A More Conservative Place

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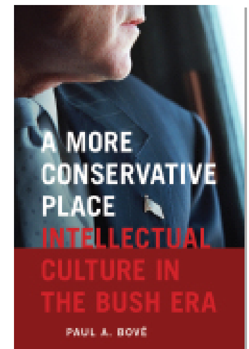

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CAN WE JUDGE THE HUMANITIES BY THEIR FUTURE AS A COURSE OF STUDY?

If we were moving in the right direction, where reality might fulfill our hopes, we shouldn't need any visionary ideals to beckon us. Events would open out before us congenially, and would call forth our innocent interest and delight, gradually, concretely, in ways odder and more numerous than we expected. Why, then, is this not so? Why does experience leave us so desolate, so puzzled, so tired, that like Plato and Plotinus and the Christian saints we must look to some imaginary heaven or some impossible utopia for encouragement and for peace?
— Mr. Darnley, in George Santayana, *The Last Puritan*

» U.S. readers have made Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire* a widely noticed academic bestseller. The book came into the market at a time when globalization was still a term on almost everyone's lips; it afforded a way for a subset of academic humanists to link their work to what they took to be an issue of deep sociopolitical, cultural, and economic consequence. *Empire* built itself from a great many terms and ways of talking already circulating in the university and media. Its familiarity made it easy for academic cultural studies scholars to engage with it. Its bold and universal account of what was going on in a long secular period of neoliberal economics and state policy excited readers eager for some sort of radical explanation that could contest with official Hayekian accounts of post–Cold War change. It afforded many chances to do more work, ways to tie the terms of especially U.S.-based cultural studies to the world of (post)state politics and economy — all in a way that showed how culturalist work mattered. Addressing the largest questions of the age, as this book and its adopters

claimed to do, in itself legitimized work that followed from or indeed had made it possible by emphasizing the role of cultural politics and suprastate institutions. As part of a paradigm's normal academic development, the book and its adherents faced opposition, sometimes from a statist political Right that despises Negri for his past politics just as it despises cultural criticism,[1] sometimes from competitive ('left') academics who prefer other models or categories for humanistic and cultural work. In other words, the book fell into a normal pattern of market behavior.[2]

The events of September 11, 2001, have given us a new commonplace. September 11 changed everything, we almost all say. Those former "masters of the universe" who attend the World Economic Forum tell us that terrorism, war, and the United States have moved globalization out of sight; everything that seemed real in the long 1990s almost matters no more.[3] Globalization goes on, as it did during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries before the Cold War changed the relations of capital to space. But globalization as the phenomenon of the Clinton years has disappeared in the dust of collapsing towers, smart bombs, and dead bodies. As a result, as a topic for academic preoccupation, globalization has lost some of its charm to legitimate humanists' work and self-opinion.

All my debatable assertions matter less, however, than two other things: first, we now know that the Bush regime's strategic intellectuals planned something like a global war of preemption long before the murders of the workers in the World Trade Towers;[4] second, we now know that the United States has an appetite for unilateral, preemptive, imperial,[5] and military adventures. Indeed, the war in Yugoslavia, with the bombing of Belgrade, taught that lesson during the long 1990s.[6] Discussions of globalization assert the nation-state's decline, even when they acknowledge the particular role played by the U.S. state apparatus in nurturing the neoliberal order of North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the World Trade Organization (WTO), and China's liberalization. These discussions valuably moved humanistic work out of the grasp of nation-state concepts and made possible new alignments, canon formations, and research projects — what we now call interdisciplinary hybridity.[7]

If 9/11 changed everything, then it has changed the relations between the humanities and globalization. How fundamental are these changes? Do they include a reconsideration of the figure of the "weakened nation-state" troping upon the nation-state concepts of older cultural work? Do we wonder if

"the politics of representation" belongs to the historical past? Do we accept any intellectual who asserts that the United States has abandoned military adventurism?[8]

The humanities have no future unless they set out an ongoing process to describe and analyze the present time's main forces. Without this *Ansatzpunkt,* events whipsaw the humanities from place to place, topic to topic, and vision to vision. Meanwhile, the humanistic professional establishment shrinks; and, although many defend its virtue, its social legitimacy is at least as bad as it has been in quite some time. Our ability to find virtue should not mislead us; we are dogged defenders of our basic ideals and expert interpreters in an age obsessed with subjectivity. A stronger profession would not need so many arguments to relegitimate itself — even in opposition — nor would it invoke for so long so many objections to its own value. We must think what it means that ours is a historical situation in which one story and practice of legitimation seems to follow another — or, all seem to coexist at once on a spectrum of legitimated positions. We have reached a place that professionals can only delusively justify, as the liveliness of civil society, the conflict of interpretations and the healthy vitality of cultural and political difference. One way to see this is to recognize some of the reasons why we might not. For example, the long history of American intellectual antiprofessionalism, rooted in various class elements that abhorred compromises and advances, can draw our attention away from the historical specificity of a profession weakened to the point that its very best members need to ward off its own critics as they ward off right-wing opportunists.[9] Most important, the humanities cannot answer the question cui bono but finds their own future solely within the reiterative value of keeping themselves alive, convinced of its inherent moral and political value.[10]

After 9/11, we can easily consider *Empire*'s wide circulation, treat it as the profession's symptom, and ask how else to explain the celebrity of a book that makes these claims:

> As a kind of historical shorthand, we could locate the end of the third and the beginning of the fourth regime of the U.S. Constitution in 1968. The Tet offensive [in the Vietnam War] in January marked the *irreversible* [my emphasis] military defeat of the U.S. imperialist adventures. More important, however, as is the case before each shift of constitutional regimes, the pressure for a return to republican principles and the original

> constitutional spirit was already prepared by the powerful internal social movements. Just when the United States was most deeply embroiled in an imperialist adventure abroad, when it had strayed farthest from its original constitutional project, that constituent spirit bloomed most strongly at home — not only in the antiwar movements themselves, but also in the civil rights movements, and eventually the second-wave feminist movements. The emergence of the various components of the New Left was an enormous and powerful affirmation of the principle of constituent power and declaration of the reopening of social spaces.[11]

While the Bush regime's commitments to unilateralism, preemptive war, and extralegal action undermined a considerable part of *Empire*'s facade, what matters most is the rushed judgment with which academic humanists accepted such foundationally erroneous remarks.[12] Admirers predictably would defend these statements by contextualizing them as part of a larger argument about the cycles of U.S. constitutionalism and society. None of this matters since the text unambiguously announces that the Tet offensive "marked the *irreversible* [my emphasis] military defeat of the U.S. imperialist adventures."[13] The emphasis on irreversible and declarative nature of the sentences pluralized object, "adventures," leaves no room for qualification. American cultural humanists, in particular, have a historically self-interested desire and predisposition to assent to these sentences' real symbolic and professional content. Extraordinary social and cultural advances in democracy, in civil and women's rights, took place during the long Vietnamese war to defeat American imperialism. As Hardt and Negri recall all this in conjunction with the Tet offensive, what appeals to the U.S. cultural studies scholars is the authors' general praise for new social movements. Especially posttheoretical, cultural studies humanists have aligned their work with representational politics, which they often link to new social movements. Facing defeat in the extra-academic national political arena, cultural studies achieves persistent (moral) legitimacy in its closed professional circles by asserting its alignment (real or imaginary) with these often-distant local and subaltern groups.

The U.S. right wing's "Southern strategy," based on Christian fundamentalism, Straussian antidemocratic elitism, and a pseudo-Gramscian march through the institutions, has ripped away so many of the victories of 1968[14] and the years after, that we can understand how so many American "tenured radicals"[15] and their students have embraced *Empire*. Nevertheless, this

embrace is a sign of weakness in the intellectual community precisely because *Empire* disguises historical error and categorical ignorance in a cloak of seemingly transformative and irreversible political victory. In an age of imperial defeat for most of those forces, it passes off an incredible utopia as a basis for current action, hope, and belief — in short, a utopia arising when no one, except the desperate, should give it any assent.[16] Following all of Ronald Reagan's "incursions," the first Gulf war, and the U.S.-led bombing of Belgrade (which proceeded without United Nations authorization), Hardt and Negri incredibly write that the Tet offensive "marked the irreversible military defeat of the U.S. imperialist adventures." They ignore forms of especially state power not amenable to "representational politics" or the "critique of representation." More important, they are assured that normal scholarly concerns with representation can continue, even if or because these rest on a supposed U.S. constitutional transformation that, resulting from new social movements, both opened social spaces and seemingly made such events as (imperial) war and state politics of so little concern. Academic interest in this book can only come from an embrace of the utopian, vague vision of a future, of a way ahead, but no serious reader worried by the absurd claims that bring the Tet offensive and antiracism and feminism together to end U.S. imperial adventures, irreversibly, could trust these authors or their intentions. Some find these authors' rhetoric "useful" because the internal desire of humanists to keep their work going, with some sense of "world-historical" legitimacy, ironically rests upon careless reading.[17] It embraces, depends upon, and reproduces a machinic model of intellectual work as repetition, a flight from the task of describing and analyzing the present, and the consequent requirement to produce new knowledges, new figures, and new theories that give the humanities a future from outside their academic and professionalized forms of practice.

Gopal Balakrishnan has done enough to discredit *Empire* in his article in *New Left Review*.[18] He makes two essential points: *Empire* is as neoliberal a text as Thomas Friedman's *Lexus and the Olive Tree*;[19] and, in effect, *Empire* absolves America from any strenuous critique in the post–Cold War arrangements of capital. Indeed, in a manner strangely reminiscent of Chinese liberals,[20] Hardt and Negri cast accolades on the founding documents of the American republic. They proceed abstractly, as if long-standing American violations of human and civil rights did not steady the United States in its rise to power. How can scholars abstractly hail the balance of powers not

long after the Supreme Court's decision on the 2000 presidential election in the United States and in the USA Patriot Act drafted by John Ashcroft and passed by the U.S. Congress? Balakrishnan pointed out how *Empire,* calling Europe "old" in comparison with the United States, praises the innovative United States for its supersession of the past.

Welcoming *Empire* symbolically and typically denies the importance of intellectual, factual, and judgmental error among those cultural academics committed to the representational cultural politics that seemingly mark the victory the Tet offensive embodies over U.S. and state adventures; as a result, despite their intentions, cultural academics find themselves on the side of those they oppose. This point, made brilliantly and dramatically by Masao Miyoshi in *Globalization and the Humanities,* has profound repercussions.[21] Unlike Hardt and Negri, Miyoshi draws readers into an intellectual regime defined as historical-temporal. His chapter structures historical loss — of passion, meaning, and purpose — in a contrast between two moments, separated by the effects of professionalization upon academic work. His style — lucid, dispassionate, and unadorned — straightforwardly pictures our political intellectual situation as what it is, a fact of history with the status of a fact of nature. This is how it is; we need to note it; we need to measure it; and we should remove ourselves from worry over it. The facts are clear; the case is closed; and the profession is of no interest. For many, this is a moment of political defeat.

Miyoshi's severe historical and intellectual judgments rest on an analysis of the current political, cultural climate and the inadequacy of academic cultural practice to new historical circumstances. Hardt and Negri's intellectual errors exemplify not only the carelessness Miyoshi finds everywhere but also the professional utopianism that concerns me. Cultural studies' absorption of the academic humanities plays havoc with the value and importance of historical evidence. This leads many to harsh judgments. Not only right-wing ideological antagonists but also "left" social scientists often bemoan the lack of empirical information and precision in cultural studies work. Of course, there are familiar and powerful arguments available to defend against such charges. Nonetheless, even among intellectual allies, there must be honesty about imprecision. For example, Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan asks, "When was the last time that an American president showed concern or altered foreign trade policy in response to dire job losses in Mexico or in the Philippines?"[22] The presumptive answer is, never. Yet even a close reader of newspapers knows this is not true. When the Bush regime came to power, one of its first acts was

to end the Clinton-established policy that gave favored import treatment to Caribbean textiles. Radhakrishnan needs to correct his thinking because, as it were, "the facts" do not bear out his case. Of course, Clinton was a capitalist modernizer interested in expanding markets and modernity through targeted means. So, his action was not "state disinterested." Nonetheless, an accurate presentation of the current situation would lead to theoretical modification but, more important, to an entirely different intellectual political stance than that offered by cultural studies — with its emotional attachment to resistance, new social movements, and a private language. Moreover, such assertions embody poor judgment; it is repetitive: we "know" that capitalist states do nothing like self-sacrifice. That cliché, however, obstructs the opportunity afforded by the lowering of trade barriers and then their raising. For example, in this one instance stands all the difference between hegemony and violence; between modernity and extraction; between knowledge and arrogance; and between slavery and liberal democracy. To occlude these demanding opportunities for analysis, argument, and persuasion establishes the solely internal legitimacy of cultural studies.

Balakrishnan describes *Empire* as "theoretical ecstasy," which as such substitutes for engagement with the "remorseless realities" of the present time. Ecstasy normally stands out, is out of place and remarkable, but theoretical ecstasy has nowadays become habitual and commonplace. We experience the rapid and involuted expression of difficult language as jargon. Ecstatics could be spiritual isolatoes, like John of the Cross or Teresa of Avila, but Balakrishnan uses the term insultingly, to refer to a morbid state, a sort of stupor or unconsciousness in which the mind is literally beside itself rather than adjacent to the relentless reality that presses upon us. Theoretical ecstasy has become habitual stupor, and whenever it appears rapture rather than thinking takes place. Of course, rapture can be banal as critics speak in tongues, envisioning a utopian fantasy. So, theoretical rapture is belated or, to use a more colloquial term, boring. Criticism should recover boredom as a judgmental category and apply it to those books and essays that add nothing to knowledge, even to well-intentioned essays that support repressed or resisting groups. Not everyone needs to say the same things about similar topics — no matter how legitimate they might seem. Boredom can be the category that allows criticism to advance against normal cultural work without giving comfort to the reactionaries whose ideological hatred for serious thinking and scholarship is deeper than their hatred for those tenured radicals whose work, I submit, indirectly supports their own.

This remarkable anthology gives us the strengths and weaknesses of cultural studies as a U.S.-based export for the study of Asia-Pacific. There is some repetition; this is unavoidable in any disciplinary practice. But it matters in an imperial economy how something old in the U.S. market remains old even if its new market is Asia-Pacific.

Rob Wilson exposes conventional treatment of the recurrent problem, the relation between culture and economy, but far exceeds the limits of repetition.[23] Dissatisfied with the politics of representation, he adds the dimension of state and international state politics to the mix of powers and realities critical imagination must confront in battling for the shape of Asia-Pacific. Wilson makes clear that the declared analytic liberatory goals of cultural studies cannot succeed without giving the imagination pride of place against the dead hand of boredom. He writes that his research "tracks the dynamics of globalization and movements towards localization under which 'Asia-Pacific' is being constructed into a postcolonial, if not postnational, identity as a coherent region of teleological belonging" (119). Wilson wants to suggest imagined alternatives to this process, to find the potentialities for life and agency implicit in the cultural workings of the forced emergent, Asia-Pacific: "The chapter invokes literary and cultural producers in order to force upon 'Asia/Pacific' a critical awareness of its own regional unevenness, alternative possibility, spatial contestation, and desublimated otherness. 'Asia/Pacific' can thus become a critical signifier for a cultural and literary studies (inside APEC, as it were) in which opposition, location, indigeneity, and an alternative discursive framing of the region can be articulated" (119). Unlike normative cultural studies' hostility to literature — a hostility that results in such markers as the listing of cultural studies books in social sciences' indices — Wilson's writing depends upon remembering both the long twentieth century's preoccupation with language and the fundamental Vichian fact that institutions come from historical poesis. So, for Wilson, Asia-Pacific is a literary figure: "This trope of Asia yoked to Pacific is used to mobilize the cash-driven transfusion and to drive the megatrends of transnationalizing economies in the region, which, without such a user-friendly geopolitical signifier, does not yet exist in anything like a coherent geopolitical or cultural framework" (120).

Wilson's chapter has an implied power of critique, not only of the capital constructors of Asia-Pacific but also of those disciplinary rhetorics that reify the movement of troping in the repetition of the self-legitimating academic same. Within a chapter itself powerfully driven by anthropological interest in the unequal relation of power and freedom among genders, Alison M. Jaggar,

by contrast, nonetheless represents the intellectual legitimacy of professional closet talk. We must ask ourselves if we need to hear again that "the present organization of the global economy undermines democracy by rendering the sovereignty of poor nations increasingly meaningless and further excluding the poorest and most vulnerable people across the world. Many women, who are disproportionately represented among the poorest and most vulnerable of all, are effectively disenfranchised. The virtual absence even of privileged women from the decision-making processes of such bodies as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization reflects the minimal influence exercised by women at the highest levels of global politics."[24] This is an example of what post-Foucauldians should call "normal knowledge."[25]

Recovering boredom as a critical value allows friendly readers to say that normal discourse about horrifying abuse is more rather than less culpable. Setting aside sympathy for the oppressed as the obvious justification for critics' writing requires an intellectual's attention to matters of critical thinking. Even oppositional left-wing writing can become self-sanctifying, resting not upon the intellectual or imaginative struggles of the scholar-writer but precisely upon the ease with which we add our voices to condemn (reveal? resist? subvert?) the repression of "subaltern" groups. Wilson, the poet-critic, urges the critical mind not to be ecstatic, not to be beside himself or herself, not to repeat, and to avoid imitating the mind killing and maiming processes of the "oppressors." Wilson places the critic next to the world, ironically to some, by being firm about the importance of language. He calls for a poetics: "One of my contentions is that if there is to be an Asia-Pacific Cultural Studies worthy of its peoples, symbolic heritages, and cultures, then one of the tasks for such a poetics is to challenge and critique these economistic master formations and discourses of the Pacific region" (124).

Among critics who easily adopted talk of the state's "death," the actions of the Bush regime and the writings of its state intellectuals should have and indeed did, in some part, end the easy repetition of certain cultural studies mantras. Nevertheless, it should have resulted in a temporary pullback into modest silence, a practice that can do much to alleviate repetition and enhance poetic invention — and, indeed, even aid people in the formation of their own worlds.[26] Balakrishnan writes that such claims, while implying the power of especially financial markets neoliberally to destroy national sovereignty of a traditional European type (as in the Thai currency crisis),

implicitly grant the United States and other attached states (Japan, U.K., and Germany) imperial power to arrange markets and services in their own interests. The Reagan era's destruction of social services in the United States, ending the resource shifting made available by the progressive income tax and revenue sharing with the U.S. states, is an example of state action. Setting aside the entire historical and theoretical record of U.S. ambitions to globalize neoliberalism, from the famous Open Door policy in China to the antiunion accomplishments of NAFTA, the ability of Malaysia (to some extent) and China (powerfully) to protect their domestic markets from neoliberal predatory practices casts the Friedman/Hardt-Negri consensus on weakening state power into question.

U.S. cultural studies has always had the potential, no matter the politics of its avowed critiques, to maintain the status quo. We see this in two ways. As Balakrishnan makes clear, *Empire* is an Americanism. Paul Jay, writing in a long-historical manner, makes the Bush neoliberalizing regime nothing more than the nature of history, an inelegant justification of the status quo. He says, "It seems to me that transnational literary studies, whether it presents itself as postcolonial or global, has to begin with a recognition that cultures have always traveled and changed, that the effects of globalization, dramatic as they are, only represent in an accelerated form something that has always taken place: the inexorable change that occurs through intercultural contact, as uneven as the forms it takes may be" (88). This remark lacks what Radhakrishnan calls the "precision" needed for cultural studies critics to matter. Why does he not cast the time frame back to the migrations from Africa? In that time, U.S. state practice seems insignificant indeed.

Of course, U.S. cultural studies critics have not only an aversion to the literary but also a defensive insistence on killing the fathers. Bruce Robbins's powerful reading of Kazuo Ishiguro, for example, exemplifies an opportunity and a trouble for such cultural studies ambitions. Robbins is not afraid to adapt sometimes-unfashionable terms and traditions for critical purposes. Rather than join in the antiprofessionalism that was itself a near commodity in recent years, he modulates the category to open an entire line of thought. For Robbins, the reality has not closed into an inevitable way of being or being thought: "Professionalism would seem well suited to new trans-national demands for loyalty and solidarity at a distance, whether corporate or quasi-governmental. The question is whether this is any cause for celebration."[27] Rather than dismiss vast oeuvres as passé, Robbins gives us critical history.

He takes it seriously as left open to the processes of human will and imagination. His history affords space for complex judgments demanding imaginative presentations such as those found in literature. Allen Chun and Jia-lu Cheng's chapter, in an entirely different mode, attempts to hold open the historical social spaces Internet modernization represents:

> The kind of globalization taking place here is perhaps consistent with what Lash and Urry calls "disorganized capitalism," following Claus Offe, in the sense of being decentered. Lacking a regulative core, the kind of network space so engendered does not appear to be culturally hegemonic, thus does not seem prone to the homogenizing tendencies of an earlier modern world system. Discursive communities emerging in such a space would also appear to be spontaneous in a way that maximizes local autonomy. . . . Such disorganized flows of people, images, technology, capital and ideologies inevitably bring about incipient crises of identity. But in what sense do these crises directly engender changing public spaces, if at all?[28]

The killing of the fathers (and mothers, let it be added), repetitive boredom, and claims that appear in simple declarative sentences — mere assertions, justified by theoretical reference or context — belong to an old pattern of intellectual life that, once upon a time, was called the treason of the clerks. Once Antonio Gramsci's influence on the question of intellectuals penetrated U.S.-based academic life, it joined forces with the populist posttheory need for Reagan-era legitimacy to develop various arguments against the so-called elite functions of the intellectual. This sociohistorical fact, marked by a turning away from the near idolatry of individual figures such as Paul de Man, Michel Foucault, and Edward W. Said among advanced critics toward more socially conscious new-historicist-based criticism legitimated by alignment with new social movements (especially on rights), itself demands greater reflection. Briefly, one noticeable side effect, in addition to those symptoms already touched upon here, is impatience with the skills of the traditional intellectual. It is as if the post-Gramscians have forgotten Gramsci's own formation as a traditional intellectual, as what Joseph Buttigieg authoritatively refers to as a "philologist." Ironically, Gramsci's great attachments to erudition, truth, and rigor have given way to a sort of ideological spontaneism of the sort he would have not recognized as intellectual at all. If each of us is an intellectual in our work wherever we are, it is because of the developed use of

thinking in relation to circumstance — history, force, tradition, knowledge, and innovation. Ironically, especially U.S.-based cultural studies generally prefers to reduce the specific abilities of the intellectual to the merely repetitive norms of an ordinary critical practice and discourse that, in a time of crisis, survives on its own echoes within the ever-narrowing and ineffectual chambers of ecstatic survival.

David Li's own interpretive and editorial purpose in *Globalization and the Humanities* has been to overturn the problems I have tried to discuss. We can learn from his dramatic statement of how such efforts can transform the normal into the creatively persuasive. His own writing about Edward Yang embodies the theoretical, critical, and imaginative powers needed to fulfill Wilson's poetic ambition and to meet Robbins's sense of the demands an open-ended, undecided history makes upon intellectual life and society. Li persuades us that a proper utopianism sees and acts in the name of an inviting future — even in the most severely tried examples of critical dissatisfaction. He would have critics see that history is redeemable without merely relying on faith. His gracious conclusion is a strong warning, for the dangers he mentions can and do appear in criticism. They need to be cut out and thrown away in the name of that future Li finds history holding for us. The issue we engage is how we do more to enable that future we embrace, sure it is no fantasy of our present dire needs.

Li ends his introduction with a vision that is best fit to close the volume as a whole. It bears repetition:

> Yang's privileging of an ethic of relationality is resonant of Jaggar's conception of the "good," Miyoshi's "ideal of planetarianism," Robbins's notion of "inclusive civility," and Radhakrishnan's model of "reciprocal transcendence," just to name a few voices in this critical chorus on globalization and the humanities. Against the tyranny of the market and the violence of unilateral militarism, ours are among the voices of resistance that endeavor to open up dialogues on how we want to live together as a global community. It is my hope that this anthology will help us puzzle out, however minutely, the predicament of our interdependent planetary culture. It shall help us garner the imaginative energy of writers, critics, artists and scholars to engender ways of thinking and means of creating conditions that will warrant the equal, just, and environmentally sound flourishing of our humanity.[29]