

Truth, Reason, Objectivity and the Left

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This article attempts to present a defence of a scientific world-view defined broadly as a respect for evidence and logic, and for the incessant confrontation of theories with the real world. In short, a plea for a reasoned argument over wishful thinking, superstition and demagoguery.

FIRST of all, I don't want to belabour *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. Secondly, I will not go into the ethical issues related to the propriety of hoaxing. 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 analyse the media fallout from this affair and what it may indicate both about academia and about the larger society. I will not enter into technical issues of the philosophy of science. I will not discuss the social role of science and technology, nor the problem of reconciling technical expertise with democratic control. Indeed, I want to emphasise 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—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 here 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 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 world-view 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 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 characterises 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' US 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.

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 post-structuralist friends will claim to be in favour 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 fibre. 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 1950s. 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 (October 22, 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 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 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 20th-century postmodern analogue of the 19th-century imperialist romanticising 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 New York University 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 emphasise that the purpose of my story isn't to criticise the Native Americans; it's to criticise the archaeologist who couldn't get his thinking straight.

(By the way, this particular example has been analysed in more detail by philosopher Paul Boghossian in his article last December in the *Times Literary Supplement* (December 13, 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 does not make it true, and the fact that people – including scientists – sometimes make false claims does not 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 scepticism: 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 assertion about that world. How such an extreme scepticism could be a philosophical foundation for political radicalism beats me.

On the contrary, as Barbara Epstein pointed out, 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 criticise 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 vulgarised 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.

I want to emphasise that my plea in favour 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 rigour – as indeed serious philosophers of science have been doing for years. And it's this intellectual rigour, 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 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.