

Against the Grain

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As the title of our journal indicates, its objective is to foster ideas in the field of Latin American literature and history that go against the grain of the so-called post-al theories developed primarily in literature departments in the United States and Europe since the 1960s, namely poststructuralism, postmodernism, postcolonialism, and subalternism. Why undertake this type of ideology critique? Because the ideologies in question all diverge to some degree or another from class, gender and race analyses of concrete sociohistorical events and, as I see it, from Marxism as the explanatory model for the fundamental critique of capitalism per se and for its transcendence in more egalitarian social systems (socialism and communism). As one of our editorial board members, Gene Bell-Villada, put it twenty years ago:

Widely divergent though these intellectual products may be, and however varied their intrinsic worth and durability, they share a larger intent and a common perspective—anti-Marxism. They satisfy a national need and a wishful search for modes of thinking that will eclipse Marxism, exorcise and supersede Marxism, consign Marxism to a minor place in the history of mind, erect lasting substitutes for the Marxian world view.

In doing so poststructuralism and the isms created since have attempted, as Bell-Villada remarks, “to deal with Marx’s investigations as well as the broad appeal of Marxist thought, yet at the same time to relativize and thereby minimize its disturbing premises

and key discoveries.”¹ These theories, then, manage to incorporate elements of Marxism’s critique of capitalism while, simultaneously, diverting attention away from the class struggle and analysis in its many manifestations and the historical and present attempts to overcome capitalism and imperialism. Poststructuralism does this, as Aijaz Ahmad has clearly shown, because it:

dismisses the history of materialities as a ‘progressivist modes-of-production narrative’, historical agency itself as a ‘myth of origins’, nations and states (all nations and all states) as irretrievably coercive, classes as simply discursive constructs, and political parties themselves as fundamentally contaminated with collectivist illusions of a stable subject position—a theoretical position of that kind, from which no poststructuralism worth the name can escape, is, in the most accurate sense of these words, *repressive* and *bourgeois*.²

Hence, poststructuralism absorbs certain aspects of Marxism and, in an ideological move, drains the latter of its full explanatory potential and radical intent. One thinks here, for instance, of Foucault’s discursive analysis and its use of such ubiquitous terms as “power” and “knowledge” or the neo-Lacanian notions of “the Real” and “the Imaginary.” To achieve that poststructuralism takes a step away from concrete historical analyses of capitalism and, thereby, the very critique it hopes to make of that economic system and its cultural and historical developments. Consequently, as an ideology—a particular and distorted view of reality—poststructuralism ends up appearing to challenge bourgeois thought when, in fact, it reproduces its basic tenets.

¹ Gene H. Bell-Villada, “Invisible Anti-Marxism: What Happens when American Academics Read Latin American Leftists” *Humanities in Society*, VI, 2-3, Spring-Summer (1983): 179.

² Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London: Verso, 1992): 35-36.

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire* provides a poignant example of poststructuralism's double bind: its critique of the empire and its subjection to bourgeois ideology. Almost completely devoid of references to specific sociohistorical and economic analyses of capitalism, *Empire* attempts, nonetheless, to describe an all-encompassing Deleuzian and Foucault-like capitalist empire that rules without any mediation and eliminates mediations (like nation states), thus creating a world in which exploitation is everywhere and there is no real "third world" nor "first world." Combined and uneven development, the driving force of capitalism and imperialism, is deemed to be a thing of the past because, for Hardt and Negri, there is no imperialism, there is only empire.³ The authors allow for resistance within the empire and even a contestation of its economic and political stranglehold on the world economy by forwarding the idea of "the multitude," a self-validating and imminent collective assemble that may spontaneously rise up against the powers that be, but without any mediation, any coherent political consciousness and any specific political organization. Only the empire has the capacity to mediate, that is, to subject the multitude to exploitation via the division of labor and its various institutional arrangements:

Resistances are no longer marginal but active in the center of a society that opens up in networks; the individual points are singularized in a thousand plateaus.

What Foucault constructed implicitly (and Deleuze and Guattari made explicit) is therefore the paradox of a power that, while it unifies and envelops within itself every element of social life (thus losing its capacity effectively to mediate different social forces), at that very moment reveals a new context, a new milieu

³ Michael Hardt/Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001). See the Preface, particularly p. xiv.

of maximum plurality and uncontainable singularization—a milieu of the event (25).

As a heterogeneous social force or as a kind of social *differance* (à la Derrida), the multitude may elude the homogeneity of empire and spontaneously resistances or, in the best case scenario, revolts. The multitude, a sector of society never clearly defined though exploited, is imminently situated and its interests are opposed to the empire's "transcendence" and homogenization. However, beyond this contradiction there is no answer, no real alternative to empire because that ethical and political discussion and praxis would involve, by its very nature, a type of homogenization and mediation of potential political agents. As poststructuralists, Hardt and Negri thus cast skepticism about the central role the working class and organic intellectuals have to play as the gravediggers of capitalism.

In final analysis, Hardt and Negri rely on a version of Marxian analysis of capitalism only to then discard it in favor of poststructuralism. This is most patently evident in their implicit rejection of the dialectical method. For if a pivotal concept such as mediation (as an economic, political and linguistic category) is disregarded, then they are left with the incommensurable dualism of empire and multitude and are unable to explain who the multitude is, how it will take power, and what type of alternative economic and political system will be created. Concisely put, Hardt and Negri's post-Marxism, manages to rid Marxism of its method (the dialectic), its sociohistorical specificity and its capacity to raise political consciousness to organize the radical transformation of capitalism (and its empire). As a reflection of high poststructuralism, if

one can call it that, Hardt and Negri's theory leads the reader away from Marxism and into the arms of anarchism and, in the last instance, bourgeois individualism.⁴

Fortunately, in Latin America the poststructuralist and post-al intellectual imports from the United States and Europe did not have too much of an effect on political movements nor on left-wing scholarly interests until the 1980s and 1990s. Until that time "sociocrítica," the sociohistorical analysis of culture held sway well into the early 1980s and it coincided with the activity of revolutionary movements in Central America. However, towards the end of the 1980s, almost precisely when several tragic defeats were registered for left-wing movements (the FLSN, FMLN, the URNG and others) in Central America and as neo-fascist dictatorships finally gave way to democratization in the southern cone, the exportation of US and European bred cultural theories began to have some impact. However, even by 2003, as there seems to be a resurgence of left-wing political activity in Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Venezuela and Bolivia, it is difficult to find many advocates of poststructuralism and postmodernism, perhaps because these are perceived to be what they are: products for export from the metropolitan imperialist centers.

In general, in the U.S. university system Latin American studies have still remained under the sway of poststructuralism and its political accommodationism. So, for instance, one sees a constant flow of articles and books relying on Kristevan, Lacanian, Zizekian, Foucauldian, and Derridean theories without having hesitated in the least it would seem when confronted with the Sokal hoax, without having questioned the basic

⁴ I would like to thank my good friend Greg Meyerson for his helpful comments on Hardt and Negri and poststructuralism in general. He is the co-editor of *Cultural Logic* (eserver.org/clogic).

premises of the theories that were so discredited by Sokal and Bricmont in their book *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals' Abuse of Science*.⁵ There is no question that the legacy of poststructuralism is alive and well in literature departments.

Yet it also seems that there is a significant group of students and professors who have been completely disenchanted with “theory” per se, and who have either abandoned their research altogether and turned completely to teaching (as was the case of Frank Lentricchia in English⁶) or they have searched for some sort of alternative to the dominant theories. *A contracorriente* hopes to reach this group and a small, but growing number in the field of Latin American studies who have returned to sociohistorical analyses of culture, often informed by Marxism, gender studies, and serious interdisciplinary studies. Like *Ideologies & Literatures* in the 1970s and 80s, let us hope that *A contracorriente* can create a different venue for earnest leftists writing on literature and history who will not accept the world as it is. That said, as this and future issues will

⁵ New York: Picador, 1998. Alan Sokal, a professor of Physics at New York University and a leftist was concerned about the proliferation of essays and books in literary criticism denouncing science as a discourse, embracing philosophical relativism, and doing so in the name of anti-capitalism and socialism. He then wrote an essay designed to parody contemporary cultural theories, “Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity” and had it accepted at well-known journal in the field of cultural studies: *Social Text*. The editors at *Social Text* did not bother to send the essay out to scientists, but rather decided to publish it after reading it themselves. Sokal later revealed that it was a spoof and that it contained a “mélange of truths, half-truths, quarter-truths, falsehoods, non-sequiturs, and syntactically correct sentences that have no meaning whatsoever.” By his own account Sokal wrote this satire because he is “an unabashed Old Leftist who never quite understood how deconstruction was supposed to help the working class” and because he is a “stodgy old scientist who believes, naively, that there exists an external world, that there exist objective truths about the world, and that my job is to discover them” (268-9). After the revelation of the hoax in *Dissent* a scandal ensued, which, to my mind, led to the current crisis in literary criticism.

⁶ Frank Lentricchia, “Last Will and Testament of an Ex-Literary Critic”, *Lingua Franca*, September-October (1996): 59-67.

show, we welcome diverging and dissenting well-wrought essays within that tradition that will challenge to learn from criticism and self-criticism.

A *Contra* corriente

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**A Journal on Social History and
Literature in Latin America**

**Una revista de historia social
y literatura de América Latina**