

Truth, Reason, Objectivity, and the Left

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This affair has brought up an incredible number of issues, and I can't dream of addressing them all in 15–20 minutes. So let me start by circumscribing my talk, listing some issues that I *won't* address now, but which we might want to discuss later. First of all, I don't want to belabor *Social Text's* failings either before or after the publication of my parody: *Social Text* is not my enemy, nor is it my main intellectual target. (In fact, I strongly recommend the latest issue of *Social Text*, which analyzes the crisis of academic labor through the lens of the recent strikes at Yale.) Secondly, I won't go into the ethical issues related to the propriety of hoaxing (although in the question period I'd be glad to defend my ethics). I won't address the obscurantist prose and the uncritical celebrity-worship that have infected certain trendy sectors of the American academic humanities; nor will I try to analyze the media fallout from this affair and what it may indicate both about academia and about the larger society (though these are all important issues that I hope we'll discuss later). I won't enter into technical issues of the philosophy of science (though again I'd be glad to do that in the question period). I won't discuss the social role of science and technology, nor the problem of reconciling technical expertise with democratic control — these are very important issues for the Left, which perhaps Meera or Steve will address, but they'd take me too far afield. Indeed, I want to emphasize that this affair is in my view *not* primarily about science — though that was the excuse that I used in constructing my parody — nor is it a disciplinary conflict between scientists and humanists, who are in fact represented on all sides of the debate. What I believe this debate *is* principally about — and what I want to focus on this afternoon — is the nature of truth, reason and objectivity, and its implications for progressive political action.

Let me make one clarification from the beginning. A lot of the discussion this afternoon may come to revolve around the word “relativism”, and it's important to understand that this word is used commonly to refer to three very different things: *epistemic* relativism (that is, relativism about truth and knowledge); *ethical* or *moral* relativism (that is, about what is good); and *aesthetic* relativism (about what is beautiful artistically). I think it's very important to keep these three issues separate. My remarks this afternoon will concern *only* epistemic relativism. Obviously that's not the end of the story: in our political work we have to make assertions *both* about facts and about values. But I'm going to have to stick to what I feel competent to discuss.

Now, perhaps I should begin by explaining what led me to write the parody, because it's not what you might at first think. My aim isn't to defend science from the barbarian hordes of lit crit or sociology. I know perfectly well that the main threats to science nowadays come from budget-cutting politicians and corporate executives, not from a handful of postmodernist academics. Rather, my goal is to defend what one might call a scientific *worldview* — defined broadly as a respect for evidence and logic, and for the incessant confrontation of theories with the real world; in short, for reasoned argument over wishful thinking, superstition and demagoguery. And my motives for trying to defend these old-fashioned ideas are basically *political*. I identify politically — as I think all of us here today do — with the Left, understood broadly as

the political current that denounces the injustices and inequalities of capitalist society and that seeks more egalitarian and democratic social and economic arrangements. And I'm worried about trends in the American Left — particularly in academia — that at a minimum *divert* us from the task of formulating a progressive social critique, by leading smart and committed people into trendy but ultimately empty intellectual fashions; and that can in fact *undermine* the prospects for such a critique, by promoting subjectivist and relativist philosophies that in my view are inconsistent with producing a realistic analysis of society that we and our fellow citizens will find compelling. It seems to me that truth, reason and objectivity are values worth defending no matter what one's political views; but for those of us on the Left, they are crucial — without them, our critique loses all its force.

David Whiteis, in an article recently submitted to *Z Magazine*, said it well:

Too many academics, secure in their ivory towers and insulated from the real-world consequences of the ideas they espouse, seem blind to the fact that non-rationality has historically been among the most powerful weapons in the ideological arsenals of oppressors. The hypersubjectivity that characterizes postmodernism is a perfect case in point: far from being a legacy of leftist iconoclasm, as some of its advocates so disingenuously claim, it in fact ... plays perfectly into the anti-rationalist — really, anti-*thinking* — bias that currently infects “mainstream” U.S. culture.

Along similar lines, the philosopher of science Larry Laudan observed caustically that

the displacement of the idea that facts and evidence matter by the idea that everything boils down to subjective interests and perspectives is — second only to American political campaigns — the most prominent and pernicious manifestation of anti-intellectualism in our time.

(And these days, being nearly as anti-intellectual as American political campaigns is really quite a feat.)

Now of course, no one will admit to being against reason, evidence and logic — that's like being against Motherhood and Apple Pie. Rather, our postmodernist and poststructuralist friends will claim to be in favor of some new and *deeper* kind of reason: such as the celebration of “local knowledges” and “alternative ways of knowing” as an antidote to the so-called “Eurocentric scientific methodology” (you know, things like systematic experiment, controls, replication, and so forth). You find this magic phrase “local knowledges” in, for example, the articles of Andrew Ross and Sandra Harding in the “Science Wars” issue of *Social Text*. But are “local knowledges” all that great? And when local knowledges conflict, *which* local knowledges should we believe? In many parts of the Midwest, the “local knowledges” say that you should spray more herbicides to get bigger crops. It's old-fashioned objective science that can tell us which herbicides are poisonous to farm workers and to people downstream. Here in New York City, lots of “local knowledges” hold that there's a wave of teenage motherhood that's destroying our moral fiber. It's those boring *data* that show that the birth rate to teenage mothers has been essentially constant since

1975, and is about half of what it was in the good old 1950's. Another word for "local knowledges" is *prejudice*.

I'm sorry to say it, but under the influence of postmodernism some very smart people can fall into some incredibly sloppy thinking, and I want to give two examples. The first comes from a front-page article in the *New York Times* a few months ago (22 October 1996) about the conflict between archaeologists and some Native American creationists. I don't want to address here the ethical and legal aspects of this controversy — who should control the use of 10,000-year-old human remains — but only the epistemic issue. There are at least two competing views on where Native American populations come from. The scientific consensus, based on extensive archaeological evidence, is that humans first entered the Americas from Asia about 10–20,000 years ago, crossing the Bering Strait. Many Native American creation accounts hold, on the other hand, that native peoples have always lived in the Americas, ever since their ancestors emerged onto the surface of the earth from a subterranean world of spirits. And the *Times* article observed that many archaeologists, "pulled between their scientific temperaments and their appreciation for native culture, . . . have been driven close to a postmodern relativism in which science is just one more belief system." For example, Roger Anyon, a British archaeologist who has worked for the Zuni people, was quoted as saying that "Science is just one of many ways of knowing the world. . . . [The Zunis' world view is] just as valid as the archeological viewpoint of what prehistory is about."

Now, perhaps Dr. Anyon was misquoted, but we all *have* repeatedly heard assertions of this kind, and I'd like to ask what such assertions could possibly mean. We have here two *mutually incompatible* theories. They can't both be right; they can't both even be *approximately* right. They could, of course, both be *wrong*, but I don't imagine that that's what Dr. Anyon means by "just as valid". It seems to me that Anyon has quite simply allowed his political and cultural sympathies to cloud his reasoning. And there's no justification for that: we can perfectly well remember the victims of a horrible genocide, and support their descendants' valid political goals, without endorsing uncritically (or hypocritically) their societies' traditional creation myths. After all, if you want to support Native American land claims, does it *really* matter whether Native Americans have been here "forever" or *merely* for 10,000 years? Moreover — and to me this is a key point — the relativists' stance is extremely condescending: it treats a complex society as a monolith, obscures the conflicts within it, and takes its most obscurantist factions as spokespeople for the whole. In a way, it's a late-twentieth-century postmodern analogue of the nineteenth-century imperialist romanticizing of the "exotic". Are all Native Americans literal creationists? Are even most of them? Has anyone bothered to ask them?

This example landed me in a lot of hot water when I used it in a forum at NYU a few months ago: people wanted to know "by what authority" I was forcing them to decide between those two theories of Native American history; they wanted to know why I was "putting Native Americans on trial"; and so forth. Well, what can I say? By "what authority" do I speak? — obviously none. I'm not an archaeologist. I'm just a lay person who happens to be interested in questions of human history. If

you're *not* interested in those questions, that's your business. I'm merely making a simple point of logic: that two mutually contradictory theories can't both be true. And quite honestly, if we on the Left have to spend several hours debating such an elementary point, then god knows how we're going to make radical social change. As for "putting Native Americans on trial", I want to emphasize that the purpose of my story isn't to criticize the Native Americans; it's to criticize the archaeologist who couldn't get his thinking straight.

(By the way, this particular example has been analyzed in more detail by philosopher Paul Boghossian in his article last December in the *Times Literary Supplement* (13 December 1996). He notes that the phrase "just as valid" can be read in at least three different ways: as a claim about truth, as a claim about evidence, or as a claim about purpose. Boghossian argues persuasively that on *none* of the three readings does the relativist view hold water.)

My second example of sloppy thinking comes from *Social Text* co-editor Bruce Robbins' article in the September/October 1996 issue of *Tikkun* magazine. Now I'm loath to bring this one up, because I have nothing personal against Robbins — in fact, he's been the most publicly candid and self-critical of the *Social Text* editors since the scandal broke. But I think there *is* a serious intellectual issue here, and I think Robbins' confusions are symptomatic of the confusions of a significant fraction of the academic Left; and it's those confusions that I want to discuss.

In this article Robbins tries to defend — albeit half-heartedly — the postmodernist/poststructuralist subversion of conventional notions of truth. He asks: "Is it in the interests of women, African Americans, and other super-exploited people to insist that truth and identity are social constructions? Yes and no," he asserts. "No, you can't talk about exploitation without respect for empirical evidence" — exactly my point. "But yes," Robbins continues, "truth can be another source of oppression." Huh? What could he mean by that? Is he simply observing that sometimes the truth is bitter? Apparently not, because his very next sentence explains what he means: "It was not so long ago," he says, "that scientists gave their full authority to explanations of why women and African Americans . . . were inherently inferior." But is Robbins claiming that *that* is truth? I should hope not! Sure, lots of people say things about women and African-Americans that are not true; and yes, those falsehoods have sometimes been asserted in the name of "science", "reason" and all the rest. But claiming something doesn't make it true, and the fact that people — including scientists — sometimes make false claims doesn't mean that we should reject or revise the concept of truth. Quite the contrary: it means that we should examine with the utmost care the *evidence* underlying people's truth claims, and we should reject assertions that in our best rational judgment are false.

This error is, unfortunately, repeated throughout Robbins' essay: he systematically confuses truth with *claims* of truth, fact with *assertions* of fact, and knowledge with *pretensions* to knowledge. These elisions underlie much of the sloppy thinking about "social construction" that is prevalent nowadays in the academy, and it's something that progressives ought to resist. Sure, let's show which economic, political and ideological interests are served by our opponents' accounts of "reality"; but first let's

demonstrate, by marshalling evidence and logic, why those accounts are objectively *false* (or in some cases true but incomplete).

Now let me be clear: I'm not saying that it's *easy* to determine, in any specific case, which claims of truth are in fact truths. Trying to make that distinction is, after all, what all of our intellectual work is about; and if it were so easy, then we'd be out of a job. (Of course, we may be out of a job anyway, but that's another story.) What I'm saying is that it's crucial to distinguish between the *concept* of "truth" and the *concept* of "claim of truth"; if we don't do that, we give away the game before it starts. Unfortunately, some people, starting from the undoubted fact that it's *difficult* to determine the truth — especially in the social sciences — have leapt to the conclusion that there is no objective truth at all. The result is an extreme epistemological skepticism: so that even when postmodernists and their friends concede the existence of an external world — as they pretty much have to — they hobble themselves with a self-imposed inability to make any coherent assertions about that world. How such an extreme skepticism could be a philosophical foundation for *political* radicalism beats me.

On the contrary, as Barbara Epstein pointed out yesterday, *political* radicalism means speaking truth to power. Against the mystifications promoted by the powerful, we have to offer to our fellow citizens a coherent and persuasive account of how the existing society really works; we have to criticize that society on the basis of a coherent set of ethical values; and finally, we have to make coherent proposals for how to change that society so as to bring it more in accord with our ethical values.

There's a lot more that can be said along these lines:

- about the use of trendy but ambiguous phraseology, like "the social construction of facts", that intentionally elides the distinction between the external world and our knowledge of it;
- about how Cultural Studies has vulgarized valid philosophy of science, drawing wildly exaggerated conclusions from doctrines such as the underdetermination of theory by evidence and the theory-dependence of observation;
- about the distinction between facts and values, which many in Cultural Studies have questioned but which I believe is important (for both intellectual and political reasons) to uphold;
- and quite generally, about the importance of distinguishing properly between issues of ontology, epistemology, sociology of knowledge, politics, and ethics, and the failure of much trendy work to do so.

But all this is a big agenda, so instead of my going on for another half-hour let's save those issues for the discussion period.

I want to emphasize that my plea in favor of truth, reason and objectivity in no way implies that the exact meaning of these concepts is self-evident; certainly I don't purport to have resolved centuries-old problems of epistemology. But it does seem to

me that these deep and difficult epistemological problems should be treated with the utmost intellectual rigor — as indeed serious philosophers of science have been doing for years. And it's this intellectual rigor, as I've tried to show and would be glad to show in more detail, that has unfortunately been lacking in some of the trendier segments of the American academy. And it's even more unfortunate — at least to my mind — that this sloppy thinking has proliferated among academics who identify with the political Left.

Let me close by observing that nothing much that I've said this afternoon is new; dozens of people in the humanities, social sciences and natural sciences — many of whom are on the Left — have been saying the same thing for years. But if my parody in *Social Text* has helped just a little bit to amplify their voices and to provoke a much-needed debate in our universities and on the American Left, then it will have served its purpose.