made. Let me try to explain.

It seems to me that the attack on certain kinds of social movements as merely cultural,

or merely identitarian, is not always made by those who are calling for a return to economism, economism understood as economic determinism. There are some, Donald Morton and his crowd at Syracuse, they are interested in a return to economism. I think that the work of Theresa Ebert is also interested in a return to economism. I think Rosemary Hennessey is complicated. I think that she is both allied with that particular position and also has a capacity to think beyond it. Her work on ideology strikes me as being kind of on the fence on this question. I think when Todd Gitlin talks about several new social movements as merely cultural — you can find that in his work and certainly on his radio shows — he is not calling for a return to economism, but he is saying, what happened to class? That's important. And to say "What happened to class" is not the same as returning to economism, as we know. When Richard Rorty says that contemporary identity politics is concerned with the merely cultural, a term that he also uses, he certainly is not talking about a return to an economism. He is talking about a return to a strange patriotic American pragmatism or civic religion, hardly a materialist project, as I understand it, though I don't understand those things very well.

So I think there are pervasive questions by certain Marxists who are not necessarily committed to a strict or anachronistic economism about the place and the status of cultural studies, and I think Stuart Hall has been elaborating this at some length. So I think there are several places we could go to get evidence for the claim that there are new political formations that are being cast as merely cultural, or, sometimes, in a related fashion, merely identitarian. So I don't think I am making that up, I don't think that it is a caricature, I think that I could probably support that through several kinds of documentation.

As you see I am not quarreling with Katha Pollitt and Barbara Ehrenreich. I do think that Katha Pollitt has said some things about cultural studies and cultural analysis that don't appreciate the place of cultural analysis in contemporary social movements, but that is an intellectual disagreement that I have with her.

I also just want to say very briefly that I think it is a mistake to think that anti-foundationalism has somehow emerged as having near hegemony in the academy, or even within leftist culture. When I think about the students I know who are on the job market, who are anti-foundationalist and are trying to find a job in political theory, they don't stand a chance. They don't stand a chance. It is really rough. It is extremely rough. When I think about the undergraduates who are interested in certain kinds of poststructuralist positions, where can they go now? Johns Hopkins, turned into historicism, they can go to SUNY, Buffalo and work with a political deconstructionist, but that's not what they want. You could go to Irvine and get slaughtered by the debates. Where can they go? They can go to HisCon, sort of, and they can go to Rhetoric, up at Berkeley, and they can go to a couple of other places, literature at Duke, kind of, maybe. But with some debates. Let's not think that these local environments in which we are living are representative of the hegemony of academic culture — it is simply not true. It is

painfully untrue.

True. Untrue. I want to use those words too. And there are moments, moments of great struggle, moments of extraordinary historical happenings where I will want to say, this is real, this is true, and I will say it, and I will not be censored, nobody's going to stop me from saying it, and I'm certainly not going to stop anybody from saying it, and I'm not going to ridicule anybody for saying it.

I have a couple of questions to ask. What are the conditions under which we can say something is true, something is real? What allows us to make those utterances? What I am most worried about is the way in which truth and the way in which reality get circumscribed prematurely by people who think they know what is and is not finally true, what people think is finally to be comprised by the notion of reality. Those are powerful terms, and people who think they've got a definition of them, that they know in advance what will and will not qualify as true, that they know in advance what will and will not qualify as reality, those people scare me more than anything, because they're going to make it impossible for others to make the claim. Or, when others make the claim they are going to be at risk of being unintelligible at the moment of making the claim. It seems to me that for political reasons it is extremely important to use those terms and not to know what their future and final form will take. That's what I consider to be the political hopefulness of a certain kind of poststructuralist approach to these questions.

**BovÉ:**

If I can say just a couple of things to second what Judith has said so well and so clearly. I was going to begin by saying that I myself don't in this paranoid potential atmosphere recognize the idea of poststructuralist or antifoundationalist hegemony, and indeed I can even remember Alan Sokal being invited to the University of Pittsburgh by a group of quite realist philosophers of science in order to join in their effort to discredit the cultural studies program at the university. Which brings me to two ideas that I wished to mention. One is that, like Judith I am terrified by those people who feel they know what the real is as a final term, and I am equally terrified, if not more so, by those people who say, surely no one makes the claim any longer to know what the real and the true is, and nonetheless proceed as if they do, because they are people you can't argue with. They are people that even Rorty worries about, because those are people who are outside of the sphere of reason or rationality. That really does scare me, because those people who are quite unhappy with various forms of critique, while admitting that they are not committed to the older forms of that rhetoric, nonetheless often proceed as if they are. So it is very hard to deal with this hidden, relatively pious set of claims.

I think the other point I want to make is to explain at least in part — since Chris referred to it at the beginning — our use of the word “conservative” had to do with the fact that at a certain moment in recent history, clearly in the humanities in the American university system, a moment of crystallization with the success of the anti-theory movement

around the work of Benn-Michaels and Napp when they were both still at Berkeley — this went hand in hand with the rise of a pragmatism which at least in Benn-Michael's work is openly committed to the politics of the market, without any ambiguities or hesitations — at the same time there were other events that took place which are perhaps worth remembering. One moment was composed of the deaths of Foucault and DeMan, and with the death of DeMan the discovery of his wartime fascist writings which led to the discrediting of his authority within the academy. And this moment coincided with the recovery of the memory of Heidegger's associations with fascism.

These events, which were important and needed to be thought through and worked with, circulated rapidly in the media. They helped to give rise to what we are now all familiar with, that is, those of us who read any of the mainstream newspapers like the New York Times, as James Atlas-like articles that are endlessly involved in ridicule of the topics, say at the MLA of, for instance, the bisexuality of Huckleberry Finn, or other things that the editor of the New York Times thinks is humorous and worth mocking. While those statements were clearly for people who, like Rorty I think, not for people who claim to be on the left, but mostly for those who claim to be right liberals, those attacks on people in the academy in the humanities who were still interested in thinking after the consequences of many of the theory debates of the '70s, they were simultaneously in various places that were politically associated with oppositional left movements. Similar objections to the persistent presence of theoretical and post-theoretical discourses in the academy, that confluence gave rise, in our chat to this word conservative, which is so offensive.

Unlike Joe Buttegieg, who has done such a good job of helping us understand the ambiguities of the word conservative within the left, what I am concerned about as well is the way in which we think about — in light of the general shift in American intellectual and political discourse to the right — the spread of a practice of conservatism into general public discussion, so that, to pick up a word I heard from the floor earlier, the values that are associated with a Rush Limbaugh are also often the values that are associated with an Alan Sokal. I had lunch with Sokal, and asked him if he was at all concerned about the extreme right's use of his work, his effort, his parody, to essentially make mockery of my colleagues at *Social Text*, and he said, no, that he was not. Although he may be worried merely about the potential abuses of social constructivism, that remark on his part suggested not only a kind of political naivety, which worried me, but also a certain kind of political joy in the bashing of Nietzschean excesses.

And I had this uncanny moment, because I had been walking my dog one day, and as I sometimes do, listening to the enemy, that is to say, I was listening to the Rush Limbaugh show, on a Walkman, and heard Rush Limbaugh for fifteen minutes berate the university theoretical community on the basis of Alan Sokal's demonstration that literary theorists, poststructuralists, people interested in sexual identity, are all intellectual frauds. Now this concerns me even more broadly because one of the issues that I think is

at stake here, and not just in the US, we shouldn't be so myopic as to think it is just a US phenomenon, is an enormously pressured assault on the university as a place of thinking. That question has to be brought forward. I had a conversation fairly recently with a man who is the chancellor at the University of Zurich, who himself was very distressed. He had come from a conference of chancellors of European universities. He was distressed because he felt that there was — speak of paranoia — a conspiracy afoot in Europe to make the intellectual life of universities so mediocre that the university could be swept away as an institution, could be replaced by other forms of intellectual practice.

So however one wants to think about our decisions to talk to, with, or against each other, I would caution us to beware a little bit of the fact that what we do within the university exists in structures of relationship that are much broader than what the university contains. I think the new historicism's success, for example, has been based on an understanding of its ability to academicize matters of importance to the community, to intellectual politics. And that its antagonism to the theory movement was not an antagonism to the idea that theory was this hyperbolic attempt to master practice, as Benn Michaels says — I mean, one presumes he knew better than that, just that he didn't say any better than that — but rather that the goal was to make sure that the connections between any sort of politics in the academy were truncated, so that the possibility of the university as a place where thinking that might advance the practices of politics, culture and society, in general, simply would not occur. Rather the university would defend itself against those who would want to wipe it out by returning to an explicitly depoliticized, which is to say, right-wing political mode, of containing politics in forms of pure academicization. So if we are going to continue the debates here about the left we need to contextualize them much more broadly than within the academy.

**BROWN:**

I'll try to be brief because I realize we are starting to have another panel up here, and I think that's a mistake. That means I have to resist the temptation to re-represent myself in all the ways I thought I was misrepresented in various comments. So I am going to do my best to resist that temptation.

What struck me in one of the main charges that the four or five people, almost all of whom I know and like — that is to say, all of them I know I like, I don't know them all — what struck me is that over and over they were saying that they felt like they were being misrepresented, misconfigured, gathered up under a rubric in which they didn't recognize themselves, and, as I think John put it, he really felt there was a kind of straw argument that in particular I was putting together. I have two things to say about this. On the one hand, it is true that as I reflected on what I might say this week, I didn't think about anybody's argument in particular, I thought about different things I had heard from different corners that had to do with left objections to current political formations as well as certain elements of political argument and theoretical contributions to those arguments.

Now I put it that way because it really surprised me, and maybe it is my naivety, to find that midway through this conference today, that the way in which the two sides were being articulated were anti-foundationalist, and anti-anti-foundationalist. I didn't think I was coming here to have that argument again. I had that argument for many years, mostly not in the context of calling ourselves a left. I'm thinking about what the implications were for the left, which is whether poststructuralist insight had any credibility, whether one could talk about poststructuralism as a thing, and what its relationship was to the empirical, the real, the true, and so on and so forth. So I am surprised to find that this is what we are having the argument about, because I actually thought that what Chris was trying to articulate, which all of us have been madly dissociating ourselves from, was something a little more composite than that, that was not simply about poststructuralism. I thought that what was being marked — and which Paul very much contributed to in beginning by talking about an antifoundationalist, namely Richard Rorty, as someone he wanted to provisionally call a left conservative, because of the political things that Rorty was saying, not because of his relationship to antifoundationalism, truth, reality, Althusser, Derrida, Lacan, Foucault or anybody else, but that he was actually trying to mark out a certain kind of political territory.

Now on the other hand, I do understand why this suddenly looks like the debate we are having. I will happily admit that I have contributed to it. The fact is, that the Sokal affair, if that is partly what promulgated this, was very much an argument about and with regard to poststructuralism, and about its shape on the so called academic left. Now of course in that affair, and in Barbara Epstein's representation of it, many of us, — loosely, us — felt terribly misrepresented. I remember listening to Barbara's presentation on that affair and the political implications of it, thinking over and over again, I don't recognize that as my argument, I don't recognize that as me, I don't recognize a thing called postmodernism as a political category, as an intellectual formation, and so on and so forth. So now what I am thinking is that we have made a mistake here in our framing, and I'm not going to hang it on Chris. I actually think the mistake is to be calling this an argument between postmodern lefties and lefties who are critical of the postmodern, whatever that is. I'm tempted to say that we didn't start that argument, that that argument came out of the Sokal affair, and the way in which Barbara and others exploited that affair, and I use exploited in the best sense, that is, made much out of it to talk intellectually and politically.

But as soon as I say I am tempted to say I don't think we started it, and I don't think we started that business of making a composite picture that represented precisely nobody actually, I am also reminded of something Barbara Ehrenreich said a long time ago, at a different moment of minor crisis on the left, when feminists were squabbling on the pages of *The Nation* about family values, whether we should be pro-family or anti-family, and people like Jean Elshstain and Barbara Ehrenreich and others were weighing in, and it was really quite a fight, and we were missing each other like mad, it was about twelve or fourteen years ago, and I just remember Barbara Ehrenreich saying at a certain point,

something like, “As a mother of a seven year old, and somebody who has dealt with these squabbles on the playground a lot, I don’t care who started it.” I really don’t care who started it, and it doesn’t matter who started it, we should all, collectively, commit ourselves to stop that characterization of this debate.

It is not fruitful to talk about it as anti-foundationalism, versus those who are critical of it. I listened to John for a good ten minutes waiting to hear concretely what his objections were, and I didn’t hear them. I heard him talk about the way in which I had misrepresented him, the way in which nobody really believed in the real and the true, the way in which they were straw arguments, the way in which my arguments about resentment suggested that all the left could do was be reactive, and so on and so forth, but I actually think that if we want to have a discussion of what the left is, what its promises are, what its depression is right now, we probably ought to have it without marking out that territory that way. And the reason I especially feel that way is that I actually think that if we continue to have that debate we are simply having an academic debate. I think many, many people could say at this point that they partake in some of the insights of Foucault, some of the insights of Derrida, lots of the insights of Marx, some of the ones of Stuart Hall, they don’t like this part, they don’t like that part, and we would have a more useful intellectual and political discussion.

Two last things to say, because I promised to be brief and I broke my promise. No, I won’t say anything else.

**AUDIENCE:**

I wanted to say first of all that I really appreciated Wendy Brown’s last remarks, and they articulated in a much more sophisticated way than I’m going to be able to, one of my reactions to the conference. I felt like one of the outcomes of the conference is that we all agree that open, undogmatic, non-stereotyping thinking is better than dogmatic, close-minded thinking. Now I don’t think that is a trivial result, something that we should disdain, but I do think it is something that has to be reflected on. I felt like one of the things that was raised, if you will, as a specter, but never really addressed in any forthright way, was what our relationship to liberalism is. If I had to come up with a term that might be superior to left conservatism, it would be left liberalism.

One of the problems with left liberalism is that liberalism is not a very coherent philosophy, it sort of is a slimy thing that is cobbled together from various loose epistemologies, institutional set-ups, historical relations to the nation, and so forth. And I think that one of the things we are really dealing with here or perhaps not dealing with here, I think there is almost a kind of *Feverfung* of this problem of liberalism, is what exactly our historical relation to it is, what do we see as valuable in that, indeed irreplaceable in that, and what do we find historically or politically suspect or unacceptable.

I wanted to just recur to one of the positions of the first speaker [Paul Bové] who brought up the example of the utopian politics of George Sorel, the idea of a concrete myth, or



Ernst Bloch's political messianism — Benjamin would be another example. I do think that those are intellectually very sophisticated positions. I also think of the position from the right of Karl Schmitt, who also makes a very powerful critique of liberalism, is also a serious position. I think the problem with both of those is that they lead to reprehensible political results if they are taken as a kind of foundation, rather than as a source of utopian impulse, a utopian openness to other possibilities, that openness of history. So I guess what I'm trying to get at is how we see ourselves in relation to liberalism, how we see ourselves in relationship to a liberalism that it is perhaps very hard to get out of, or that maybe that we shouldn't try to get out of, but how we see that relationship to a utopia reserve in such a way that can perhaps animate that liberalism to make it a force of transformation.

**BROWN:**

I just want to say that your question makes me very happy. I think this is really worth talking about.

**BUTTEGIEG:**

Just a couple of comments on this. The first thing that came to mind is that I don't think it is an accident that some critics of so called postmodern critics label them when they don't like them as liberals. So, that could also be an issue internally, which is also problematic. However, I think when we think about liberalism we've got to realize that the peculiar position in which the left finds itself in dealing with liberalism in the United States, in that you have the absence of a political party that is not liberal. Now, when we discuss a lot of theory we are importing these ideas and then using them here and elaborating them but from contexts where there is a contest between the liberal and the non-liberal. I think it would be very valuable not only to attempt a critique of liberalism but also to specifically figure out how it happens in a country — that is this one — where it seems there is nothing but a whole spectrum of liberalism, for the classical to the progressive.

**BROWN:**

One of the things I expected us to talk about under the troubled rubric of left conservatism was left politics that does not easily differentiate itself from a certain kind of liberalism, and you know, when I think about *The Nation*, which I have a very mixed relationship with, I think about it as formally and putatively on the left, and at the same time it has no sustained critique of liberalism. It has a kind of challenge to it, it is bugged by liberalism's hypocrisy, and it constantly points it out as it were, but there isn't what I consider to be a fundamental ingredient of left analysis, which is a deep critique of the imbrication of liberalism with capitalism, and a deep critique of the way in which liberalism systematically mystifies power in the cultures that it governs. Not necessarily a rejection of liberalism, but a critique of it. That's not very much present on the left these days, the so called poststructuralist left, the so called anti-poststructuralist left, although who would want to define themselves that way as a political category. And so, the reason the question makes me really happy is that I think the question of the

relationship of liberalism to articulating what the left has left behind in its own legacy, political incisiveness, and what it demands of itself theoretically, that liberalism is one of those objects.

**AUDIENCE:**

My name is Craig Reinerman, I am in the sociology department. I want to say I guess several things and then end with a question. The first is that I am now willing to chalk up Chris's flyer to a brilliant strategy for maximizing turnout. When I first read it I had to read it one paragraph at a time and stop because I was so upset for many of the reasons people are articulating. It succeeded in getting me here, and I've listened and learned a lot, particularly from Wendy and Judy. However, I have to say a couple of other things. One, is that this poor guy Sokal is spoken of as if he is singlehandedly handing over the universities to the corporatist right and allowing us to be thoroughly retrenched. And it seems to me he has been mentioned a half-dozen or more times in that light and it seems to me that lost in that discussion is the point he made, which was that the *Social Text* folks got caught with their intellectual pants down, and were rightly embarrassed. They let trendy PC horseshit pass without going the most minimal common-sensical peer review, where you ask somebody who knows something about the subject to take a look and make some suggestions. You wouldn't get that from listening to the way Alan Sokal has been talked about. Now he may have been mean-spirited, he may have pulled dirty tricks, but its not like we can absolve ourselves and some of the things we write about and do in the academy. We can't blame everything bad that is happening to university academic life on the likes of Sokal.

The second thing I want to say is as I understand Katha Pollitt and Barbara Ehrenreich and the criticisms other people have made of what I tend to call postie work — for lack of a better term, anti-foundationalism I suppose is what a lot of people call it — but it seems to me that to call it, as the flyer did, anti-theory, and anti-theory polemic, which in itself is a polemic, misses the distinctions that people are making, and I didn't see them throwing the baby out with the bathwater. What I saw them arguing against was bad theory, was lame theory, was theory that was inaccessible, impenetrable, badly written, hyper-abstract theory that bears no relationship to how people live their lives. And it seems to me that it is incumbent of us who are on the left of whatever stripe to criticize bad theory, or inaccessible theory, or hyperabstract theory, or theory that doesn't have anything to do with how people live their lives. And that is worth doing. I don't think we should put ourselves in the position of defending all of the theory equally, because it is not all equal. I have learned a great deal from most of it, but I can't say that about all of it.

Finally, the question. I think one of the lines I liked the most from the panel was Wendy's line about we can't have Truth with a capital T back. We can't put that genie back in the bottle. And I agree with that. But I was reminded, Wendy, of an essay by Eric Hobsbawm. It was a speech he gave, I think, at the opening of Central European University, where he took historians to task, one of which he singled out, who had a book with the title, "Four

Thousand Years of Pakistan.” And he pointed out that Pakistan was only invented a few decades ago, and that this was pernicious nonsense that was feeding ethnic feuding that was going to result in thousands of deaths, and we have to be careful, because there is after all, something that is the truth that we can at least approach. His line, which made me remember the entire essay, was “After all, Elvis Presley is either dead or he isn’t.” So, my question is, yes, I agree with you, we can’t have Truth with a capital T back, but it seems to me there has to be some alternative short of a collapse into nihilism, and we scholars have to figure out some alternative calculus for figuring out what is closer to real, or closer to true, or what is garbage and what is not garbage.

**BROWN:**

Let me just say that I don’t know how recognizing that Elvis Presley is probably more alive dead than he was when he was alive is nihilism. And I actually think that to collapse those is to resuscitate the accusation is that there is this thing called postmodernism, it rejects all truths, it is all relativist, it doesn’t even see the relationship between truth and power, it doesn’t recognize common biology or facts, it doesn’t know it is sitting on a chair, and it has no values. Because I actually think it is not the case that Elvis Presley is either dead or not dead, I think that is what the business of his perpetuity as a dead figure but quite alive, producing subjects who live in the notion and in a world in which Elvis Presley is alive. Here I am dwelling in popular culture, which I don’t do, and I don’t belong in, but since we are accused we may as well do it. I think it is a mistake, Craig, to make that move — to say that that is nihilism, and to rest your case on facticity.

**BUTLER:**

I just wanted to say — obscure writing, impenetrable, abstract, et cetera — I think to go back to what Barbara said earlier, I think it is really important for those of us who teach difficult theory that we provide a classroom in which people can figure out whether they want to have access to this theory, what it means, what it is doing, what it is about, and to be able to switch registers and talk about it in ways that accessible. I think that is a pedagogical responsibility in the teaching of poststructuralism. I don’t think it means that you can’t teach poststructuralism, I think if you are going to teach it, you have a pedagogical responsibility. I think that if we were to reject intellectual work that is dense or abstract or complicated or not immediately accessible, we wouldn’t be reading the Grundrisse, we wouldn’t be reading Lukacs, we wouldn’t be reading Gramsci, and we would be participating in a kind of anti-intellectualism which is I think another problem altogether. I think there is a certain kind of anti-intellectualism that sometimes operates under a political banner and sometimes under an anti-political banner, but I think it is its own phenomenon right now, and we need to think really seriously about it.

**CONNERY:**

OK, if people can remember to identify themselves and then speak.

**AUDIENCE:**

My name is Chris Brew, and I just want to say that while I also think that maybe the term left conservatism is unfortunate, or is doing more problematic work than good work, I

think this discussion that we are having is really important and I also want to say that I want to defend the work that has been going on all day at this panel and on this panel. I think it is really important work that is being done, and what worries me here, and I think it is great we are actually having conflict around this, because consensus is one of the evil manifestations of US liberalism that we should resist at all costs, one of the things that worries me here, and I want to engage your comments, John, and I know it is not the first time we have been on opposite sides of the mike, I worry about a certain kind of moralism that creeps into some of the rhetoric that is critiquing the panel here. I think that in fact it actually proves the importance of Nietzsche as a thinker, because moralism itself is one of the things that sets our sights on imaginary enemies rather than the enemies we need to focus on and worry about. I also want to worry about the populism I hear in some of this, because I think that populism is something that has a very mixed history in the US, and while we all adhere to it in various political struggles, I think it is also important that we don't resort to it in the academy as self-evident, because I think it is a really complicated rhetoric. So I just want to put that out there, I want to say that what I hear today is a real sustained critique, and I think that is always an important thing.

**AUDIENCE:**

My name is Donna Haraway. I'm reminded that maybe one of the most important papers Judith Butler wrote in my personal appreciation of her work, has in its title "Contingent Foundations." I have never read her as an anti-foundationalist, indeed she has gone to extraordinary lengths to talk about the simultaneous semiotic materiality of foundations, the necessity of them, the worldliness of them, and precisely the non-transcendental and necessary quality of living with commitments that do not then become religious, transcendentalist positions related to some false enemy. So, I affirm the notion of refocusing this issue around which contingent foundations, and when, and how we make a difference.

I want to return briefly to the way the Sokal affair has been used, and engage in two seconds of paranoid discourse, because I was certainly personally ridiculed and personally betrayed. And that of course is a paranoid statement about the perception of a public publication that had nothing to do with an individual person but was perceived and processed in a socially paranoid way. It is an issue I have tried to think through pedagogically in relation to colleagues and students and political allies — Sokal is still a political ally — working together and beyond these moments of mutual destruction seems to me really difficult and important emotional discipline and its public process.

Sokal provoked many things, but among them seems to me he was exemplifying a hard issue: we want materiality back. That there is something about social constructionism in its more exuberant forms that undermines some very deep commitments to the way the world is, whether it is the biological quality of being a sexed human being in discussions of gender, or the questions of what it means to live a body wounded by poverty in the context of NAFTA, that there is something left out of certain ways of doing social

constructionism that really matters.

I have a quick thing to say about the way science functions as an extraordinarily powerful signifier, much more powerful than Marxism, as the signifier of materiality, and that that is what in many ways has been at stake among us, including social science, to which I am committed in many ways. And I'd like to say something from the point of view of a person who spent her adult life studying what kind of practice science is. I thought I'd know something, therefore I am making contingent foundationalist claims about the way things work, and it seems to me one would be hard pressed not to see three things simultaneously true about the contemporary organization of knowledge producing practices in the natural and engineering sciences. One: There has never been a time in world history when science has been more floridly in the service to the market. The way that world is shaped into objects of knowledge and practice is infinitely imbricated at every semiotic level of the onion in processes of the expansion of the contemporary market. Two: That science and its modes of practice in shaping up the world is one of the very powerful resources for putting a limit on One. Witness the debates about global warming. That the appeal to the knowledge of the way the world works, limiting the degree to which people can — human beings, our species as well as certain formations within our species, can exploit the world, that scientific practice is one of the extraordinary resources in many forums for naming the limits to the possibility of exploiting the world we live in and still surviving. This is an absolutely indispensable contingent foundation for conducting political life. Three: How science works as a knowledge-building practice, which is to say, contingently and through articulation. That is to say, the machines, the people, the meaning making practices, the imagination of the structure of the world through which you ask a falsifiable question, the way you articulate knowledge practices with finance, with government regulatory agencies, with people who will care in schools or textbook publishing, at every level of the onion it is a concrete, worldly practice of stabilizing knowledge in some forms and not others, and not any form of knowledge goes.

And this kind of thing is a lesson for the politics of the left, in my view. If we took seriously these three dimensions of the way scientific knowledge works in our world, one, naming it as the enemy in some crucial ways, two, naming it as the indispensable foundation for our own work, and three, getting at the way it is a worldly practice, and not some kind of signifier of capital and materiality, we will have made a lot of progress beyond ridiculing each other.

**AUDIENCE:**

I'm Mary Beth Peddup, I teach in community studies here on campus. I was reminded while listening to the panel today of Milton Friedman's line about we're all Keynesians, because it seems to me that in 1998, there is this real sense in which we are all postmodernists. I'm referring to Wendy Brown's comment about how there has been the discovery that the world has become more complex. It seems to me that a lot of what has transpired over the last thirty years or so has really been a recognition that the world

was always very complex, but in fact what has changed is our ability to articulate that complexity, and our unwillingness to quash that recognition. I think, another comment that was made was about family disputes. It seems to me that a lot of what has been poststructuralism, postmodernism, whatever — I don't want to engage in the label game now, I remember that history, that emerging history, as coming out of debates within Marxism, a refusal to really quash the social relations that Marxism could not explain, and never really purported to explain. And that is why the genie is out of the bottle. And that is why I say we are all postmodernists now.

I remember having debates in graduate school, about, for example, the domestic labor debate, which was one of the foundational debates of feminism that was grounded originally in Marxism. And I'm not trying to say that everything has come from Marxism, but it seems to me that one of the things I recognize, being in higher education, is a real loss of that intellectual political history, of recognizing where a lot of theoretical developments that we now take for granted actually had their origins in political and theoretical struggles. It seems to me that one of the ways out of this impasse is to remind ourselves of that genealogy, of that political and theoretical genealogy, and to continue to pass that along to our students, otherwise what I fear happens is that people enter the debate with no knowledge of that history, and then are more susceptible to making sort of facile accusations about, oh, you're this, you're that, without understanding the tremendous ferment, not just careers but lives and struggles that really lead up to this moment that we are in right now.

And I guess the last comment I want to make is a very simple plea for, perhaps a division of labor. As a social scientist I believe in the division of labor in society, I can't do everything, I can barely do what I'm supposed to do. I should be home blowing up balloons for my kid's birthday party tomorrow, but I'm here, and I'm glad I'm here. But it seems to me one of the ways out of this impasse is for some kind of, dare I say, mutual respect, a continued debate, a continued argument, yes, but also recognize that no one person can bear the entire weight of the left, of the struggle, of whatever it is, on their shoulders, and there is really room for a lot more, not cooperation, but a sort of coexistence.

**CONNERY:**

Let me say that since we got started about fifteen minutes later, we'll go to 5:15 until 5:00.

**AUDIENCE:**

I just have a few words to say. I'd like to say that the specter of capitalism is over Eastern Europe right now, and I think this is what I think the leftists ought to be thinking about. It is very, very complicated, and terrible what is going on there, and I have just been travelling in Eastern Europe and Russia and what I'd like to say is that the critique of liberalism is taking place in Eastern Europe right now because they are questioning whether the kind of democracy and capitalism they are getting in a package is what they

want. This critique is very interesting, it is taking place in Warsaw, and in Prague, and I don't know about Moscow, because they are too busy being capitalists, but in any case, I think that is something that Western leftists ought to be paying attention to, and also that this debate ought to be taking place in a more open atmosphere, geographically.

**CONNERY:**

Does anyone on the panel want to speak in relation to what come up in the last few comments?

**AUDIENCE:**

My name is Will Hull, I'm a graduate student in sociology. Three comments, well, two comments and a question. The first comment is that I have to say in some ways I always feel very weird at things like this, and I get the sense from talking to graduate students who are about my age that we all feel kind of weird in this. In some sense we don't fit. When I say this, I'm sorry, I don't know your name, in your opening comments [Chris Connery] you said that part of what this is about is how we interpret the 60s. Well I was born in 1968, so when all this stuff was happening I was in diapers, so I have no concrete historical experience with that. I wonder to what degree this is a kind of generational debate, that to people in my generation it doesn't feel quite so salient because we never had little red books in our pocket, and weren't screaming Mao, more than ever, at the other side, and we feel like we have something that we have to cope with. Another way of putting it is sometimes I wonder, is poststructuralism a recovery movement for sectarian leftists? I don't mean that in a dismissive way, because there were obviously a lot of terrible excesses, and I have a lot of ridicule for the sectarian leftists, much as I think of myself as a Marxist. So I get the sense that for a lot of graduate students we don't feel as though we fit on one side or the other, although, I signed this letter, even though I say that.

The second thing, is just to make a kind of plea. I feel like the issue that Wendy Brown brought up about the difficulty in writing hasn't really been addressed by people on the panel directly. I think you are right to caution us that if we make things too easy we never move beyond what we already know, I'm a hyper-over-educated person, and I oftentimes read these texts and I don't know what in the world they mean. And I'm a graduate student so I think what does it mean to someone who doesn't even have a bachelor's degree, it doesn't say anything to them. Which isn't to say, you can't use the ideas, I'm just making a plea for clear writing. I don't think it is anti-theoretical to write clearly.

The third thing I wanted to bring up is I'm still not clear what left conservatism is. I think the reason is that the way this was set up, it was set up in opposition to anti-foundationalism. I guess I'm not sure what anti-foundationalism means. Here a thing, concretely. In Judith Butler's talk, she said, look, we're not rejecting categories that are universal, but we are calling them into question.

**BUTLER:**

I didn't use the word we, I was only referring to myself.

**AUDIENCE:**

Just you. So you don't think I should hold the same position?

**BUTLER:**

No, I'm sorry I wasn't representing a collectivity.

**AUDIENCE:**

For instance, she thinks that universal values are necessary, for instance, the right to sleep with whom you want to sleep without the state busting down your door and telling you who to sleep with, a position I think most of us would agree with. But yet we should call these into question. Now that is a statement I entirely agree with. I would hope everyone in here, and my sense from the applause you got that most people here would agree with you. But the thing is, it is not at all clear to me that that is either an anti-foundational point, or at all a postmodern point. I think Socrates, in the trial, would agree with that very statement. So I'm not at all clear what is postmodern about it, or poststructural about it, or anti-foundational about it, necessarily, which isn't to say it is right or wrong. But what is really confusing to me is when I see that said and then in Wendy Brown's talk, she says, the real, just dismissively, you don't have to give an argument, that the real doesn't exist any more. Truth doesn't exist, reality doesn't exist. .

**Editor's note:** This is the point at which the tape recording of the conference ends.

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## Additional Information

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