THE NEW ATLANTIS
A JOURNAL OF TECHNOLOGY & SOCIETY

Theory Wars, Again

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Barbara Herrnstein Smith is an academic polymath, with books on everything from how poems end to the dynamics of intellectual controversy. Her latest book is concerned with the status of truth in the academy, and how theoretical disputes that are properly the province of epistemology get inflected with wider political meaning, becoming weapons in the service of various polemics. This is a worthy theme of investigation, but Smith explicates these difficulties under the unfortunate rubric of the "scandalous," and in so doing tends to replicate the oversimplification she laments.

Scandalous Knowledge: Science, Truth, and the Human
By Barbara Herrnstein Smith
Duke ~ 2006 ~ 198 pp.
$21.95 (paperback)

Thus, in her telling, we have the epistemological Right, represented sometimes by "the tradition" of Descartes and Kant and sometimes by early twentieth-century logical positivism. All of this is dubbed by Smith "rationalist-realist-positivist," a bewilderingly capacious term. The main point, she would have us know, is that this conservative disposition is easily scandalized by the epistemological Left, which includes a slate of thinkers from Kuhn to Foucault. Her polemical point is that academic conservatives and their minions in the press have little real acquaintance with their postmodern adversary, and reflexively invoke the peril of "postmodern relativism" as a sort of bugaboo.

She is right about that. Or at least it was true within living memory. The book sometimes reads as a belated salvo in the "campus wars," "theory wars," and "science wars" of the 1980s and early 1990s. Smith was president of the Modern Language Association in 1988; clearly this was a formative moment for her. But at this point, the sad figure of David Horowitz may be the only combatant left on the other side to be wounded by this kind of polemic.

It is not so much that the quarrels between postmodernism and science exhausted themselves as that the postmodern critique became institutionalized in departments of "science and technology studies." In the process, the critique became more historical, more well-informed about scientific practices, and hence more nuanced. It lost its polemical edge, in part by persuading the rest of us that, in fact, our view of science

really was naïve. As an oppositional posture, it was the victim of its own success.

Smith seems to miss the smell of napalm in the morning. Her interest is more sociological than philosophical. Thus relativism, as a doctrine, is surely "protean or elusive," as Smith writes, but this elusiveness does not excite her to theoretical exertion. Rather, the (merely alluded to, not explained) perplexities of relativism serve only to provide a sort of formal contrast, in light of which her main object becomes all the more compelling: relativism, despite its perplexities, "has evident power as a charge or anxiety, even in otherwise dissident intellectual quarters, even among theorists otherwise known for conceptual daring. It is this phenomenon that I mean to explore here: not relativism per se, if such exists, but the curious operations of its invocation in contemporary intellectual discourse." Yet if one wants to understand this "anxiety" of the daring, one would have to parse the arguments and intuitions that disturb their sleep. Or is it merely that they have been bullied by the less daring? Smith dwells on crude denunciations of relativism by conservatives (and these are not hard to find), but never leads us to the non-crude, serenely apolitical reflection that she is presumably in possession of.

That presumption is tested after reading repeatedly of "traditional objectivist, absolutist, and universalist concepts." This is her characterization of the epistemological Right, but I honestly don't know what it could refer to. She surely knows that that old absolutist Descartes begins precisely from radical skepticism, and issues perhaps the most thoroughgoing rejection of "tradition" (as a source of knowledge) ever offered. And that it was Kant, of her alleged "realist-positivist" crowd, who most famously insisted that the objects of modern science are constructions of the mind. And indeed that, upon inspection, her amalgam "realism-positivism" strains to unite two incompatible doctrines: as commonly interpreted, positivism insists precisely on agnosticism about what *really* exists, and is content to *posit* entities that are heuristically convenient. So while Smith is surely right to draw our attention to the crudities of certain conservatives' attacks on that constellation of theoretical dispositions it names "postmodern," it is likewise true that she fashions an "absolutist" scarecrow of the pre-post-modern, i.e. the modern, that sorely wants for nuance and generosity.

These major deficiencies aside, there is still much to like in this book. Smith is at her best in skewering the pretensions of evolutionary psychology. Here she does parse the arguments, excellently, and convincingly demonstrates the "unusually

preemptive character" of this field's claims. It is enamored of the computational theory of mind, according to which the mind is software run on the hardware of the brain, corresponding to the disciplines of neuroscience and cognitive science.

> The distinction between physical embodiment and mental processes permits evolutionary psychology to claim autonomous status as a discipline, free to deduce mental organs and programs with minimal constraints from such ('only…physical') considerations as neurophysiology. Conversely, however, in marking off the *mental* as the specific territory of their accounts, the authors reveal the paradoxical character of the new field, which claims a scientificity superior to that of other social sciences but produces, as its central explanatory resource, a distinctly non-empirical realm of causality.…
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> [Evolutionary psychologists would have us believe that] there is something especially rigorous and scientific about transferring such calculations and analyses [of adaptive fitness] as rawly as possible from blackboard, barnyard, jungle, or presumed ancestral savanna to contemporary society.

Smith goes on to produce some astounding quotations from the famous cognitive scientist Steven Pinker that reveal the willfully unempirical character of his view of human beings. Refusing to be bullied by the imputation of "spiritualism" that Pinker and his ilk typically deploy against their humanist critics, Smith nails a crucial point beautifully when she writes, "it is not a matter of honoring some ineffable distinction between organisms and physical systems but of understanding what kinds of physical systems organisms—including human beings—are."

By way of returning to my earlier criticism, I would only add that the genealogy Smith loosely attaches to this kind of scientism, finding it an expression of "classic rationalist thought" (by which she means modern rationalist thought), must be supplemented with the observation that such reductive accounts of the human dovetail weirdly with postmodern assaults on "humanism."

Positivists and postmodernists may despise one another, but there is a surprising resemblance between them. "Pomos" declare the death of the subject, while the cognitive scientists explain subjectivity away as an epiphenomenon of brain processes. If psychic states are "nothing but" brain states, i.e., contingent physical facts, then it seems no psychic state (for example, a particular belief) is preferable to any other psychic state. In other words, reductive cognitive science issues in the most radical relativism, despite its casual associa-

tion with an epistemological Right. From a larger perspective, then, the postmodern comes to seem like merely the very modern. That is, the twentieth-century crisis of reason in the West is merely the belated elaboration of a fundamental skepticism that is coeval with the birth of modern science, and all this scandalized antagonism amounts to very little—a sibling rivalry.

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