

Psychology, Science, Feminisms, and Cultural Studies: A Book Review Article of New Books by Bell and Hardin

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Psychology, Science, Feminisms, and Cultural Studies: A Book Review Article of New Books by Bell and Harding

In *Confronting Theory: The Psychology of Cultural Studies* (2010), Philip Bell sets out to critique the body of work produced by scholars of and practitioners in cultural studies. Although Bell is careful to indicate that he is particularly concerned with those uses of Theory that aim to describe psychological matters, the goal of the book is clearly spelled out in its preface: "to break out of the circular corral of textuality and the question-begging defense of inter-textuality" (9). Thus, although the book starts on a somewhat conciliatory note with Bell musing on the irony of his having written this book since, after all, he has spent most of his professional career "analyzing essentialism and reductionism" (8), it soon becomes obvious that his disdain for cultural studies does not stem from what he perceives as an excessively textualist interpretation of culture, but, rather, that he is objecting to the textual turn that cultural studies took in the 1970s.

Confronting Theory, however, is not an attempt to turn back the clock and return to the Marxist exploration of working class culture of the early days of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, but an attempt to debunk the "metaphysical houses of cards that 'Theory' writers have constructed" (9). The eight essays that constitute the book can be read independently as a series of critiques of Theory's scientific value that point out what Bell perceives as methodological and conceptual inconsistencies or as a, sometimes redundant, long essay on the validity of understanding subjectivity as a textual construct. While Bell is careful to describe the scope of his criticism arguing that it is cultural studies, and more specifically a psychologizing branch of cultural studies, that he aims to critique, his essays often generalize what he refers to as "Theory-speak" as the only type of work that goes on in departments of literature and often making catastrophic assessments of the state of the humanities such as: "the edifice of twentieth-century Anglophone humanities appears to be crumbling from within" (136). This type of sweeping generalization is particularly surprising since it seems a bit far-fetched to argue that all scholarship coming out of departments of literature conforms to the dictates of cultural studies when there is plenty of evidence that the supposed hegemony of the textualist approach that Bell abhors in cultural studies has been contested from its inception (Susan Sontag's 1964 "Against Interpretation" certainly comes to mind). In the last ten years we have witnessed a renewed criticism of cultural studies by those who advocate a return to the traditional role of literary criticism as the authoritative judge of the aesthetic value of cultural production, a return that Bell seems to be sympathetic to. Among the most prominent texts of the return to the aesthetic are James Soderholm's *Beauty and the Critic: Aesthetics in the Age of Cultural Studies*, Michael Clark's *The Revenge of the Aesthetic*, Elaine Scarry's *On Beauty and Being Just*, Wendy Steiner's *Venus in Exile: The Rejection of Beauty in Twentieth-Century Thought*, and Denis Donoghue's *Speaking of Beauty*. Bell's indictment of cultural studies for compounding "the devaluation of humanities education across the board" (135) insinuates that — had departments of literature been doing their job as critics of the aesthetic instead of trespassing into disciplines like psychology — the depreciation of cultural capital that the humanities have undergone in Western universities could have been averted or slowed down. Bell's omission of any reference to criticisms of cultural studies from within literary studies helps him present a bleak picture of Theory as a whole and that does not seem to aim at promoting the reevaluation of the humanities but to designate an expiatory goat. The general tone of Bell's collection of essays, as their collective title promises, is certainly confrontational. He does not mince words when exposing what he perceives as Theory's flawed logic. In one of the chapters, he compares the notion of affect articulated by Gilles Deleuze and further developed by Lisa Blackman, among others, to the naïve ontology of a five year old (90). Despite his call to cultural studies scholars to engage in a constructive dialogue with the social sciences (specially with psychology) so that their working concepts and methodology can be clarified and rendered much more effective, Bell's criticism of cultural studies promotes a further entrenchment of the positions of those in favor and against the discursive analysis of culture.

In Chapter 1 Bell traces the origins of cultural studies in what he describes as an understandable response to the alliance of repressive policy and the social sciences that characterized the 1950s and

1960s. Reacting to this alliance of political and academic power, Bell argues, was certainly necessary, but the terms in which this reaction was articulated were, according to him, flawed from the very beginning. Cultural studies scholars did not engage in a constructive criticism of the disciplines that they criticized but, rather, chose to dismiss them altogether (17). Bell is particularly disturbed by what he interprets as cultural studies' refusal to accept the possibility of any type of epistemological certainty. Most of his essays are predicated on a narrow interpretation of the 1970's textualist turn: the idea that calling attention to the discursive nature of science and questioning its truth value are one and the same thing. Bell mentions as an example of what he perceives as antiscientific nonsense Andrew Milner and Jeff Browitt's defense of Luce Irigaray's statement that Einstein's formula $E=mc^2$ is masculinist because it privileges what goes fastest. His response to those who, like Milner and Browitt, argue that the discursive analysis of a scientific text does not necessarily dispute its scientific value is to turn the tables on them and argue that the problem is not the discursive nature of science but Cultural Studies resistance to evaluate its own statements in terms of their truth or falsity (i.e., the faulty scientific methodology of cultural studies) (26). Bell is certainly not the first to express concern for what some perceive as the antiscientific slant of Anglophone humanities departments. As early as 1994, Paul R. Gross and N. Levitt published *Higher Superstition: The Academic Left and Its Quarrel with Science*, a book in which they already warned against "the open hostility toward the actual content of scientific knowledge" they detected in academic circles (3). Interestingly, Bell makes no reference to Gross and Levitt in his own book. This omission may be due to the fact that while Gross and Levitt present their argument in political terms (i.e., the academic left is antiscientific), Bell rarely refers to the political orientation of those scholars whom he considers antiscientific and restates the case by accusing not the left, but cultural studies scholars with the lack of scientific methodology.

In Chapter 2, Bell tries to unveil one of the oxymorons on which cultural studies is supposedly built: the Deleuzian invitation to develop an ontology of becomings. "An 'ontology,'" he informs us, "is a theory of what exists, what can be narrated as really existing, perhaps" (31). Referring to Greg Hainge's claim that cultural studies "has no ontology of its own" (32), Bell aims to provide a critique of how ontologies come into being. Certainly, if an ontology amounts to "what can be narrated as really existing" (32) any ontology should by definition be open to a textualist analysis, not because the consistency of the physical world is questionable, but because our ability to comprehend and represent (i.e., narrate) the world is certainly limited. Given the initial premise of Bell's argument, it is not surprising that the book reads as a *reductio ad absurdum* of some of the most widely acclaimed work produced in cultural studies in the last decades. Bell, true to the scope of his book stated in his preface, is particularly troubled by those areas within cultural studies that more directly challenge basic notions of human psychology. Donna Harraway's and Kathleen Hayle's critique of humanism (73-85) and Deleuze's and Blackman's exploration of the notion of affect (89-104) occupy most of the second part of his book. As it could be anticipated, Bell's critique of post-humanism follows the same circular logic of his critique of Deleuze's ontology of becomings: how can Theorists "speak as though 'persons' are excess conceptual baggage" (75)? Bell makes no distinction between, for example, Harraway's ironic critique of humanism in "A Cyborg Manifesto" or Raymond Kurzweil's futuristic musings on the possibility of human identity being contained in software (77). Bell's bibliographic notes present Kurtzweil (spelled with a "t") as the author of "I can process binary opposites therefore I am," an article on artificial intelligence published in the Australian glossy *Black + White* that was actually written by Alex Craig. This may just be a typo or it may be Bell's attempt to emulate Sokal, but presenting the work of Kurzweil as an example of cultural studies is a misrepresentation. A more nuanced analysis of the different uses that have been made of Harraway's provocative essay would have certainly been appreciated. It is also true, however, that Harraway has often blurred the lines between academic writing and science fiction, her 1997 book *Modestwitness* is probably the best example of this.

The notion of affect as conceptualized by Deleuze and developed in the work of Blackman is the type of textualist approach that most directly challenges concepts traditionally accepted by psychology. Bell's critique of the notion of affect is, as I point out above, particularly negative. He accuses both Deleuze and Blackman of reification and of assuming that the existence of affect as they describe it derives directly from the fact that they can name it. This is why he compares their work to the naïve ontology of a five year old's. "In Cultural Studies," Bell argues, "as in religion, the verbal creation of a world of pulsating micro-forces allows writers to continually poeticize mundane matters of experience

such as perception, and to write about what sound like new kinds of aesthetics and science" (90). For a staunch advocate of realism and an equally staunch critic of textualist interpretations of reality like Bell, Deleuze's, Blackman's and, we could add here, Teresa Brennan's abstract explorations of the notion of affect can be nothing less than reification (or bluffing, as he refers to Theory in the last chapter of his book) (135-36). Surprisingly, Bell chastises cultural studies scholars for ignoring Sigmund Freud's and William James's equally metaphysical uses of the term affect in favor of Deleuze's. In his account, the Deleuzian notion of affect seems to be entirely gratuitous and no mention is made of Deleuze's attempt to critique and think beyond the Freudian narrative of Western subjectivity. In *Confronting Theory*, Freudian conceptualizations of affect within an economic model of drives that promotes individual over group identity are taken as fact. Bell refuses to acknowledge the cultural elements that inform Freud's and James' narrative of the workings of the human psyche, and, as a result, the significance of the critique of Western subjectivity in the work of Deleuze, Blackman, and Brennan seems to be lost to him. Once again, a more nuanced critique of the concept of affect would have been useful here, particularly because Deleuze's notion of affect has its own problems. In critiquing Western subjectivity and attempting to develop a deterritorialized economic model of drives, Deleuze seems to be making the same mistake he criticizes in Freud: creating a supposedly culture-neutral model of subjectivity.

Bell's critique of cultural studies concludes with the proposal that "realism be reinstated as the 'default position' in the humanities at least until arguments to the contrary are built into the relevant curricula" (129). He is asking for traditional philosophical and psychological accounts of subjectivity to be taught side by side the critique of its premises provided by cultural studies. Despite the negative tone of the book, this final proposal seems reasonable. Bell complains that students are exposed to critiques of traditional epistemology without familiarizing themselves first with the body of work that is being criticized (129). I would not assume that all students are taught in humanities courses is Theory, but it is true that the wide range of work critiqued by cultural studies presents a pedagogic challenge not only in undergraduate but also in graduate courses: "Theory and its epistemological dilemmas," Bell argues, "can be taught dialogically, by argument and counterargument" (140). Yet, Bell's seemingly modest proposal to teach Theory side-by-side with traditional forms of epistemology does not seem to match his characterization of cultural studies as antiscientific nonsense. In the context of Bell's dismissive portrayal of cultural studies, a dialogical approach to building a humanities curriculum that combines realist epistemology and cultural studies critiques does not come across as an attempt to develop knowledge by building on the insights of both of them, but as yet another version of the destructive cultural wars in which each side aims to cancel each other out. And, with regard to the criticism of the anti-scientific nature of cultural studies, Bell appears to be unaware of scholarship in "comparative cultural studies," a framework whose construction and application are based on fields in the social sciences including (radical) constructivism and the empirical study of literature and whose practitioners are found not only in literary study but also in psychology and education.

The idea that the critique of science that characterizes some of cultural studies scholarship amounts to little more than the uninformed bluffing of some scholars in the humanities, as Bell would put it, and this view does not take into account the truly interdisciplinary origins of this body of work. As early as 1970, the publication of Thomas S. Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* triggered an analysis of scientific discourse from within the scientific community. During the following decades, the body of work produced by scientist that followed Kuhn's line of work increased exponentially and this was particularly true among biologists who found the combination of feminism and cultural studies especially useful in their field. Works including Ruth Bleier's *Science and Gender: A Critique of Biology and Its Theories on Women* (1984), Anne Fausto-Sterling's *Myths of Gender* (1985), Lynda Birke's *Women, Feminism, and Biology* (1986), and Ruth Hubbard's *The Politics of Women's Biology* (1990) among others established that the discursive analysis of science is a concern for those who take both scientific knowledge and its effect on society seriously.

The objective of this critique of scientific discourse, despite Bell's reiterated accusations to the contrary, has not been to systematically discard Western epistemology, but, rather, to consider ways in which to develop a self-reflective scientific practice. The preoccupation with the social repercussions of scientific research predates the arrival of cultural studies, as well as the critique of the scientific discourse pioneered by Kuhn. In *The Social Function of Science* (1939) J.D. Bernal's advocated for the

need to develop an ethics of scientific research. Bernal's proposal was problematic in that it tied this scientific ethics to a narrowly defined political (socialist) agenda, but the effort to integrate ethical and scientific discourse remained a constant concern for those that have studied scientific discourse since then.

I would like to provide a wider context in which to evaluate the ways in which textualist critiques are not only not antiscientific but can benefit scientific research by considering the proposal for an alternative conceptualization of science presented in Sandra G. Harding's *Sciences from Below: Feminisms, Postcolonialities, and Modernities* (2008). The main project of Harding's book speaks to Bell's main criticism of cultural studies (its dismissal of traditional epistemology and refusal to articulate a constructive criticism of the sciences). Harding's goal is "to 'calibrate' to each other progressive tendencies in Northern science and technology studies, Southern science and technology studies, feminist work, and modernity studies. I propose that each needs the success of the others for its own projects" (8). Harding advocates for a reassessment of Western and non-Western knowledge instead of "romantic evaluations of one and demonizations of the other" (6). Coming from Harding, whose career has been built on the critique of Northern science, as she refers to it, this attempt at reconciling the two sides of the dispute over Western scientific discourse is particularly interesting. Her proposal does not represent an attempt to soften the critique on Western sciences, nor an idealistic call for a return to the pre-modern, but an invitation to use the insights of science and technology studies to improve science and vice versa.

The first part of the book reviews the work of Bruno Latour, Ulrich Beck, and the collective work of Helga Nowotny, Peter Scott, and Michael Gibbons. Harding finds their work appealing for a series of reasons: all of them find postmodernism relevant in as much as it describes the symptomatology of modernity's ills, but politically limited; they agree in considering that science has become a kind of governance in which knowledge production is deeply intertwined with power; they believe that the transformation of science cannot happen without the transformation of the political context in which science takes place (25). All of them argue against abandoning modernity and propose slightly different ways of continuing/renewing the project of modernity. Harding's contribution to their shared positions is to bring feminism into the picture since women's perspectives were, for the most part, absent from their arguments. From Latour, Harding takes his critique of the conceptualization of science as a culture-neutral discourse: the traditional representation of scientific discourse as mere description of fact. But Latour is not advocating for a return to social constructivist views of nature. Social constructivism can only result in "a relativist conceptual framework of incommensurate worlds wherein different cultures simply have different beliefs about nature and social relations" (Latour qtd. in Harding 31). Social constructivism, according to Latour, is based on a mononaturalism: the belief that there is one fixed nature that pre-exists its conceptualization by different cultural traditions. In this conceptual framework, it would be impossible to compose a "common world." Latour reminds us that not only each culture shapes an idiosyncratic conceptualization of nature, but that nature is constantly shaping culture(s). Science should, consequently, have the ability to compose a common world in as much as both Western and Eastern, Northern, and Southern sciences are open to assume the challenges that nature is constantly posing to their cultural beliefs. Harding's proposal is deeply informed by Latour's insight as we shall see.

Beck's critique of the self-validating advance of science in *Risk Society* is also crucial to Harding's proposal. Beck argues that "science is one of the causes, the medium of definition, and the source of solutions to risks, and by virtue of that very fact it opens up new markets of scientization for itself" (Beck qtd. in Harding 54). Beck is concerned by the dehumanization of science in which the benefit of the individual, the community, or the environment is constantly deferred. Beck tells us, however, that we have entered a second modernity in which the firm grip on science by scientist seems to be slipping away. We all contribute to scientific knowledge in as much as we are constantly being asked to make decisions when faced with contradictory scientific findings. According to this, science is becoming increasingly self-reflective. Beck's overtly optimistic assessment of science is certainly problematic in that it overemphasizes the transition from a first to a second modernity as Harding tells us, but the idea that ordinary people may take charge of scientific agendas is certainly appealing to her (56). Nowotny, Scott, and Gibbons argue that the central role that science played in the project of modernity has gradually dissipated. This has produced, Harding explains, "an alarming decline in science's

ability (and authority) to define the reality of the natural world; on the other hand an unprecedented increase in its power to manipulate and intervene in that world" (87). Modernity and science no longer seem to share the same agenda, an insight that echoes Latour's comments in *We Have Never Been Modern* as well as Beck's critique of science for science's sake.

In the second part of the book, Harding reviews a selection of the existing literature on the marginalization of folk and Southern scientific knowledge from Northern scientific discourse. The expansion of Northern sciences promised to liberate Northerners and Southerners alike; however, the reality is and has been different. Harding is particularly eloquent in her critique of how globalization has not resulted in an improvement of quality of life for Southern peoples: "the policy and practice of development has largely further impoverished the already economically and politically disadvantaged of the Third World, of which women and their dependents make up the vast majority" (169). Standpoint theory provides the necessary counterbalance by conceptualizing how knowledge is relative to the vantage point from which it is articulated. The aerial, culture-neutral epistemology that science promises is actually grounded in a specific point of view: a male and Eurocentric one. Standpoint theory and the feminist science accounts that it has inspired have been helpful in advocating for "expanded [scientific] principles and practices" (126). Harding reminds us that any initiative to develop an alternative epistemology from the generic point of view of "women," or "third world women" is, however, problematic in that it can easily replicate the imperialist gesture that characterizes Northern science imposing a generic agenda on women (157-58). Conceptualizing and articulating Third World Women's standpoints is both a political necessity and an epistemological challenge, there is not just one standpoint just as we cannot speak of just one modernity.

In part three of her book, Harding addresses the concern that a Eurocentric version of modernity may manage to impose itself wiping out tradition. She reminds us that tradition is not a monolithic entity but one that is constantly created by modernity. Modernity constantly appropriates elements of tradition and presents them as modern (170-83). Hence, the exchange between tradition and modernity has always been going on, Harding's proposal is to bring this exchange to the foreground so that we can appreciate not only how modernity shapes tradition but also how tradition can mold modernity into new shapes. We hear here echoes of Latour's conceptualization of nature as an active agent in shaping culture. This is Harding's most ambitious argumentative turn, she is simultaneously making a case for the patriarchal nature of modernity and locating women as principal elements of tradition. Harding presents the constant redrawing of the lines that separate modernity from tradition as a male compulsion to abject the female body of tradition: "my major point in this chapter has been that the widespread prevalence of gender stereotypes within modernized societies is not a mere residue of traditional social relations, as modernization theorists and their Marxian critics have consistently proclaimed. Rather, these stereotypes are built into the founding conceptual framework of modernization thinking; it is stereotypes of the masculine, defined in terms of their distance from 'the feminine,' that indicate what counts as modernity and what counts as social progress" (212). Harding does not, to her credit, lapse into an abstract, psychoanalytic explanation of a possible talking cure for modernity's fear of femininity. Instead, she proposes that science follow the "feminist standpoint mantra to 'start research and politics from women's lives'" (225). Science should redraw its research agendas considering the diverse standpoints of women's lives. This proposal is intended, as Harding tells us, as a provocation, a reminder that science has walked away from its self-proclaimed commitment to modernity.

Harding's critique of science and her proposal remind us of Terry Eagleton's critique of cultural studies, echoed by Bell, that "the freedom of text or language would come to compensate for the unfreedom of the system as a whole" (Eagleton qtd. in Bell 134). Reading Bell's often excessive critique of cultural studies one has to agree that the interpretive "technologies" of our field may have, like Beck argues in the case of science, become, at times, their own justification. Cultural critics, I would argue, borrowing from Harding's proposal, need to remind themselves that the purpose of cultural studies was and should continue to be to start research from women's lives. This is not to say that textualist interpretations are not valid, but that the critique of knowledge is not a goal in itself, but, hopefully, a means to a better world. Western feminism admitted long ago to the limitations of its foundational Eurocentric standpoint and the need to include the points of view of non-Western women. These marginal standpoints, however, are not static, they are constantly changing and hence the need to start research, again and again, from women's lives.

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