Letters

THE SEMIANNUAL NEWSLETTER OF THE ROBERT PENN WARREN CENTER FOR THE HUMANITIES

VOL. 5, NO. 2 • SPRING 1997 • VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY

Experimenting with Cultural Studies

Alan Sokal, a physicist at New York University, submitted an article titled "Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity" for publication in the Spring/Summer 1996 issue of *Social Text*, a prominent cultural studies journal. This issue focussed on science and cultural studies, and Sokal's article was published in it.

At the same time that this issue was circulated, another article by Sokal hit the stands. This article, "A Physicist Experiments With Cultural Studies," was published in the May/June 1996 *Lingua Franca*, a magazine that covers higher education. In this article, Sokal announced that his article in *Social Text* was a hoax and that it was filled with nonsensical mathematics and physics, faulty reasoning, and ridiculously-applied cultural studies theory. He claimed that the article was an experiment to test whether the *Social Text* editors would publish an article "liberally salted with nonsense if (a) it sounded good and (b) it flattered the editors' [liberal] ideological preconceptions." Sokal denounced the "intellectual arrogance" of postmodernist literary theory and the relativism and questioning of reality by scholars. In response to the questioning of reality, Sokal stated, "Anyone who believes that the laws of physics are mere social conventions is invited to try transgressing those conventions from the windows of my apartment. (I live on the twenty-first floor.)"

The news of the hoax spread quickly over the Internet and through countless publications, including *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *Newsweek*. The editors of *Social Text* expressed regret at having published the article. Sokal wrote a third article, "Transgressing the Boundaries: An Afterword," which was published in the Fall 1996 issue of *Dissent*. In academia, scholars had varying responses to Sokal's hoax. Some welcomed the attack on intellectual sloppiness; others defended the field of cultural studies; and still others denounced the hoax as an attack on academic integrity.

At the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities, professors in Vanderbilt's College Program on Science, Technology, and Humanities met to discuss the Sokal episode. Three of these faculty members, Mark L. Schoenfield, Assistant Professor of English, Arleen M. Tuchman, Associate Professor of History, and David A. Weintraub, Assistant Professor of Physics and Astronomy, reconvened to share with *Letters* their ideas about the Sokal episode and, more generally, the interaction between scholars in the humanities and sciences.

LETTERS: What do you think the most important element of the Sokal episode is?

TUCHMAN: For me, it is the way in which it creates a picture in the public's eye of a war between the sciences and the humanities that misses the mark. I am concerned about this public image. There is a lot of serious work that has been going on in the cultural studies of science, the history of science, the philosophy of science, and the sociology of science. This is work that has commanded respect even within the scientific community.

What has come out of the whole Sokal affair is a picture that, first of all, pits humanists and scientists against one another. It creates caricatures of people doing cultural studies, and contributes to a caricature of scientists as people who are so naive that it takes your breath away. One of the consequences of this is a picture of what goes on within the academy that can only feed into the hands of people who are already antagonistic toward the academy and wish to decrease funding across the disciplines.

David A. Weintraub, Assistant Professor of Physics and Astronomy, Arleen M. Tuchman, Associate Professor of History, and Mark L. Schoenfield, Assistant Professor of English, participants in Vanderbilt's College Program on Science, Technology, and Humanities

WEINTRAUB: I think the bigger issue is mentioned not in either of Sokal's articles, but in some of the responses to Sokal, and that is the question of who should speak for the sciences outside of the academy. There are so many issues, political and economic, in which science is an intimate player. The question is: can only scientists speak about issues concerning science? I think the answer is no.

But when a nonscientist enters a debate in which science is an important part of the debate, that person needs to be fairly well educated about science. It is not clear that the people whom Sokal attacks are sufficiently knowledgeable about the sciences which they critique for their critiques to be listened to. If nonscientists were more knowledgeable about science, perhaps the article would not have been published, because the science in the article was so laughable. That is why, sitting on the scientific side of the aisle, I find the whole episode very sad, but also somewhat amusing.

SCHOENFIELD: I lean towards seeing the episode as sad rather than funny, because I know how difficult interdisciplinary work is.

WEINTRAUB: What we all seem to agree on is that social scientists have a role to play in studying, critiquing, and trying to understand how science operates and how scientists, as human beings, engage in the activity of doing science. The problem with

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reduced funding for science as well as the humanities is not just that politicians are trying to reduce the deficit, but also the fact that for a generation or more, research has been emphasized and money for research has been easily available. As a result, we became lousy educators. We have produced an entire generation of very sloppily-educated people who now make decisions about what they do not understand. Our job now is to try to correct our teaching problem, and it may take a generation, after an awful lot of damage may have been done.

TUCHMAN: A number of scientists have told me that they would love to throw out that introductory chapter in every introductory science book that talks about the scientific method. First of all, many of the sciences have different methods. Secondly, the introductory chapter does not capture what actually happens in the laboratory. So what I wonder is why there is so much invested in continually reproducing this picture of "the" scientific method.

WEINTRAUB: It is a cartoon sketch of how science works that emphasizes that, in science, we engage in rational thinking and try to design experiments that are testable.

TUCHMAN: So do most of the social sciences and many of the humanities.

WEINTRAUB: So there is no difference. But in the debate over Sokal's hoax, there is a place for academic communities to engage each other. But we have not done a really good job of engaging with each other. The language is a barrier, and all we have are words. But the fancier the words get, the higher the barrier between academic communities gets.

SCHOENFIELD: It is interesting that all of the articles in the issue of *Social Text* except Sokal's article are clear and have carefully-chosen vocabularies that allow an interdisciplinary engagement. This issue shows exactly what you would hope would happen in interdisciplinary work, and yet one article—Sokal's article—ends up trumping it.

TUCHMAN: I am actually of two minds when I hear and occasionally voice complaints about the impenetrability of some of the work that has been coming out of the humanities. Because, on the one hand, I do find myself wishing that scholars writing on postmodern theory would take greater care to express their ideas in ways that would be easier to understand. But I also find myself thinking that great philosophers like Immanuel Kant or G.W.F. Hegel have rarely written in ways that have been easy to read.

Moreover, within the sciences, there is a consensus that there are terms that people outside the discipline simply will not understand, and there is no debate about whether these terms should be used or not. Part of what the socialization in a particular field is about is learning that terminology, learning, for example, what "organic" means for a chemist, or learning what "atom" means for a chemist versus a physicist.

WEINTRAUB: Clearly it is a question of who your audience is.

SCHOENFIELD: Part of the issue, though, is the assumption that a scientist always writes for scientists, whereas a humanist somehow writes for human beings. You cannot write in the humanities and control your audience in the same way that a scientist can. There is an assumption that someone can pull out a humanities journal and easily read an article on *Emma*. We can all read *Emma*, so therefore it would follow that we can all understand what someone would say about *Emma*. We cannot all open up a body and sew it up so someone can live, and therefore we do not all assume that we can understand what a scientist would say once that body was opened up.

LETTERS: How are scientists responding to the Sokal episode?

TUCHMAN: A great part of the scientific community is very concerned about cultural studies because this is what inspired Paul R. Gross and Norman Leavitt's work, *Higher Superstition*, in which they accuse the academic left of conflating science and superstition. This book, which has received a lot of public acclaim, led Sokal to devise the hoax.

WEINTRAUB: Maybe there are too many of us scientists who have never heard of Gross and Leavitt's book. We spend all of our time trying to do our science, and do not look very far beyond that. But because of the threat to funding, a lot of the national scientific societies try to engage their individual members to lobby their local political representatives. What the national organizations find is that no one gets involved.

SCHOENFIELD: It does come down to resources being stretched very thin.

TUCHMAN: Sokal and others like him believe that scientists are losing their funding because too many people in the academy are claiming that there is no such thing as truth and that any position is as good as any other. They blame the humanities for what they hold to be a growing relativism.

It concerns me that part of Sokal's agenda seems to be a desire to reclaim for science the role of arguing that there are absolute values, that science will be the savior. Yet much good work that has been coming out of the social sciences and humanities, and has looked at the activity of scientists, has been asking, "Do scientists working in their communities and on their projects always live up to the ideal that has become so intimately linked with our picture of science and the scientific method?" One could see these critical projects as almost more committed to Enlightenment ideals. Scientists have contended that their work is objective, rational, and value-free.

WEINTRAUB: Certainly an awful lot that has come and gone with science in the last several centuries has been very, very positive for all of mankind. But certainly a lot has come out of science that has not been. There is room for the entire community that supports science to participate in deciding what science should and should not be done.

For example, some of the research on radioactivity would lead to the production of certain isotopes that are used in medicine. But some of those isotopes are a bit of a problem. We need to weigh the good and the bad and decide which way we want to go in spending our research dollars. Up until now there have been sufficient funding and insufficient interest or activity outside of the ivory tower, and scientists have just done what they wanted to do. In a lot of science, we do not know whether the results will be good or bad. Scientists have tried to step out of that debate and say that there is no good or bad in doing science, and that there is just science.

TUCHMAN: The debate should involve not simply the products of science, but also how science is done and discussed. In light of my interest in gender and science, I think about how we still discuss the "doing" of science in terms that are more closely linked with what our culture considers to be masculine traits, such as rationality or logic. In contrast, the role of intuition, which most scientists admit plays a part in

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scientific endeavors, and which is more closely associated with the feminine, is largely ignored. You do not find scientists emphasizing the importance of intuition when they are in front of the classroom or writing introductory textbooks. The way the sciences are taught has a clear impact on who decides to go into the sciences today.

SCHOENFIELD: I do not think scientists insist on reason in exactly the way Sokal seems to think one needs to. Anyone who wants to hang onto reason as the only way of thinking through a problem, and as the great heritage of the Enlightenment, simply does not understand the history of the Enlightenment. Even the people who one could associate with reason would, in Sokal's view, be avowed irrationalists. Sokal's notion that if one does not believe in objective reality, one should try jumping out of a window is profoundly irrational. There is no rational connection between one's sensations and an outside world; that is a question of belief.

Sokal uses reason as a term that is supposed to define or constitute the right way of thinking. It is constructed in exactly the way that would enable teachers to associate students with temperaments, and tell students that reasonable thinkers should go into particular fields, and artistic thinkers should go into other fields. These clearly have gender components. It cannot be accidental that the vast majority of mathematicians are male.

WEINTRAUB: The belief system of science is devotion to reason and rationality.

SCHOENFIELD: Right. That is a perfect sentence. It has belief and devotion on one side, and reason and rationality on the other side. In order for that sentence to make sense, these terms had to be hooked together.

TUCHMAN: But reason and rationality in opposition to what? Who would stand up and say, "I am devoted to irrationality?"

SCHOENFIELD: I think I would.

WEINTRAUB: Scientists are interested in cause and effect. Did something make something else happen? If you can figure that out, then you can manipulate the system to make it happen again.

TUCHMAN: But you often do a lot of manipulations without really knowing what the ultimate cause is.

WEINTRAUB: We do not know what ultimate causes are. We can only know what the immediate causes and effects are and every cause has more fundamental causes, which have more fundamental causes. You can hope to dig deeper and deeper, but you know you will never get there.

TUCHMAN: But we got away too quickly from the question I posed of who would say that they were devoted to irrationality. What discipline would present itself as being dedicated to irrationality? Almost all contemporary scholarly work is structured around reasoned arguments. There is nothing peculiar about the natural sciences in their desire to understand and come up with reasoned explanations of what they study.

WEINTRAUB: Within the natural sciences, there is more opportunity to provide empirical tests.

TUCHMAN: You can define your system to control what you study.

WEINTRAUB: Whereas, in the sort of work that Mark engages in, there may be lots of people out there who may agree with what he sets forth, and lots of people who disagree, but there probably is not anybody, including Mark, who would agree that there is a right or wrong answer to what he puts forth, and this is quite reasonable.

SCHOENFIELD: Some people would go so far as to say there are right and wrong answers. There are, as it were, devout rationalists about this, and people who would take more relativistic positions. I want to cling to the irrationalists, recognizing that my discipline does not make that claim and dare not make that claim. I do not mean by that that I do not believe reason exists, or that I do not believe it is very powerful, but that what will constitute the reasonable is itself always being negotiated.

Suppose I have a comma in the middle of a line of poetry that causes a certain pause, and I am going to tell you why this is significant. My argument will be reasonable to the extent that you accept it. You may say, "I believe this because it is reasonable," but the reverse is true. It is reasonable because you believe it. That is, it is that belief system that has produced my argument as reasonable. It is not that it is inconceivable to me that there are some areas in which only reason as it is currently defined operates. But what will constitute a reasonable argument is itself always historically shifting.

WEINTRAUB: That is true within certain disciplines, but either the airplane flies or it does not fly.

TUCHMAN: But different explanations for why the airplane flies might be held to be more rational at different times.

WEINTRAUB: But in some sense it does not matter whether we are right about whether the pressure of the air going over and under a wing actually applies to an appropriate landing, or to the lift that makes the plane take off. What matters is that our ability to manipulate the environment has made it happen.

TUCHMAN: That is right. But scientists and people in general often confuse instrumentality with truth. There is no question that our ability to manipulate and control certain systems has increased tremendously through time. This is one of the reasons why science has so much power in our society. But that does not mean that we know or are sometimes even interested in the ultimate cause.

WEINTRAUB: But what we are interested in is getting better at what we do, which is manipulating the environment.

SCHOENFIELD: Instrumentality is clearly not the only standard scientists use.

WEINTRAUB: It is the obvious one that is accessible to everybody.

SCHOENFIELD: Right, and therefore it is the one that has been most often trotted out. Imagine someone like you, David, who works on the origins of planets, and this person comes up with a theory based on various evidence about how planets are formed, which will have no instrumental use, because for the existence of humankind no one will ever be around to have a planet formed. Suppose that someone claims that planets can form after seventeen conditions are met. The standard of measurement for that claim would not be empirical. No one could ride a motorcycle off to a star system and see whether that happens. The claim would be tested according to how persuasively it could be rhetorically put. That could be called a more rational test than the mere empirical test of whether it really happened. "Empirical" and "rational" are not the same thing.

WEINTRAUB: There are certainly areas of science in which empirical tests are hard or impossible to come by. Then the influence of authority is very important. Science is not di-

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vorced from concerns about politics and money. There are human concerns in science that strongly influence what science is done. There are major players in every area of science who control the playing field.

SCHOENFIELD: Sokal's approach plays into another model in which instrumental science, getting the airplane to fly, is the ultimate, purest, most canonical science. That does a disservice to a lot of what strikes me as the most interesting kind of scientific questions.

WEINTRAUB: But the ultimate scientific questions have to be put to the empirical test, which ultimately becomes the instrumental test. For example, string theory in modern physics is wonderful, but if it remains simply intellectual speculation, it really has no value. But when that speculation finally gets to the point at which scientists can make testable predictions, then either string theory will fail or not.

TUCHMAN: But, of course, a lot of the historical sciences such as evolution and geology thrive, and yet they cannot, for the most part, deal with those kinds of empirical tests. At least it is a very different picture of empirical testing.

WEINTRAUB: There are certainly empirical tests involved in geology and anthropology. They may be based on physics, on radioactive dating of the rocks. Either that rock from Mars is 3 1/2 billion years old, or it is not. There are whole geological regions which do not fit geologically into South America. They do fit into North America. We actually think we understand why, and we understand plate tectonics because we can measure the spreading under the ocean ridges, and the uplift and erosion of continents. They are subject to empirical tests.

TUCHMAN: Reasoned argument.

WEINTRAUB: But they still rest on testability.

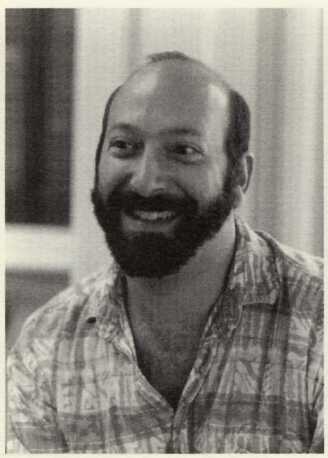
SCHOENFIELD: That particular example does not seem to me to rest on reasoned argument so much as a connection between this empirical evidence and a persuasive narrative, that is, telling a story in a particular kind of way so that it meets our assumptions about coherence and continuity. I do not know why you would want to reserve the word "reason" for describing how that works.

TUCHMAN: Well, what makes a narrative persuasive?

SCHOENFIELD: That is a good question.

WEINTRAUB: It is reason.

TUCHMAN: The way you just described this particular geological example is really no different from what historians do, especially historians who work in archives. They are constantly confronted with documents, and what they do is come up with a persuasive narrative or a reasoned argument as to how we can best make sense of these documents, which to me is very different from a classical empirical test.



WEINTRAUB: Let me give another example. In 1916 Alfred Wegener offered the idea of continental drift. He said, "Look at the shape of the continents—you can fit them together. They must have fit together at some time and have drifted apart." For over fifty years, everyone thought that was the most ridiculous thing, because it was just reasoned argument without any empirical backing, other than the jigsaw-puzzle observation.

But in the 1960s, we were able to begin mapping the bottom of the ocean floor. We now have empirical evidence which really shows that the sea floor spreads out and pushes the continents apart. Suddenly it was called plate tectonics instead of continental drift, because there was a physical mechanism to make it happen. It became believable, because there was a process behind it.

TUCHMAN: Although that paints a picture of how scientific ideas compete with each other and replace each other, that, for my taste, is a little too smooth. Probably Wegener's problem was that all he had was a reasoned argument, but people believed it was an unreasonable argument.

WEINTRAUB: They had no reason to believe it.

TUCHMAN: They had no reason to believe it, and that usually involves more than simply not having empirical facts, but also involves other theories that, having sway at the time, were so convincing that what he said did not seem to make sense.

WEINTRAUB: You have to have a better argument than the old theory.

TUCHMAN: But people also have to be able to hear you. What you say has to make sense within the context of what they believe.

SCHOENFIELD: There must have been some people in addition to Wegener who "knew" (and this word is problematic) that the evidence of the shape of the continents was "good enough." He reasoned from evidence. If the continents had not been together, they would not look as though they did fit together. The shape of the continents is adequate empirical evidence for this conclusion.

WEINTRAUB: But his insight was that there must be a process that makes that happen, even though he had no clue what that process is.

SCHOENFIELD: It is very interesting to pose the question, though, of who was "smarter" at that moment. He deduced properly from evidence that he could see as properly deducible something which fifty years later on the basis of other evidence, now other people agree with. In the world of chess, he was the genius. That is, he was able to go on less evidence and still get to the right conclusion.

WEINTRAUB: But you cannot present it that way, because it is out of historical context. You have to look at the world in 1916, and ask what the weight of evidence was that he would displace. Before there was any evidence supporting his theory, the geophysical community could not say that he had more insight.

TUCHMAN: It made sense to reject him at the time.

WEINTRAUB: Yes.

SCHOENFIELD: Right. It simply shows, in fact, that the former reasoning was not strong. The static continent narrative was based on no evidence. Logically, as a strict rational argument, it is impossible for there to have been any evidence at all for their position, since their position has no empirical existence.

WEINTRAUB: Yes, there can be no evidence for a phenomenon that does not exist.

TUCHMAN: This supports Mark's earlier claim that what is considered reasonable changes in different contexts. In order to understand why the majority of geologists at the time rejected this theory, we need to look at what was necessary at the time to credit it.

SCHOENFIELD: It reminds me of that scientist who cannot understand why people thought the sun went around the earth, and his friend says to him, "Well, they went outside and looked, and it looked like the sun went around the earth." The scientist paused for a minute and said, "How would it look if the earth went around the sun?"

WEINTRAUB: We know the difference because if the earth spins around the sun, a lot more

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Erudition and Specialization

PAUL H. FREEDMAN

Centers such as ours serve to bring together scholars in the humanities and other fields to share knowledge across what are sometimes artificial boundaries of academic departments. As Director of the Warren Center during the last three years, I have been fortunate to be involved in encouraging discussions of problems such as the different approaches (literary, anthropological, historical) to the nature of culture and the interaction of science and society. These are questions that are both historical and contemporary and that have included members of many different disciplines.

One of the most common adverse images of faculty, perhaps especially of those in the humanities, is that of excessive specialization, of concentrating on such narrowly-defined research topics as to ignore or forget the broad-based liberal education that was supposed to be their métier. Edmund Wilson wrote a famous scathing review of a new edition of the works of William Dean Howells, castigating the author for devoting page after page of the introduction to the use of commas. Barbara Tuchman, the best-selling freelance historian, criticized her academic colleagues for their pettifogging concerns that meant nothing to a public eager to learn about great historical issues and enterprises. Recent decades have certainly expanded the horizons of such disciplines as English and history so that the image of overspecialization does not fit the present reality.

No one can accuse humanities faculty of failing to address current political questions—if anything, they are now attacked by such widely-read authorities as *The Wall Street Journal* for excessive (and leftist) attention to social issues. An emphasis on multiculturalism, popular culture, theory, and discourse outside the canonical, high-artistic texts has increased the scope and range of programs in literature and brought them closer to addressing change and dissonance.

History, literature, and philosophy may seem, to those of us in universities, to have taken on new life and multiple new interests, but to the educated public, the humanities disciplines remain suspect for their supposed preference for research over teaching, their devotion to a recondite theoretical jargon, and a reluctance to support a traditional, broad understanding of their subjects. Much is made of the esoteric nature of Ph.D. theses and their distance from what universities and an educated society actually need. Recently Louis Menand in *The New York Times* linked the twin evils of overspecialized dissertations and the terrible job market and proposed a less rigorous set of hurdles for doctorates in the humanities to bring graduate education back in touch with what is really important and in demand. Graduate education, according to this view, might again serve a liberal educational ideal, attracting many whose career plans lie outside university teaching.

Lost sight of in such proposals is that far from a universal overspecialization, there has been a decline in many subfields, especially those that are fundamental underpinnings to humanities disciplines. Subjects that formerly were reasonably well-represented in American universities are now endangered from a mistrust of what seem to be esoteric topics.

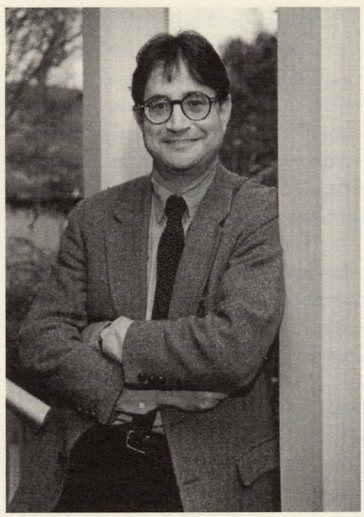
To speak only of the field I know best, medieval studies, there are basic areas for which almost no one is now hired such as paleography (the study of reading manuscripts) or codicology (the study of how manuscript books were put together), subjects of fundamental significance for understanding medieval texts, identifying forgeries (a major medieval pastime), dating records, or determining where they were written and how they circulated. It is virtually impossible for anyone with training in these areas to be hired in departments of English or history.

There are also whole cultures that are now marginalized, so that there are few younger scholars employed to study them. Byzantine history, a subject embracing a thousand years and a society that influenced modern Russia, Eastern Europe, and the Balkans, has a handful of practitioners in this country, and what were formerly active programs in major universities are now closed. Even more surprisingly, there are fewer than five specialists in Anglo-Saxon England employed by history departments in the United States. Again, this is not a tiny field of endeavor but a major culture that lasted seven centuries. The study of canon law, a system important not only in the history of the Catholic Church, but also in the development of modern law, is almost moribund after a promising era in the 1960s and 1970s.

The overall field of medieval studies has done reasonably well. There is a surprising degree of student interest in this distant period and there has been no decline in the number of positions in relevant departments in the last twenty years. On the one hand there has been a commendable orientation towards undergraduate teaching but this has also meant the marginalization of those specializations regarded as incompatible with departments' priorities.

This is not to lament some crucial collapse of Western Civilization. Even someone with my interests would find it difficult to predicate the ruin of American society on the decline of paleography. What this does point to is a series of underlying crises in the humanities disciplines apart from the well-publicized culture wars and canon controversies, or the severely constricted job prospects for recent recipients of doctorates. It is an aspect of the only partially-recognized volatility in humanities disciplines.

Whole subjects in the humanities are in precipitous decline.



Paul H. Freedman

While overall foreign language enrollments have stabilized or increased, most of the growth has been in one language: Spanish. Judged by enrollments and numbers of majors, all other European languages (except Italian) have experienced profound and increasing uninterest. The case of Russian is more recent as the collapse of the Soviet Union, far from encouraging a new interest in a more open Russian culture, has resulted in the halving of enrollments despite a business job market wide open for college graduates with Russian language skills.

With respect to interdisciplinary research, varieties of approaches, and a certain inner vitality, these are good, if not the best of times for the humanities. Joined, however, to the damage done by the culture wars and the disastrous decline of public funding for state universities and the National Endowment for the Humanities is a hidden crisis that will weaken the standards of evidence and expertise on which our fields are based. The commitment of university resources and the generosity of donors has made possible the Warren Center and similar interdisciplinary humanities centers in other universities. Such programs not only

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Tracing "Culture" in Modernist America

SUSAN HEGEMAN

In 1917, Mabel Dodge, the subject of Gertrude Stein's famous prose portrait, received a letter from her husband, painter Maurice Sterne, that would change the course of her interesting life. It began, "Do you want an object in life? Save the Indians, their art-culture—reveal it to the world!" Soon after, Dodge renounced her role as the social center of the New York avant-garde, and made her home in what was then a very remote northern New Mexico. In Taos, Dodge became a central figure in another artists' colony that would eventually include D.H. Lawrence and Georgia O'Keefe, both of whom shared her fascination with Native America.

There are a number of ways to explain this modernist migration. For impoverished artists (though Dodge was hardly among them), Taos was a cheap place to live, and the landscape was undeniably inspiring. Also, as Sterne's letter suggests, the artists were attracted to the Indians—or at least, to their primitivist fantasies of them. Then too, in 1917 it did not seem so unreasonable a thing to turn one's back on a Europe in chaos and to seek out a place still largely untouched by modernity and the horrors that apparently went with it. A few short decades after the end of the Indian wars, New Mexico seemed to offer a new "art-culture" from which to draw inspiration, and thus also an alternative "cultural" homeland to Europe.

Thus, the passion with which Dodge and others took up the cause of the Indians' "art-culture" suggests not only a significant change in perceptions of Native Americans, but a fundamental transformation in how "art" and "culture" were understood as well. In this reconception, Indians were no longer designated the "primitive" antithesis to the "civilized" Europeans. Indeed, romanticized as possessors of an ancestral culture much along the lines of Renaissance Italy or Tudor England, the Indians' cultural accomplishments could be described as comparable to those of Europe. Pueblo pottery and Navajo rugs joined ranks with the products of the great European painters and sculptors, and the recently "discovered" African art traditions.

This is but one example of the general rearticulation of ideas of "culture" that occurred in the early twentieth century in the United States. Later, among less elite groups of Americans, "culture" would come to connote different but equally dramatic changes in how people viewed their, and others', position in the world. Though the term was employed in highly specialized ways among social scientists, it also became an important part of the American vernacular. Indeed, after World War II, "culture" had such widespread usage that in 1950 two of anthropology's more prominent practitioners were led to exclaim, "Why has it rather suddenly become popular in the United States, to the point that such phrases as 'Eskimo culture' appear even in the comic strips?" My answer to the anthropologists would be that in these beginning years of the Cold War, "culture" offered the perfect vehicle for imagining a coherent set of customs and values that could be called "American." Though "Eskimo culture" was in the comic strips, "American culture" was on their minds.

My "book-in-progress," *The Democracy of Cultures*, is an attempt to grasp the significance of "culture" in the context of American modernism. It both charts and complicates many of the assumptions that have been made about that very confusing concept. "Culture" is often defined as two separate ideas. On the one hand, it is a term of value or a realm of human existence associated with refinement or art ("high culture"); on the other, it is a technical, value-neutral term of description, connoting the customs, habits, and assumptions of a group of people ("Pueblo culture"). The first definition is usually associated with aesthetics, hierarchical evaluation, and the work of Matthew Arnold; the second, with cultural relativism, scientific detachment, and the discipline of anthropology. Just as the former definition is firmly associated with the Victorian era, the latter could be said to be quintessentially a product of the modernist moment, coined and popularized as it largely was by the practitioners of the new academic discipline of anthropology.

But as Mabel Dodge's changing involvement with what might be called "culture" should show us, these two usages of the term are far less easily separable than this simple distinction would suggest. While Dodge may not have been able to conceive of Native American life without having something like an anthropological understanding of "culture," she was nevertheless interested in "saving" Indian "art-culture" for reasons that were at base aesthetic.

In fact, similarly aesthetic interests were also prevalent among those who were considered to be coiners of the new, social scientific usage of "culture:" the anthropologists. But this should hardly come as a surprise, considering that the most prominent anthropological theorizers of "culture" were based at Columbia University, a few short subway stops from Dodge's former home in Greenwich Village. Indeed, Columbia anthropologists such as Franz Boas, Robert Lowie, Elsie Clews Parsons, and Ruth Benedict were influential in the same intellectual and artistic circles in which Dodge and her friends traveled, and several of the anthropologists, including Benedict, Margaret Mead, and Edward Sapir, had serious artistic ambitions.

Thus, the "cultural" discourse of the period was one in which artists invoked relativism and other aspects of the anthropological conception of culture, while anthropologists in their turn fretted about questions of individual "genius," aesthetic standards, and morality. Given these complex inter-influences, both "culture" and the modernist moment of which it is a part must be rethought together.

Thus, in my research I address the meaning of "culture" in terms of the contradictions its usages suggested: between the hierarchical and value-neutral conceptions of the term, between the aesthetic and the social-scientific, between the technical-professional and the popular. Usages of the culture concept in this period suggest still other tensions, including anxieties about the relationship between ethnic, racial, and national identities, and the place of the individual within society.

These contradictions can be best illustrated by seeing the anthropologists and other intellectuals and artists of the period as engaged in a similar project of "cultural" definition. There was a close, but often slighted, historical relationship between the founders of American professional anthropology—including Boas, Mead, Benedict, Parsons, and Sapir—and influential literary intellectuals including Randolph Bourne, Constance Rourke, and Van Wyck Brooks. Not only were these figures often in communication with one another, but, as "public intellectuals," they were also engaged in similar political and cultural debates, over such disparate issues as American nationalism; U.S. entry into World War I; racism; birth control, marriage, and women's rights; homosexuality; free verse; and the meaning, content, and extent of American "culture" itself.

Thus, Franz Boas's founding work in the field of anthropology can be discussed fruitfully not only alongside his more public statements against scientific racism and against U.S. participation in World War I, but also together with the work of such thinkers as W.E.B. Du Bois and Randolph Bourne: all offer con-

"Culture" came increasingly to connote a static social entity, often associated with a stereotypical "Middle America."

ceptual alternatives to racist and nationalist discourses of the period, and hence reveal the political dimensions of the creation of relativist conceptions of "culture." Similarly, literary critic Van Wyck Brooks's important statement on "Highbrow" and "Lowbrow" tendencies in American culture can be interestingly compared to anthropologist Edward Sapir's essay "Culture—Genuine and Spurious." Both writers rejected cultural relativism to some degree, to insist on the social and personal necessity of thinking in terms of hierarchies of cultural value. But perhaps even more importantly, both demonstrate how the idea of "culture" presented new confusions about how to understand the individual's place within the social whole: how much of me is "cultural," and how much is unique to me alone? What happens to me as an individual if the "culture" of which I am a part is debased, immoral, or stifling?

The answers to these pressing questions are partially offered in works such as Waldo Frank's book-length essay *Our America* and Ruth Benedict's widely-read *Patterns of Culture*, and in the work of such writers as Sherwood Anderson and Jean Toomer. For them, plural "cultures" were conceived of in spatial terms, as a range of aesthetic and political possibilities open to the cultural traveler disappointed with his or her own milieu. Out there somewhere, in other words, was the "culture" that "fit," one's authentic homeland. This kind of "cultural" imagination can, I think, help us understand the modernist regionalisms of better-known literary figures, including Willa Cather and even William Faulkner. It also goes a long way toward explaining some of the fascinations of Taos for the artists who migrated there.

It is my contention that something interesting happened to "culture" as a result of this regionalist usage. Regions of the United States, notably the South and the Midwest, became the sites from which to articulate tensions within the United States between the cultural and political centers of American life and their peripheries. Through an account of the politics of regionalism in this period, and an examination of Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd's influential community study, *Middletown* (which was taken to offer a kind of baseline "culture" for America), I argue that the term "culture" came increasingly to connote a static social entity, often associated with a stereotypical "Middle America." This idea of "Middle America," convergent with both an increasing vernacular acceptance of the word "culture" and the development of an expanding middle class, came, in turn, to connote a unique stratum of cultural taste: the "middlebrow." Midwestern regionalist artists, notably Thomas Hart Benton, used the emergence of this "culture" of the middle to challenge the power and opinions of the New York-based art establishment, and to consolidate in the minds of many the relationship between "middlebrow" taste and political, aesthetic, and social conservatism.

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Meanwhile, East Coast intellectuals of the political and aesthetic vanguard saw in this development a potential threat not only to established claims to cultural authority, but to a project of social and artistic transformation associated, in part, with the concept of culture itself. The result, as the decade closed, was an emerging "highbrow" anxiety about attempts to represent "culture." Among American anthropologists, "culture" diminished somewhat in importance as a discipline-defining concept, and more popular discussions of "culture" became largely absorbed into debates over class and cultural value. In the work of such writers as Dwight Macdonald, Clement Greenberg, T.S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound, "culture" would be deployed against the tastes of the masses, for whom they developed a new vocabulary of degraded taste: "Masscult," "Midcult," "kulchur," "kitsch."

My research thus treats "culture" as a critical term that was deployed in a specific historical period, with indefinite and unpredictable consequences. Among modernist intellectuals, "culture" promised a conceptual framework for resolving certain tensions of American social life in the period, and for reconceiving society in new and potentially transformative ways. But I would argue that the lasting consequence of the modernist redefinition of "culture" was to allow for the idea that American literary and artistic life existed, developed, and thrived independently of its European models. With wider usage, it also enabled a particular new kind of group identity, in which citizens of the United States imagined that they thought and behaved and lived in a distinctly "American" way.

We can now see with historical perspective that both of these ideas—the uniqueness of "American" artistic traditions, and the distinctness of an "American" people—were useful fictions in their contexts: the isolationism of the interwar moment and the exceptionalism of the Cold War. Much of the interesting scholarly work on American life in recent years has been devoted to showing not only how complexly heterogeneous is the citizenry of the United States, but also how almost any art tradition that we would care to call distinctly "American" is actually the product of centuries of circulations of people, ideas, and materials from all the world's continents.

But even given these dramatic revisions, "culture" seems to have adapted and moved on, transmuted by the needs and issues of our moment—in academic descriptions of these new global identities and processes, and in the various volleys of the more public "culture wars." In the academy, "culture's" remarkable re-emergence as a critical term, especially in the humanities, often seems easily dismissed as resulting from its centrality to the consolidation of new disciplinary formations such as "cultural studies."

However, much of the vehemence, and a surprising amount of the substance, of the current debate over "culture" is a holdover from an earlier moment—as in, for example, the passion with which many invoke the idea of an "American culture." It is my hope that, as we engage in these new sites of "cultural" struggle, we remember the complexity, seriousness, real interdisciplinarity, and public-spiritedness of a previous generation's "cultural" negotiations.

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Experimenting,

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things have to happen, like the earth spinning to make it day and night.

SCHOENFIELD: Right.

WEINTRAUB: Then you can say, "Well if the earth spins, then I am moving a thousand miles an hour, simply because the earth is spinning." You have to have a whole day of physics to understand how I can move a thousand miles an hour and not fly off the earth.

TUCHMAN: But I do not have any problem imagining that it was possible to interpret the evidence at the time to support the theory that the sun revolved around the earth.

SCHOENFIELD: Oh, I do not either. But none of the evidence that could have been found for the sun going around the earth could exclude the possibility of the earth going around the sun. So between those two models, there was no evidence one way or the other.

WEINTRAUB: That is correct.

TUCHMAN: Right, there were long periods of time in which communities debated over the two models.

WEINTRAUB: There were tests that go back as far as Aristotle, who said if the earth goes around the sun, we should be able to measure what is called the parallax, the apparent change in the position of stars. The great astronomers in antiquity tried to measure it and got zero. Therefore, that apparently provided a test that said the earth stands still, and the sun goes around the earth.

SCHOENFIELD: But it is still the case that they could have obtained those results even if the earth went around the sun because, in fact, they did get those results with the earth going around the sun. So even there, it was a matter of their rhetorical argument.

TUCHMAN: No, it was the empirical evidence.

SCHOENFIELD: No, it was the rhetorical argument, because the empirical evidence was. . .

WEINTRAUB: . . . prefaced on an assumption.

SCHOENFIELD: Exactly.

TUCHMAN: Assumptions are always embedded in our hypotheses.

WEINTRAUB: You just have to know what the assumptions are.

TUCHMAN: The facts supported a stationary earth.

WEINTRAUB: Aristotle understood that the test failed if the stars were extremely far away. But the scientists felt that they had other measurements that showed what the scale of the universe was, and that the stars were not that far away.

SCHOENFIELD: The way you put it is really helpful, because it points out that facts themselves are embedded in theories and produced by theories.

WEINTRAUB: They are embedded in assumptions and actions.

SCHOENFIELD: Can we push that into the hardest of the hard sciences?

WEINTRAUB: Absolutely.

SCHOENFIELD: What I find troubling is the moment when people who work within sets of assumptions encounter someone who does not work within those sets of assumptions and call him or her "irrational," using "rational" as the good term.

LETTERS: How do you see science and the humanities as working together?

TUCHMAN: I was just thinking about how wonderful a conversation this has been, and how much more sophisticated this discussion has been than anything you would get from the Sokal affair. This is the kind of discussion we need to have across the disciplines. What Sokal represents to me is everything I want to make sure that we do not do. David mentioned earlier that discussions about where we want to go with science and technology need to be carried on by all educated people. Clearly what we are trying to do in the College Program on Science, Technology, and Humanities is provide the scientific and humanistic literacy that will allow people to engage in these discussions, understand each other, and make decisions together.

WEINTRAUB: It is more than literacy. There is an interconnectedness between fields; developments in science inform other areas. They help shape the ideas that develop in philosophy and religion, and our views in religion shape how we do our science, how we may view assumptions we will make in our science, and therefore how we will interpret our facts. One of the things that we can do is help people see how connected these fields are.

SCHOENFIELD: This discussion has been tremendously helpful in making me see the way in which it is possible to propose a whole bunch of different articulations for the way in which assumptions get made. This discussion makes me feel much better about the universe, frankly, than Sokal. With Sokal it just seems that what he is all about is shutting down the kind of conversation that we have just had.

TUCHMAN: I do not think that was his goal. But unfortunately, he has drawn attention away from these discussions.

Erudition,

cont. from p. 5

overcome the compartmentalization of disciplines to encourage exploration of new topics, but also serve to preserve in what is sometimes a discouraging climate, a sense of the past, of culture, and of the tradition of human thought.

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Statement of Purpose

Established under the sponsorship of the College of Arts and Science in 1988 and renamed the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities in 1989, the Warren Center promotes interdisciplinary research and study in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. Members of the Vanderbilt community representing a wide variety of specializations take part in the Warren Center's programs, which are designed to intensify and increase interdisciplinary discussion of academic, social, and cultural issues.

Letters is the semiannual newsletter of the Warren Center at Vanderbilt University, Box 1534 Station B, Nashville, Tennessee 37235, (615) 343-6060/FAX (615) 343-2248. For more information concerning the Warren Center or any of its programs, please contact the above address.

Published by University Publications & Design 1997. Photographs by David Crenshaw and Gerald Holly.