Employment of English

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My first attempt to write this essay dates from the spring of 1995, and one of the more curious features of its original composition was that it turned out to be anything but the essay I had intended to write. When, in the summer of 1994, I was asked by the English Department at Kansas State University to address the subject of cultural studies and the public sphere, I assumed that I was being asked to do so partly because my work has addressed the relations between academic and popular knowledges: the university in the public sphere, the university as a public sphere. I haven’t forged any bold, fresh models of cultural studies, I haven’t proposed brand new roles for Western intellectuals, and I honestly couldn’t come up with a supple new theoretical account
of subjectivity if I tried. But I have written a few essays for nonacademic publications, and these have tried to address some conception of “the public” both thematically and materially. So at first, I thought I might discuss what kind of “selling out” such writing entails, partly because it involves a great deal of negotiating with editors about almost every aspect of an essay, multiple rewrites, and hour-long conversations about individual sentences and paragraphs. The extent (and length) of these negotiations is quite considerable, and I am somewhat surprised that so few people have remarked on the difference between academic and freelance writing in this regard. And in the course of discussing “selling out” in this sense, I thought I would try to put some necessary distance between myself and the new discourse of the so-called public intellectual, by explaining that I do not share that discourse’s assumptions about critical language, professionalism, or the history of the American intelligentsia in the twentieth century, or, for that matter, its assumptions about the constitution of “the public.”

In other words, I had intended to play on the ambivalence of the phrase “selling out,” which could mean either abandoning one’s principles and caving in to the demands of the market, or, more happily, creating the conditions under which academic cultural criticism could reach so wide an audience as to create what the sports and entertainment industries call a capacity crowd. In that sense, I live to see the day when mass-market bookstores find it impossible to keep adequate supplies of the latest book from Stuart Hall or Michael Denning: just as *The Bell Curve* or *See, I Told You So* has sold out in many stores, so too should intellectuals in cultural studies hope to sell out. Or so I was going to say. My essay, then, as I first envisioned it, would have emphasized the differences between the New Right and the academic Left with regard to the dissemination and distribution of cultural criticism: no sooner does Simon and Schuster publish Christina Hoff Sommers’s *Who Stole Feminism*? than right-wing flacks like Mona Charen and Harry Stein are singing its praises in syndicated newspaper columns and the “On Values” page of *TV Guide* (a publication whose circulation exceeds even that of *Critical Inquiry*, so I’m told). Of course, I know that the Right has better distribution networks than we do for many reasons, partly because they
have all the money and almost full control of the liberal media. Nonethe-
less, I wanted to say, the academic Left is producing a great deal of
quite valuable and searching cultural criticism, but, as Edward Said
(“Opponents, Audiences”) famously remarked, it doesn’t tend to circu-
late to more than three thousand people, most of whom don’t need to
be convinced of the merits of the cultural work of the cultural Left.

Now, I will argue something like this in the course of this essay, but
over the past few years my relation to the discourse of the public
intellectual has changed enough to make it difficult for me simply to
propose that cultural studies intellectuals do more “public” writing. As
of the fall of 1994 I had published a handful of essays in the still-
somewhat-alternative Village Voice, where I could assume a readership
with political sensibilities at least broadly similar to mine. Then in the
last months of that year I had essays accepted by more “mainstream”
publications like Harper’s and the New Yorker—magazines that, unlike
the Voice, are printed on glossy paper and are indexed in the Reader’s
Guide to Periodical Literature. In each case, I wondered whether, in order
to appear in such venues, I would have to do some measure of selling
out—as an academic, as a fire-breathing progressive, whatever. And this
was a weird feeling for someone who’s argued, like Gerald Graff, in favor
of our co-optation by the “mainstream.”

So I think it would be fatuous of me to stress the necessity of doing
“public intellectual” writing, as if this were a matter of simple volition.
More important, I want to say that my experience of writing for those
magazines, limited as it is, did indeed involve some kind of selling out—
a kind of selling out that has impelled me to think anew about the
potential and actual relations between cultural studies intellectuals in the
academy and the discourses of cultural politics and social policy currently
popular in the United States. What is of greatest moment to me in this
regard, what seems to me the signal crisis in these actual and potential
relations, concerns the idea of the national “public” itself, and the status
of this idea in an era when public housing, public education, public
health, public ownership, public welfare, and public funding for televi-
sion, the arts, and the humanities have all come under savage attack from
our so-called national leaders.
In this climate it is deeply disturbing to me how successfully both wings of the New Right, the economic-libertarian and the cultural-fascist wings, have been able to attack “the public” in the name of the people; this seems to me a new and virulent strain of authoritarian populism the antidote to which we have not yet been able to imagine. But it is also deeply disturbing to me that there is so much skepticism and outright disdain, among the academic Left, directed at the proposal that intellectual work in cultural studies should seek to have an impact on the mundane and quotidian world of public policy. When American cultural studies theorizes “the everyday,” it appears, “the everyday” does not always involve school breakfast programs, disability law, or the minimum wage. I’ll get back to this line of argument in a moment; first, I want to explain how I have had to sell out, and then I want to say a few words about the avant-garde tradition that still influences many American left intellectuals, a tradition in which negotiating with the state, with Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), or with mainstream print media in civil society is considered not one of the obligations of citizenship but a form of capitulation to capitalism.

My encounter with Harper’s is not especially germane to this chapter, except that insofar as it broached the subject of human disabilities and the discourse of genetic foundationalism (it’s about my son James, and eventually formed the basis of my first “crossover” book, Life As We Know It), it did attempt to intervene in the neo-eugenicist debates surrounding The Bell Curve; I felt as if I were aiming a peashooter at the Charles Murray think tank. But it’s worth noting that when I sent the essay to Harper’s at the suggestion of a friend, the first thing I was told was that it would have to be cut in half, and most of the citations would have to go. My editor, a smart and judicious young woman, informed me that she had an extremely stringent criterion for magazine essays: ideally, she said, you should be done reading them before you realize you’ve begun. She is not averse, she explained, to sinuous narratives, patient excursuses, or carefully modulated philosophical deliberations—except in magazine essays, which should seem so effortlessly written as to betoken an equally effortless task of reading. I had some reason to worry whether my essay would pass that kind of muster, and whether I should
ask it to; the article was originally written for an academic collection of essays, and was full of excursuses and deliberations on evolution, meliorism, and the survival value of intelligence. My opening sentence was "Down syndrome does not exist; what exists are the practices by which we know and produce Down syndrome"—a sentence I thought anyone familiar with American cultural studies would recognize as an allusion to Douglas Crimp's citation of François Delaporte at the opening of *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*. Needless to say, that sentence had no allusive force whatsoever for the hypothetical or actual readers of *Harper's*, and I was advised to cut the opening few pages on social constructionism and replace them with the story of my son's birth.

I agreed to almost all of the most severe editorial suggestions, and the result was actually a much tighter, much less self-indulgent essay, one whose most important theoretical points about genetics and language I was forced to embed in my narrative rather than appending to the narrative. But oddly enough, I found myself accused of selling out nonetheless, by a colleague who told me that he liked the piece except for what he called the sellout to liberal humanism in the final two paragraphs. For him, it was as if I had had to attach those paragraphs before *Harper's* would accept the essay. As it happens, those two paragraphs had been in the essay right from the start; I had imagined them as attempts to negotiate the work of feminist Habermasians with the work of psycholinguist Steven Pinker (and I had had a long conversation with my editor about what this negotiation entailed). Accordingly, I told my colleague that matters were even worse than he thought: I actually believe my conclusion that we should sign unto others as we would have them sign unto us. That's no sellout, I said, that's just me. The only "sellout" was leading the essay with the story of Janet's labor on the day James was born.

The *New Yorker* piece presented me with an altogether different, and more dangerous, set of challenges. My assignment was to write a review essay on the emergence of black intellectuals as public intellectuals, focusing specifically on Cornel West, bell hooks, Michael Eric Dyson, Thomas Sowell, and Derrick Bell. (That lineup was hashed out over time; the first draft of my essay also included figures like Henry Louis
Taking the New York intellectuals of the 1940s and 1950s as my point of contrast (Daniel Bell, Irving Howe, Philip Rahv, Lionel Trilling), I decided that my job was basically to file a partisan review. And since West and hooks were already academic “celebrities,” I didn’t have to worry about making their work “accessible” to the readers of the New Yorker; I could assume some general knowledge of their work, and proceed to criticize it on its merits, devoting very little time to paraphrase. My editor at the New Yorker, Henry Finder (also the managing editor of Transition), was sympathetic enough to this approach, but turned back my first draft by asking (a) for more detailed argument on the work of Cornel West, and (b) whether I couldn’t be more skeptical of the academic Left in general than I had been.

At this point I got nervous, and not merely because of the possible racial politics involved. For one thing, I was familiar with Eric Lott’s stinging review of West’s Race Matters in Social Text, and although I had wide areas of agreement with Eric’s essay, particularly with the charge that West comes close to pathologizing the black underclass, I most certainly did not want to adopt Eric’s strategy of attempting to represent the forces of vitality and resistance in the black underclass more fairly than West. It was a risky enough strategy when Eric used it, and I did not like contemplating the prospect of insisting, from the study of my central Illinois home, that the black urban subaltern could speak in ways Cornel West wasn’t hearing—as if this should become the method of choice for white critics looking to trump their black colleagues. But more than this, I wondered how I could convey some of my own skepticism about the political effectiveness of the academic Left without seeming to dump it all on the heads of people like West, Dyson, and hooks. And, of course, I asked myself whether, in going along with the request to devise a more skeptical conclusion to the review, I was simply selling out. My ambivalence became all the more violent when I opened the Chronicle of Higher Education of December 14, 1994, right in the middle of rewrite number twenty, to find that the “Hot Type” column included a précis of Eric Lott’s Social Text essay, which began, “Cornel West is in danger of selling out, says Eric Lott” (“Hot Type” 10). I had read Eric’s essay in
manuscript some months before, but I had not anticipated so tangled a
course as this: what are the cultural politics involved, I wondered, in the
possibility of selling out by joining the growing chorus of voices accusing
Cornel West of selling out?

This was not merely a matter of academic politics, of who gets to say
what about whom and who will think what of whom as a result. Rather,
it was a question involving what Edward Said has called “representations
of the intellectual.” Because I had been asked to discuss these figures as
public intellectuals, I had decided to base my claims for their work on
the fact that they possess a constituency, largely but not wholly African
American in composition, for and to whom they regularly speak; and
I meant to juxtapose that sense of constituency to the self-conscious
cosmopolitanism of the New York intellectuals of the 1930s and
1940s—a cosmopolitanism that helped establish them as intellectuals,
but which, regrettably, sometimes left them unable or unwilling to speak
as Jewish intellectuals. Therefore, it seemed to me, the way to discuss
the functions of new black intelligentsia, for better and for worse, was to
discuss the question of intellectuals’ constituencies. For theorists like
Julien Benda, as for a long tradition of avant-garde intellectuals from
Henri de Saint-Simon right through to Mas’ud Zavarzadeh, an intellec-
tual who has a constituency is by definition an intellectual who has sold
out: the intellectual is he (almost always he) who transcends all affilia-
tions. As Said writes, such intellectuals “have to be thoroughgoing indi-
viduals with powerful personalities and, above all, they have to be in a
state of almost permanent opposition to the status quo: for all these
reasons Benda’s intellectuals are inevitably a small, highly visible group
of men—he never includes women—whose stentorian voices and indel-
icate imprecations are hurled at humankind from on high” (7).

I fancied that my solution to the problem of how to be suitably
skeptical of public intellectuals considerably more “public” than myself
had a certain attractive recursivity to it: I would sell out by broaching the
subject of whether intellectuals with constituencies have sold out to the
extent that they “represent” a public at all. And since the intellectuals in
question are black, I could broach this question simply by attending to
the ways they themselves broach the question, for it is a crucial issue for
them: “because non-black audiences are still the ones that have the power to put black artists at the top of the charts,” I wrote,

African-American intellectuals’ uneasiness about black commercial and professional success stems in part from the long-standing fear that “crossing over” must entail selling out. It’s what leads to [bell] hooks’ attack on [Spike Lee’s Malcolm X] [which, she’d written, “cannot be revolutionary and generate wealth at the same time”]—the unstated suspicion that any critical or commercial success with white audiences is, de facto, political failure. (77)

And I concluded that “if black intellectuals are legitimated by their sense of a constituency, they’re hamstrung by it, too: they can be charged with betraying that constituency as easily as they can be credited with representing it” (77—78).

All well and good. But as fortune would have it, I had been given a deadline of November 11 for the New Yorker essay, which meant that I was writing it just as the election returns of November 8 began to be narrated as an epochal moment in postwar American politics, the “romp to the right” (as USA Today called it) that finally freed the American people from the tyranny of liberal Washington. I therefore decided that it was time for me to unburden myself of some of my latest obsessions about cultural studies, regardless of whether they were apposite to the task at hand: to wit, I would take Thomas Sowell’s Race and Culture: A World View as the occasion to note that “where the left tends to address itself to culture, the right—even when it takes up the topic of ‘culture’—tends to address itself to policy” (79). This phenomenon is particularly remarkable in Sowell’s book precisely because it claims, at the outset, not to have any designs on practical policy making; the rest of the book, however, mounts a case (and stop me if you’ve heard this one before) against the evils of the custodial welfare state and the doctrines of cultural relativism in the social sciences, which apparently sustain the welfare state. My concern was, and is, that right-wing intellectuals from Charles Murray to William Kristol to James Q. Wilson seem never to open their mouths but to articulate their versions of “cultural studies” to the exigen-
cies of policy making, whereas cultural studies theorists on the Left often express outright disdain for the policy implications of their work, as did Andrew Ross in an interview in Lingua Franca when he dismissed the task of addressing policy as “a little too easy” (60).

This then has been my fixation since the elections of 1994: configuring the relations among American cultural studies, the latest policy initiatives of the New Right, and the discourse of the public intellectual. I want to argue that cultural studies, if it is going to be anything more than just one more intellectual paradigm for the reading of literary and cultural texts, must direct its attention to the local and national machinery of public policy. But I also want to argue that doing academic cultural studies, as currently constituted, is not enough—just as writing a few essays here and there for mass-market magazines is not enough. Teaching and writing are two important ways of being public, and we need to say so whenever we are publicly accused of being insufficiently public; but what I want to call for is a practice of cultural studies that articulates the theoretical and critical work of the so-called public intellectual to the movements of public policy.

One advantage to voicing these concerns in the New Yorker, I thought, was that it would allow me to chip away at the legend of the New York intellectuals, by pointing out how dismal was their own record in this regard. I beg your indulgence for one more quote from that essay, one that summarizes my concerns about cultural politics while refusing the nostalgic fantasy that Howe and Trilling were giants who walked the land:

watching the American left redefine the terrain of cultural politics while practical political positions to the left of Bill Clinton disappear from the map, one begins to wonder if there isn’t a sense, even in the work of the most prolific and capable black public intellectuals, that cultural politics is a kind of compensation for practical politics—more satisfying, more supple, more susceptible to sheer intellectual virtuosity, because it involves neither revenues nor statutes. Not that the celebrated New York intellectuals of yesteryear held any clear advantage in the realm of practical politics: Lionel Trilling had no hand in Truman’s
The word “yesteryear” in this last sentence is crucial to the point—since, after all, we now live with the legacy of the New York intellectuals in the form of William Kristol, and it is Norman Podhoretz’s magazine, *Commentary*, that has recently defended the brutal beating and murder of gay men on the grounds that it discourages “waverers” from indulging in the gay lifestyle. But I don’t want merely to remark on the sorry transformation of the New York intellectuals into the neoconservatives; I want also to introduce into our discussions of the “public intellectual” the overdue recognition that the New York intellectuals were often the worst kind of armchair quarterbacks and fence-sitters, “activists” whose only activism consisted of essays in *Dissent* or *Partisan Review*. Time and again, when crucial social issues were on the table, the New Yorkers elected to pass, and when it came to taking stands on the Vietnam War, on school desegregation and decentralization, on the women’s movement, many of the so-called public intellectuals of the 1950s and 1960s compiled a deplorable record.

My point in rattling these old bones is not simply to challenge the lionization of the New York intellectuals, but to raise a question I think is crucial to our own moment, in which the challenge of the would-be public intellectual is precisely to revivify our conception of “the public.” It is remarkable, to say the least, that even moderate Republicans like New Jersey governor Christine Whitman have so successfully elided the rhetoric of public ownership with the rhetoric of government control, as when she suggested, apropos of funding for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, that the notion of government ownership of media went out with the passing of *Pravda*. This bizarre logic, I note, has given us not merely a new form of discourse, in which eliminating the National Endowment for the Arts is construed as a means of liberating artists from the shackles of government funding; it has also given us a whole raft of toxic new policy initiatives, from the repeal of laws ensuring environmental protection and workplace safety to the insurance industry boondoggle known as “tort reform.” And one of the reasons for that, of course, is...
that conservative public intellectuals see it as integral to their enterprise to undermine the idea of the public in the realm of public policy—which is why the aging Hitler Youth duo of Peter Collier and David Horowitz make sure to send their interventions in cultural politics (namely, the tabloids *Comment* and *Heterodoxy*) to the offices of elected officials who will aid them in their noble quest to gut the public.

Nonetheless, I knew—and know—full well the trouble I invite by suggesting a division between “cultural politics” and “public policy.” With the American Left in such woeful disarray, it is all too often that we hear about how the “academic Left” or the “cultural Left” is obsessed with its readings of Madonna, its barbaric jargon, and its byzantine rituals of theoretical purification. And sure enough, among the first “progressive” responses to the Republican sweep was Michael Tomasky’s cover article for the *Village Voice*, blaming the academic Left for the rise of Newt:

> so we sit around debating the canon at a handful of elite universities and arguing over Fish’s and Jameson’s influence on the academy, while the vast majority of working-class young people in America (a) will never read the canon, however you choose to define it and whatever you wish to in- or exclude, (b) will think Fish and Jameson stand for a dinner of carp and Irish whiskey (and be little the worse off for thinking it, incidentally), (c) will take very few literature courses, and (d) will be working like hell to save the money to pay their tuitions at a two-year college or perhaps a land-grant university. (19)

He then goes on to cite who else but Russell Jacoby. Tomasky was promptly rebuked in the pages of his own paper, chiefly by Ellen Willis, but the charge stung precisely because we have heard it so often before, particularly from self-described liberals such as David Bromwich, Daniel Harris, Russell Jacoby, and Richard Rorty. For that matter, the charge that the academic Left is too self-absorbed is not wholly without merit; it is simply a different kind of claim from the charge that the academic Left is marginal to national politics, or that the academic Left is responsible for the 104th or 105th Congress. You can blame people for their
self-absorption, but you cannot necessarily blame them for being marginal, and analyses like Tomasky’s (which he has since expanded into a book, Left for Dead) tend to confuse this issue, provoking nothing more productive than defensiveness and academic turf-guarding in response. Likewise, even if I were to enumerate and denounce every kind of academic self-absorption and ineffectuality I know of (and this would take some time), I would still not have shown that any of it was to blame for the latest conservative turn in national politics—a phenomenon we might more plausibly attribute to the malfeasances of elected Democrats and the terrifying mass mobilization of the Christian Coalition.

Whatever my own qualms about the academic Left, then, I do not want to be saddled with positions I have not taken: I do not claim that cultural politics isn’t a “real” politics, nor would I claim that struggles over popular culture are unrelated to struggles over public policy. To quote an influential theorist I’ve been reading lately, “it is simply not possible to refocus this nation’s public policy debate through electoral politics alone” (87); moreover, “the left has been very successful because it understands the importance of the culture—of framing the debate and influencing the way people think about problems” (88). For those of you who don’t recognize the prose style, that was Rush Limbaugh. I think he’s got a point, and I think there are many reasons the academic Left devotes so much of its attention to culture. Not least important of these, I submit, is the fact that most citizens of the United States devote more of their attention to culture than to politics; it is no exaggeration to say that most Americans live their relation to the political by way of the cultural, as was amply demonstrated by 1994’s public debates over films like Forrest Gump and The Lion King. And, as I’ve argued elsewhere, cultural criticism is ubiquitous on the American political landscape, particularly the kind that proceeds from figures like Michael Medved, Cal Thomas, Rush Limbaugh, William Bennett, and Christina Hoff Sommers, not to mention Peter Collier and David Horowitz. Finally, there’s the eerie fact that the realm of popular culture often seems to offer wiser and more bracing analyses of post-Fordism and the crisis of the American worker than anything ordinary people can find in the political realm. My favorite example here comes from The Simpsons, in an
episode in which Homer and a coworker are representing the company in the state capital, and decide to order room service at their hotel and put it on the company tab. No sooner do they do so than a red buzzer goes off hundreds of miles away in the office of Mr. Burns, the CEO, whereupon Smithers, Burns’s assistant and sycophant, remarks, “Someone’s ordering room service, sir.” Burns then orders Smithers to release the winged monkeys, and in a brilliant citation of *The Wizard of Oz*, Burns cackles, “Fly! Fly, my pretties!” But the monkeys crash to the ground almost immediately, provoking Burns to mutter that the program still needs more research. I want to point out that my then seven-year-old son enjoyed this surreal scene every bit as much as I did, which leads me to believe that when it comes to depictions of the post-Fordist economy in which obscenely wealthy CEOs cook up draconian schemes for employee policing, we can say of *The Simpsons* what Augustine said of the Bible: that its surface attracts us like children and yet its depths are stupendous, rendering its meaning copiously in so few words.

So if it is true that cultural politics sometimes seems like a compensation for practical politics (and it is certainly true in my own life), perhaps this is so because Americans often appear smarter as consumers than as political agents; at the very least, we certainly tend to understand ourselves more readily as consumers than as political agents, which is one reason, as James Carville has often remarked, so little of the American electorate has any substantial understanding of political issues that do not directly affect their disposable income.

Even in the political arena bounded by the state, however, there is no clear distinction between cultural politics and public policy, and therefore no clear way of determining whether or not “politicizing” an issue is a responsible or irresponsible thing to do. When, in the spring and summer of 1994, the Congressional Black Caucus sought to “politicize” the president’s crime bill by demanding that it retain a provision on racial justice and the death penalty, they were undoubtedly speaking cultural politics to policy in a manner that should remind us how tenuous is the distinction between the two. But even here we can find two senses of the word “political”: the narrow sense in which the caucus informed Clinton that he might not have the votes to pass the bill unless
he addressed their concerns, and the larger sense in which the caucus was trying to redirect the subject of race in our national discussions of crime and punishment, such that African Americans would be seen not as potential felons but as citizens targeted by a police apparatus in which they are many times more likely than their fellow white Americans to be stopped by the highway patrol, to be scrutinized in retail stores, and to be given the death penalty for violent crimes. Racial justice, in other words, is not solely a matter of public policy. And yet the cultural politics of racial justice have had to address the vicissitudes of public policy, ever more urgently since the insane Supreme Court decision of McClesky v. Kemp (1987), which held that statistics concerning race and executions, regardless of the weight or clarity of the statistics, were immaterial to challenges under the Eighth Amendment.

Now, I know that in making this argument I’m running the risk of preaching to the converted, bringing coals to Newcastle, and doing any number of similarly pointless things. I don’t imagine that very many of my actual or hypothetical readers opposed that provision of the president’s original crime bill on the grounds that it would create an unacceptable “quota system” for lethal injections. I adduce this example only because I want to walk this line carefully, and to insist not only on the difference between cultural politics and policy but also on their inevitable entanglement. What I’m saying in this regard has in fact been said before, most notably by Tony Bennett in an essay entitled “Putting Policy into Cultural Studies.” But it is symptomatic of our uncertainty about the politics of intellectual work, I think, that Bennett’s essay would have gotten so hostile a reception from so political a theorist as Fredric Jameson, who wrote in his Social Text review of the Routledge Cultural Studies collection that Bennett does not “seem to realize how obscene American left readers are likely to find his proposals on ‘talking to and working with what used to be called the ISAs rather than writing them off from the outset and then, in a self-fulfilling prophecy, criticizing them again when they seem to affirm one’s direst functionalist predictions’ ” (29). It is when I read passages such as this that I begin to fear the creation of an academic Left whose only function is to analyze and interpret the formation of the hegemonies that are actually being formed
by our counterparts on the Right; I fear an intellectual regime in which cultural studies is nothing more than a parasitic kind of color commentator on the new authoritarian populism of the Age of Gingrich, too busy explaining the rise of the postmodern eugenicist-libertarian-cybernetic-fundamentalist Right to be of any use in actually opposing it. If you look at Limbaugh's *See, I Told You So* you'll see something of a looking-glass version of what I'm talking about; the passage I quoted earlier, in fact, appears in a chapter in which Limbaugh laments that all the liberals are reading Gramsci (would that this were so) and are engaging in a "war of position" against traditional American values. What Limbaugh cautions his readers against, needlessly but always strategically, is a world in which the Left has all the tools to wage wars of position and the Right is only belatedly trying to understand how the Left so thoroughly dominates the nation; and I don't think it's paranoid or defeatist to suppose that at the moment, the reverse is much more nearly the case in the United States.

I want to remark briefly on the irony of broaching this issue by way of discussing black public intellectuals. There seemed to me—and there still seems to me—something grossly unfair about discussing the disjunction between left intellectuals and public policy by focusing on people like bell hooks or Cornel West or Derrick Bell, who do cultural politics that often have everything to do with public policy. In the *New Yorker*, for example, I called attention to a passage in Michael Eric Dyson's *Making Malcolm: The Myth and Meaning of Malcolm X* in which Dyson relates a compliment he received from a young black admirer. He had just testified at a Senate judiciary subcommittee hearing on gangsta rap, and he had quoted Snoop Doggy Dog verbatim from memory, prompting an observer to tell him, "for a guy your age, you really can flow" (xxi). In the context of Dyson's book, the story concerns Dyson's own relation to youth culture and to the discourse of black urban masculinity in crisis; but for want of a better alternative, I took Dyson's story as the occasion to remark that "for cultural critics, the danger of popular acclaim is that it can tempt them to pay more attention to the responses of young admirers than to the deliberations of Senate subcommittees" (79). Dyson, I think, would have every reason to ask who's zooming who here; and should he ask, I would have to admit that I myself have never
been asked to testify before the Senate on any subject whatsoever. But Dyson’s presence in Washington only underscores my point: when the Senate judiciary subcommittee opened its hearings on violence and misogyny in gangsta rap, Carol Moseley-Braun called on academic critics such as Dyson and Tricia Rose, who showed up to tell the Senate they were asking all the wrong questions. What were Dyson and Rose doing, I ask you, but talking—and talking back—to the ISAs? I stand by my point regardless of how ill-gotten it may have been in regard to Dyson—and what’s more, I wish his book Making Malcolm had said more about Dyson’s role in those hearings. Dyson’s work on Malcolm is scrupulous and, in its way, as relentless as bell hooks in showing that the rhetoric of black nationalism renders a black subjectivity that is always already a black male subjectivity. This too has something to do with the politics of lethal injections, as Ice Cube’s album of the same name suggests, and it cues us once again to the myriad connections between cultural and practical politics. But to repeat the point one last time, it’s one thing to make the entirely necessary argument that black nationalism foregrounds a masculinist politics and a male subjectivity; it’s another thing to translate that point into a political initiative that will realize some of its many implications for the disposition of revenues and statutes.

I can imagine three salient objections to what I’ve argued thus far, and I want to mention them partly because I want to agree with them ahead of time. The first is that the connections between intellectual work and the policy implications thereof are too often drawn sloppily or arbitrarily; accustomed as we are to unfolding arguments with care and rigor, it seems superfluous or even humiliating to have to tack on some kind of policy prescription once we’ve finished historicizing the nationalist subject. The second is that the connections between cultural politics and public policy are too often drawn at the expense of the former. This objection takes many forms, from Andrew Ross’s complaint that the aim of intellectual work should be to change consciousness rather than to enact statutes, to Edward Said’s warning that the intellectual who speaks truth to policy may wind up as the tool of the political apparatus he or she seeks to operate, to my own sense that cultural studies can be more easily compromised to fit the demands of public
policy than can public policy be reimagined so as to accommodate the utopian yearnings of cultural studies. And the third objection, which no doubt occurred to some readers once they’d read my first few paragraphs, is that right-wing intellectuals are by definition closer to the sources of national political and economic power than any of the liberals and leftists I’ve mentioned; and it is only in this sense, I think, that we can make sense of Jameson’s repudiation of Tony Bennett’s proposals as “obscene.”

Because there’s nothing we can do about this third objection, other than hoping that more progressive organizations will see the need and have the capacity for massive fundraising at the national level, I’d like to address the first two for a moment. The link between theory and policy often is capricious and ill-conceived: as Jacob Weisberg pointed out in his review of The Bell Curve, you could accept every piece of Herrnstein and Murray’s work, the shoddy statistics, the impoverished measurement of “intelligence” by the $g$ factor, the unwarranted confidence in our ability to define race, even the questionable use of “research” sponsored by neo-Nazi groups, and you could still come to the opposite conclusions from those drawn by Herrnstein and Murray. That is, you could posit a permanent and ineradicable intelligence differential based on “race,” whatever that is, and argue for the maintenance and expansion of the welfare state on precisely those grounds. Conversely, it would not be hard to imagine an argument for dismantling what remains of the welfare state on the reasoning that there is no correlation whatsoever between race and intelligence, and that affirmative action programs are therefore interfering with the “natural” distribution of intellectual talents.

I was rather forcibly brought up against this conundrum in my reading of Thomas Sowell’s Race and Culture, a book I’d like to offer as something of a model of right-wing global cultural studies. Knowing that in the New Yorker I would have no more than two paragraphs in which to dispose of Sowell, I decided to concentrate on his “Race and Intelligence” chapter—again, partly because this is one of my signal obsessions at the moment, and partly because I thought it would be rhetorically effective. Sowell’s data happened to overlap with the data I had learned about from another source, namely, James Trent’s social-constructionist history of mental retardation in the United States, In-
venting the Feeble Mind (which documents the symbiotic rise of eugenics and intelligence testing in the first decades of this century, and documents the policies of sterilization and institutionalization that began in the United States in the 1920s and were then expanded to great effect by Nazi Germany in the 1930s and 1940s). So, drawing on Trent together with Anthony Appiah, I thought I could make the point clearly enough: once you start historicizing and globalizing comparative studies of race and intelligence, you give the game away, by showing that intelligence differentials are in fact social and cultural rather than biological.

But since Sowell explicitly rules out the biological explanation of intelligence elsewhere in the book, I would have to make the point much more carefully than I thought—since Sowell’s argument itself is more careful than I had at first imagined. Here then is what I finally devised, with the help of a remarkable New Yorker fact-checker by the name of Blake Eskin:

“For many practical purposes,” he concludes, “it makes no difference whether poor performances in abstract thinking are due to neglect or to lack of capacity.” But this is no conclusion at all, since if groups’ differences are attributable to “neglect”—or worse, to active discrimination—then Sowell has inadvertently demonstrated the necessity for precisely the kind of ambitious social programs his career has been dedicated to attacking. (78)

I had fondly hoped that if I exposed this contradiction in a major magazine, the exposure would have some effect on something. But I have to admit what I’ve only alluded to above: despite my best efforts to analyze, historicize, deconstruct, and redefine the arguments of my opponents, I actually have not had all that much impact on national policy myself. The 104th and 105th Congresses have gone about the business of dismantling social programs despite the fact that one radical conservative claims natural, biological sanction for doing so, and another radical conservative explicitly rejects that reasoning yet comes to the same conclusion. It would seem, then, that right-wing intellectuals will somehow come to the conclusion that the unregulated “free market” provides the best of all possible worlds regardless of whether they find justification for
this belief in nature or merely in culture. Even when Sowell explicitly disagrees with Murray’s premises, then, he nevertheless manages to agree with him on the policy tip. Borrowing a page from Andrew Ross, I like to think about this phenomenon in terms of the weather: Charles Murray wakes up, predicts sunny skies and a high in the sixties, and concludes that today would be a good day to eradicate the notion of racial justice; Thomas Sowell wakes up, predicts rain turning into sleet by nightfall, and concludes that today would be a good day to eradicate the notion of racial justice. It is no mystery why we should be skeptical about the prospect—or the potential value—of putting policy into cultural studies.

Nonetheless, my worry is not that academic progressives will construe cultural politics as something wholly other than practical politics; my worry is that we will tend to conflate them. In other words, I really don’t see any danger, at the moment, that the cultural Left will decide that popular culture is not a proper location for political struggle, or that debates over race, ethnicity, clothing, cuisine, music, science, and technology have no manifest “political” content. On the contrary, I see plenty of danger that we will underestimate—or, worse, ignore—the difference between theoretical work on such subjects and the practical political effects such work can have for the people we’re talking about if not necessarily talking to.

One recent instance of the disjunction between cultural studies and public policy stands out especially in my mind, partly because it’s drawn from a book whose theoretical sweep and ambition I admire and cannot hope to emulate, and partly because the book in question explicitly sets out to understand and contest the new conservatism in American life. At the end of We Gotta Get out of This Place, Larry Grossberg alludes to the battles over “political correctness” that were erupting just as he was finishing his manuscript, and he castigates the Left’s responses to PC, including my own, for how they “manage to avoid most of the issues and absolve themselves of all blame” (430). Wondering what issues we had avoided and what blame we should have accepted, I read further that “some people have taken extreme, absurd positions which should be criticized” (an interesting injunction, since Grossberg does not cite spe-
cific persons or positions) and that “the Left has to recognize the truth in the Right’s accusations: e.g., affirmative action in universities has not solved the problem and has created new ones” (383).

I want to remark on this notion that in the early months of 1991, as the PC attacks swept across the American media, we on the Left should have taken some of the blame for the failures of affirmative action. I don’t think Grossberg is wrong to point to these problems; I just think that one could not plausibly single out affirmative action as terrain for concession to the New Right if one were paying even the faintest attention to the policy disputes of 1991. For it was then that the Civil Rights Act of 1991 was being bandied about in Congress, an act that specifically sought to hold employers to the standard that any job qualifications that screen out minorities and women must be related to a person’s ability to perform the job. In 1989, the Supreme Court had held, in one of its most perverse opinions, *Wards Cove v. Atonio*, that American courts had never established such a “job performance standard,” and the Bush administration, led by C. Boyden Gray and Dick Thornburgh, was pushing for a weaker standard, requiring companies to show only that their hiring practices serve “legitimate employment goals” and requiring employees to identify the specific employment practice that brought about the alleged discrimination. (As policy analysts pointed out, this would allow employers to defend discriminatory practices on such vague grounds as corporate image, customer preference, or employee morale.) The bankruptcy of the Bush/Gray position, I should note, was quickly exposed by the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, which showed that in 217 of 225 cases since 1971, the courts had indeed used the “job performance standard” the Bush administration and the Rehnquist Court claimed not to exist.6

Now, let me remark on one important consequence of this somewhat arcane policy dispute. The most prominent and vocal Republican supporter of the Civil Rights Act of 1991 was Senator John Danforth of Missouri. Bush eventually signed the bill, but only after Danforth had served as Clarence Thomas’s point man and chief defender in the Senate in an unofficial quid pro quo for his (Bush’s) capitulation to what right-wing intellectuals to this day fraudulently call a “quota bill.” In the larger
agenda of the Bush Administration, in other words, passage of the bill would be paid for by the appointment of Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court. No better example could be devised, I submit, of the profound interdependence of cultural politics and practical policy making; and in this case, I can think of no better example of the cultural Left’s often lamentable inattention to policy matters than Grossberg’s suggestion that in the PC debates of 1991, we should have acknowledged the “truth” in the Right’s attacks on affirmative action.

I am not suggesting that we all be called to account for the policy implications of our work, nor am I demanding that we each append to our next book or article a little “policy epilogue” that spells out the practical steps that follow from our analysis of Madonna, Malcolm, Macherey, or nationalism, imperialism, or gender and the public sphere. I am simply asking that we be attentive to the ways cultural studies might conceivably be of interest to, or intersect with the work of, theorists and political agents more directly involved with the policy machinery of the state. And this is why, as I look over the textual record, I wound up unable to write the essay I’d originally planned: because to make the kind of case I’m making in this essay is to call out the limitations in my own work. To date, my conception of the so-called public intellectual has relied almost exclusively on the very model I criticize in the New York intellectuals, the same model that still dominates most of our discussion of the subject: the intellectual who engages with what Peter Uwe Hohendahl, following Habermas, calls the “literary public sphere.” My conception of selling out, therefore, was confined solely to the question of how American cultural studies could best represent itself in the mainstream press. I now want to suggest that there is at least as important a difference between the literary public sphere and the public policy sphere as the difference between cultural politics and public policy, and that most cultural studies intellectuals, myself most assuredly included, have not yet begun to think seriously about how best to negotiate that difference.

To admit that difference and to seek to negotiate it would be to sell out, and no one has said so more emphatically, of late, than Mas’ud Zavarzadeh. In one of his most recent attacks on the ludic American
academy, Zavarzadeh writes that “the various tendencies of ludic populism can perhaps best be outlined by examining the emerging figure of the post-al ‘public intellectual’” (106). Zavarzadeh goes on to insist that “the bourgeois ‘public intellectual’—in the name of democratizing knowledge—perpetuates the ignorance of the people and deepens their dependence on the knowledge industry” (107). The heart of his critique goes to the heart of my argument:

the credibility of the bourgeois “public intellectual” is established by his/her “activism,” which is, itself, an “affirmation” of the system by accepting (affirming) its rules and playing inside the system according to the rules of reform. . . . The “public intellectual” is a figure invented to combine this deep anti-intellectualism and counter-revolutionary affirmation of the commonsense with reformist localism. (107)

To most of Zavarzadeh’s indictment I have to plead guilty as charged: I am committed to playing inside the system according to the rules of reform—though I’ve argued as often as I can that there’s all the difference in the world between weak and strong reformism (and, it should go without saying, I am anti-intellectual and counterrevolutionary to boot). But I will differ with Zavarzadeh in one respect: I do not want to fetishize the local. On the contrary, it seems to me that what we need most desperately in the wake of the elections of 1994 (from which we have still not recovered) are new discourses of national identity, new discourses of national unity. The academic Left normally does not even contemplate the possibility of such discourses except as expressions of conservative, nostalgic, crypto-fascist fantasy. But while we’ve been making the case against imposing or presuming a common American culture, the New Right has worked assiduously to destroy the material foundations of what can at least potentially sustain us as a common society. That’s why their attacks on the realm of the public are so important, and why it is so important that we reclaim and rejuvenate “the public” in the name of the people. It may seem comic or tragic that the New Right so painstakingly undermines our common social foundations, like public schools and social services, at the same time that it makes a cottage
industry of screeds lamenting our loss of a common culture or a common morality. But I think we should understand these phenomena as complementary symptoms of the same general development: as Congress undoes the social-welfare powers of the federal government by parceling out social services in “block grants” to the states, thereby reminding us that the purpose of the so-called New Federalism of the 1980s was precisely to Balkanize our national laws pertaining to taxation, abortion, welfare, schooling, employment, and housing, we will undoubtedly hear all the more empty, idealist nationalist rhetoric about the need to affirm traditional values and bring back a common sense of shame—and we will hear this, needless to say, from people whose political behavior is itself nothing other than shameful. As Samuel Luttwak has written in a brief essay cheerily entitled “Why Fascism Is the Wave of the Future,”

> It is only mildly amusing that nowadays the standard Republican/Tory dinner speech is a two-part affair, in which part one celebrates the virtues of unimpeded competition and dynamic structural change, while part two mourns the decline of the family and community “values” that were eroded precisely by the forces commended in part one. (6)

It is in this moment of crisis, then, that cultural studies intellectuals need to imagine a language wherein national identity and American cultural politics are mobilized not as they were in California, when a rainbow coalition of hyphenated Americans got together to pass Proposition 187, but wherein “patriotism” is redefined as that sentiment that prevents us from letting our fellow citizens starve, beg, or go homeless. The Right knows that its rewards for detaching a sense of national identity from a sense of public citizenship can be great indeed: as long as the ideological construction of “American identity” has nothing to do with access to housing, health care, employment, or basic nutrition, our leading plutocrats can continue to reap the benefits of the industrialized world’s most inequitable tax system while our fellow citizens live with the industrialized world’s highest rates of child mortality and childhood poverty. And if we do not imagine an alternative conception of national identity, I fear that our federal government’s fiscal powers will be further
weakened as its police powers are steadily expanded—such that fascism, to borrow Luttwak’s phrase, will indeed be the wave of the future.

I realize that I run the risk of reaffirming the very discursive formation I seek to undermine; in focusing on national identity I may be simply proposing nationalism as a refuge from capitalism, and thereby hastening the rise of the repressive, punitive discourses of national identity we see at work in California. I must admit I am not sure what I think about this: for Luttwak, it is the globalization of capital rather than the resurgence of nationalism that threatens to precipitate the return of fascism, and in an era when the most vocal opponents of GATT and NAFTA have been Patrick Buchanan, Ross Perot, and Ralph Nader, I have to say I do not know what the relations between nationalism and capitalism may be in the future, or indeed what they may be in the present. I know the danger here is that of proposing reactionary countermoves, concocting counterdiscourses, and ultimately playing into the hands of the ISAs. But that is a danger I believe we must court; and I believe we have nothing to lose in doing so—except our theoretical purity.

I want to close with one parable about that danger. I was perusing the Down syndrome discussion group on the Internet in the winter of 1994–95 when I saw a posting from a self-described conservative Republican that advised parents of disabled children how to deal with the newly Republican Congress, particularly if they’d just lost a liberal Democrat to a conservative Republican. Since the abolition of unfunded federal mandates has the potential to eviscerate the Americans with Disabilities Act, and since on the state level we had indeed lost a progressive activist to a local right-wing machine politician, my spouse and I read this posting with great interest. It advised us not to talk about “rights and entitlements,” but to emphasize instead our child’s potential for “self-sufficiency”; and not to talk about “justice” or “fairness,” since life is inherently unfair, but to insist on the value-neutral principle of equality before the law. Much as we hated to admit it, we thought this was good, well-intentioned, pragmatic advice, and we were briefly grateful for the lesson in how to tailor our political convictions to the purpose of maintaining our son’s social services. Briefly grateful, that is, until we read a brilliant posting from a woman named Janet Curtis, who, identifying
herself as “nothing more than a poor housewife,” fired back a reply that said, in effect, how dare you tell me not to say the words conservative Republicans don’t want to hear, like “rights” or “justice,” and that pointed out the vacuity of the phrase “equality before the law,” since the law prevents rich and poor alike from sleeping under bridges. But the reply did not stop there; it went on to point out that if a pregnant woman were to make a decision on whether to carry the fetus to term on the basis of whether the child, when born, could hope to achieve the self-sufficiency Republicans recommend for the disabled, conservatives would be the first people in her face, blocking that decision by invoking the “rights” of the unborn.

I want to point out that this little exercise in rhetorical analysis and critical legal studies was undertaken not by a cultural studies theorist, nor by someone dependent on the knowledge industry run by bourgeois sellouts like me, but by an ordinary citizen of these United States, operating in extraordinary circumstances not of her own making. But more important, I want to pass along to you what this exchange has taught me: first, that sometimes, the cost of selling out to the discourses of policy makers is too steep to bear, particularly if it means disavowing the languages of social and cultural justice; and second, that Ms. Curtis’s reply, mixing righteous indignation with a keen eye for ideological contradiction, should serve to remind us that our task in selling out is not to capitulate to the terms our historical moment has offered us, but rather to find the terms with which we can best contest those terms, and in so doing redescribe and redefine both our cultural politics and our social policies.

NOTES

1. See Pinker and Benhabib et al.
2. As the next few pages indicate, my primary concern was that I would be faulted for having sold my subjects short in the pages of a prestigious literary magazine, and that black and nonblack critics alike would thereby read the harshest moments of my review as evidence that the New Yorker would take up such subjects only to dismiss them. Imagine my surprise, then, when in the spring and summer of 1995,
as the “new black intellectuals” suddenly became the topic *du jour* in every major American forum of letters, my article was singled out as an instance of mere “puffery” and “celebrity-mongering” (Wilentz) by writer after writer churning out ever shabbier essays whose only intellectual substance lay in the charge that *other* writers on the subject have lacked intellectual substance. To date the subject has seen a great deal of rhetorical posturing and turf-claiming, but as yet, only two essays (Boynton and Rivers) that touch on the question with which my essay concluded, namely, what is the role of the left public intellectual at a time when the idea of “the public” is nearly unthinkable in national public policy? (It is worth noting, for the record, that Robert Boynton wrote his essay almost a year before I wrote mine, but the *Atlantic* sat on it for quite some time, evidently secure in the belief that nothing important would happen in the world of black intellectuals between 1993 and 1995. Moreover, when the *New Yorker* ran my essay in January 1995, the *Atlantic* reportedly considered pulling Boynton’s essay from the March issue—even though it was three times longer than mine and focused on different figures—as if one major essay on black intellectuals would be sufficient for the year, and two would constitute a glut.)

3. For obvious reasons, the conditions for speaking as “a Jewish intellectual” in the United States were radically different after World War II than before. Compared to the prewar *Partisan Review* writers, the postwar group was markedly more willing—indeed, sometimes compelled—to speak and write as “Jewish writers.” Particularly moving in this regard was Alfred Kazin’s painful reassessment of the role of the Jewish intellectual in the wake of the Holocaust, a reassessment that began with the essay “In Every Voice, in Every Ban” in the *New Republic*. However mistaken Kazin may have been to indict his fellow New York intellectuals for “our silent complicity in the massacre of the Jews,” the point remains that no one writer (or group of writers) can dictate when it is proper or necessary to speak “from” or “for” one’s ethnic identity and when it is preferable to speak as a “cosmopolitan.” See A. Bloom, *Prodigal Sons*, esp. 137–39.

4. See Pattullo. Though Pattullo’s odious essay attracted a great deal of criticism from *Commentary’s* less rabid readers, the magazine itself has not retreated an inch, calling Pattullo’s essay (in a promotional mailing) “the most carefully reasoned argument for maintaining society’s preference for heterosexuality over homosexuality in the teaching of children.”
5. The idea that the “racial justice” provision would create a quota for death sentences is almost too bizarre to admit of discussion, but one thing about this argument seems noteworthy: even though every conservative pundit from George Will to Cal Thomas denounced the provision, none of them realized (or cared to admit) that the provision would not mandate the execution of more white prisoners. In other words, the provision would simply have asked the courts to consider whether blacks were being executed in wildly disproportionate numbers—and, if so, to take that disproportion into consideration in sentencing. The provision might have prevented a handful of black inmates from being executed, perhaps, but it certainly would not have increased the number of white inmates executed. The fact that the media’s conservative white chorus screamed so loud and so long over a provision that merely might have lowered (slightly) the number of black inmates executed seems to me one plausible explanation for why white and black Americans have such radically different perceptions of how the nation’s judicial system works.

6. See Koenig.