

Theory & Event

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Left Conservatism of Left Factionalism?

Who invented this strange and wondrous term, “Left Conservatism?” And why have they done so?

We will all have to wait to hear what the panelists actually have to say about these matters. However, as UCSC graduate students in the humanities and social science committed to left critical thought, we feel the need to respond directly to the publicized workshop description. We are disturbed by the tone of the description, which implicitly mobilizes the familiar language of left factionalism (Out with Trotskyites! Smash the Petty Bourgeois Revisionists! Out with the Left Conservatives! Etc.). Whether or not this vilification of imagined enemies within the left was intended to achieve parodical effect, it in fact does nothing to serve the organizers’ stated interest in furthering “discussion and debate.” There is an important difference between honest, if pointed, critique, on the one hand, and attempts to stigmatize those who would dissent from the status quo in theory, on the other.

The text announcing the conference turns on the claim that critique of “antifoundationalism” = “anti-theory” = “conservatism.” This equation implies that the test of true radicalism is adherence to “anti-foundationalism.” Yet there are many radicals who embrace ideas which often run counter to “anti-foundationalist” claims: e.g., that radical politics does, and should, contain an ethical dimension; that there is an essential,

not merely nominal, difference between oppression and liberation; that the natural world, and the beings who inhabit it, cannot be reduced to the discursive constructions and meanings that human beings attach to them; that patriarchy, capitalism and racism are determinate historical systems which can and should be abolished rather than simply resisted, and so on.

Such statements are surely open to debate and revision. Are they, however, “conservative,” or “anti-theoretical?” If so, in what way? We would honestly like to know.

We would also like to know whether the organizers consider “anti-foundationalism” (or any other theoretical tendency with which they identify) to be above skepticism or revision. So they believe that they have stumbled upon the “correct” path of analysis and critique — the one that decisively answers the contradictions and mistakes of left-feminist praxis over the course of the last century? One immune, presumably, to new criticism or interrogation? Is the mere questioning of the emergent poststructuralist orthodoxy in the humanities itself a kind of class treason — de facto proof of one’s reactionary politics? If the organizers had their way, would those who remain disinclined to be incorporated within the postmodernist paradigm be excommunicated from the left? (Or would they just be denied tenure?)

What does it mean when scholars who claim (in their published works) to embrace “difference” and radical democracy resort to name-calling as a form of discourse? When scholars who reputedly oppose “binary” and dualistic thinking feel the need to frame their opponents as a despised “other” (conservatives)? When anti-essentialists invoke a purely essentialist and fictive category — “left conservative” — to tar their critics? When writers who often express skepticism toward substantive notions of truth, value, agency, and ideology nevertheless arrogate for themselves the terrain of political vanguardism, replete with denunciation and ad hominem attacks? Indeed, on what possible epistemological, ethical, or political foundation do they feel entitled to do so?

There is surely some irony in the spectacle of well-compensated and comfortable academic theorists in the humanities declaring, with absolute self-seriousness, that their work represents one of the last redoubts of critical thought in the entire United States. In this regard, it seems to us curious that of the three culprits named in the conference description as engaged in “attacks on critical theory” — Barbara Ehrenreich, Katha Pollit, and Alan Sokal — two are among the nation’s most prominent feminist public intellectuals, and the other is a physicist without formal credentials in the humanities. But why name these names, and not, say, others who have criticized the postmodern fashion yet are in a better position to defend themselves against the organizers’ slings and arrows? Terry Eagleton, Susan Bordo, Barbara Epstein, Sabina Lovibond, Fredric Jameson, Adolf Reed, Alex Callinicos, Ellen Wood, David Harvey, Arif Dirlik, Cornel West, Noam Chomsky, and many others come to mind.

There must be something more here than the attempt of certain academic theorists to

assert their rhetorical hegemony over the entire left, or a naked appeal to academic professionalism (the idea, recently defended by Stanley Fish, that only professionals ought to comment on other professionals' ideas). Isn't there?

We do not believe that being skeptical of poststructuralist claims leads to an anti-theoretical position. On the contrary, we passionately affirm the need for theory as a crucial tool for making sense of the world, and for providing us with the maps necessary for transforming it.

For this reason, we find the workshop organizers' conception of theory to be narrow and impoverished, for it seems to offer a basis only for determining "correct" ideology, rather than for changing the world. This does not make the organizers themselves "conservatives," however, only (we believe) wrong.

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