



4-15-1996

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13023/DISCLOSURE.05.16>

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Recommended Citation

Kopf, Jennifer and Staddon, Caedmon (1996) "Cultural Theory and Intellectual Politics," *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory*: Vol. 5 , Article 16.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13023/DISCLOSURE.05.16>

Available at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure/vol5/iss1/16>

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Cultural Theory and Intellectual Politics

An Interview with Russell Berman

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disClosure Editorial Collective

Lexington, Kentucky

Saturday, February 11, 1995

This interview with the German Studies and Cultural Theory scholar Russell Berman took place in the context of his invited lecture to the Interdisciplinary Committee on Social Theory's Spring Lecture Series at the University of Kentucky. That lecture, entitled "Imperialism and Enlightenment," discussed the relations between philosophical models of enlightenment and the Western colonial project. The interview picks up on this general theme, but brings it into such contemporary contexts as German unification and the economic collapse of the Soviet Bloc. Also discussed are the epistemological and political statuses of Cultural Studies, which Berman sees as deeply problematic. Throughout the discussion Berman is concerned also to raise the idea that cultural authenticity cannot be restricted to the old centre / margin dichotomy, which he partially deconstructs. The interview concludes with some discussion of the points of convergence between German Critical Theory and French Poststructuralism.

Culture, Nation, Identity and Contemporary Cultural Studies

disClosure: When you are talking about imperialism and enlightenment in your book *Cultural Studies of Modern Germany: History, Representation and Nationhood*, you often refer back to the connections between "culture," "nation" and "identity"; for example, when you are talking about the Gulf War, you refer back to "culture-nation-identity" as a kind of explanatory triad. We thought that the dis-

cussion of this foundational principle could provide the basis for this interview. To quote from the introductory chapter of your book

“not because of any essential identification of culture and nation, but because for cultural studies the nation is one particularly intriguing site at which symbolic orders are distinguished.”

Contrarily, others have argued that the notion of “culture”, deriving from the German “Kultur,” is *absolutely* identified with immanent nineteenth century German nationhood, with German modernity. So, I would like to challenge you a bit on the status of this relation. Connected to this, I would also like to discuss with you the question of the rise and epistemological status of contemporary Cultural Studies.

Berman: In my work and in that book in particular I am trying to comment on both Germany and some German questions as well as to raise constantly some theoretical questions about Cultural Studies. I think that Cultural Studies in its empirical and theoretical formulations in contemporary American universities has great potential. I also think however that there is considerable confusion, both among the advocates of Cultural Studies and its opponents, as to what Cultural Studies is. The suggestion that one hears repeated *ad nauseum* in the defense of Cultural Studies is that it is inter-disciplinary, or meta-disciplinary, or that it draws on various traditions. The only way one can respond to that is to say “well I am glad to hear that it is not closed-minded, that it is prepared to draw on different traditions.” Frankly I think that many scholars are not closed-minded and are prepared to draw on different traditions, even if they are not part of Cultural Studies. Therefore there is a kind of a straw man being set up in the insistent claim by the advocates of Cultural Studies that *IT* is interdisciplinary and open, and by implication that everybody else is closed, befogged, antiquarian. Which is not to say that there are not some closed, befogged, antiquarian academics in universities.

But the point of this whole prelude is to suggest that I think that the study of culture needs to reflect on its disciplinary nature and on its scholarly (*wissenschaftliche*) foundations. I guess the question would be: if Cultural Studies is just a collection of contingent practices, what justification does it have as scholarship; is it in any way different epistemologically from the material that it purports to study? Or is academics just another culture, a set of discursive practices, making reference to another culture: Germany, American popular culture, China? But then there is really no justification for Cultural Studies claiming a location in that special institution, the University, in which statements ought to be generated that have the

very special status of knowledge. So all of that is by way of a challenge to Cultural Studies to think through whether it is happy whining that it is interdisciplinary or if it might not try instead to overcome the misery of interdisciplinarity, and define a scientific agenda. Can one imagine a science of Cultural Studies?

Now Cultural Studies, as I observe it, is interested in examining the constitution of collective identities through symbolic orders. That constitution including moments of resistance and the collective identification is crucial but not surprising; remember that identities are always contested, that there are always different voices within a culture...

Now you've challenged me also on the loose connection between “culture and nation.” I think that the “Nation” and national identity are very neuralgic sites of culture for various reasons, and I am not quite sure that I can attempt to enumerate them. But that is surely not the only way to imagine culture. One can certainly talk about sub-cultures, which are cultures, but they refer to fields smaller than the nation. These might be regional cultures: there is a Southern identity, there is also a New England identity. Or one might talk about culture in terms of ethnic groupings; there may be an African American culture, or there may be several, just as there may be an Italian-American culture. It might be the case that one can talk about other groups that are smaller than nations, or that transcend nations, (e.g. diasporic forms) which Cultural Studies could examine. In my book I am concerned with Germany and a key feature of Germany is the construction of nation.

It could be, however (and this would be a third way of thinking about culture after “nation,” and “other groupings” which are generally imaginable as smaller than the nation) that there is another way to think about culture, and that is culture as *universal*. Are there universal characteristics of culture that Cultural Studies might consider examining? Now this of course is a scandalous suggestion in the contemporary intellectual atmosphere, but I mean it very seriously. Because to the extent that one surrenders the possibility of making any kind of universalist inquiry a certain political debilitation ensues. But that is not the truly intellectual argument. It might be the case that if one gives up the possibility of making universalist claims, then the scientific status of Cultural Studies becomes untenable. For then it becomes just a matter of “this is true for me, but it is not true for you” in which case it is not scholarship because it cannot be falsified. What would a universalist conception of culture mean? Fifty years ago it probably would have been secularized Protestantism imagined as the global set of values for individuals, faiths and character...

I would think that Cultural Studies as an emerging discipline makes the initial assumption that humans engaged in communities construct values and identities through symbolic representations and that this is an existential feature of humans. While it is probably the case that there are no values, particularly positive values, that one can prove have universal necessity and there may be none that one can determine as having empirical universality, clearly Cultural Studies is making the claim—the very exciting claim—that humans form their symbolic worlds and that this is a feature of humanity in general. Now if one follows Cultural Studies down this route - that humans make their symbolic worlds - then there may be some definite claims that follow on that about the relations between individuals and community, about past and present, that are the *parameters* within which any particular kind of culture gets played out.

disClosure: Well, what about that aspect of Cultural Studies that seems to be just as strong as the focus on the intersubjective construction of symbolic worlds? This is the political aspect, the sense that, yes Cultural Studies is all the things that you say it is, but it is *also* foundationally counter-hegemonic. That what Spivak and others are very much concerned with is, as she puts it, figuring ways in which the “subaltern” can speak and speak specifically against hegemonic ways of defining who “they” are, and for that matter who “we” are. I think that only at one point, when you mentioned resistances as a component of collective identity formation, did you begin to point towards that important defining feature of Cultural Studies.

Berman: I guess I have a complex relationship to that kind of insistence on the counter-hegemonic character of Cultural Studies. I think that the discussion around Cultural Studies is prematurely and naively politicized when its proponents present it as left-identified and its opponents denounce it as left-identified. I would think that one could certainly study culture, that is to say engage in Cultural Studies and come up with conservative results. Those conservative results might well be in many circumstances as counter-hegemonic or even more counter-hegemonic than some of the left results. But aside from that polemic, I would want to say that culture, which is the object of Cultural Studies, has the capacity to be *itself* counter-hegemonic so I would want to think about the difference between culture (I hesitate to say “authentic” culture) and hegemony. Of course I can think of many examples where culture can be hegemonic and complicitous. But I think that the reflection on the capacity of humans to construct their symbolic worlds is by *definition* counter-hegemonic. As counter-hegemonic it could however just as well be conservative as progressive: when progressives own the state, conservatives may be oppositional.

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disClosure: That prompts me to wonder if you would agree with the proposition that current right wing discourses in US politics, about the “culture of poverty” and the kinds of politics (to my mind regressive) implied by that perspective, are therefore in some sense *structurally equivalent* to progressive discourses about the “Indian subaltern” or other marginalised groups.

Berman: I suggested a moment ago a project for Cultural Studies and its possible “growing up.” There are, however, clearly limits to Cultural Studies or possible pitfalls around Cultural Studies. I think Cultural Studies, to the extent that one of its moves is to go beyond literature and look at all sorts of objects and see them as parts of discourses and paradigms and orders of meaning in which we participate and which they inherit and try to transform, participates in what I call a “semiotic optimism” that everything has meaning. Pace Spivak, that is a kind of “humanism gone wild” because here humans are always creative of meaning and always living in structures of meaning. Cultural Studies ends up being incapable of articulating the encounter with the absolutely alienated, the absurd, brute force, which is surely not only a semiotic event. AND this culturalism of Cultural Studies, comparable to the economism of orthodox Marxism, flattens out our world, making it just a place where humans have meaning. Lord, growing up in the twentieth century, it is not only meaning you encounter...

disClosure: ...it's markets, it's brute force, it's the Mexican economic crisis....

Berman:...and it's *meaninglessness*.

Another dimension that is arguably beyond Cultural Studies just like the moment of alien meaninglessness is the moment of absolute luminosity. Religion, religious experience which taken seriously (and one of the good sides of Cultural Studies is the imperative to take the Other seriously) is to some extent genuinely beyond culture; it is Divine intervention, it is not humanly created. One has to entertain that possibility as—at least—an intellectual option, and imagine the mystic moment as non-cultural. Anthropologists often flatten religion out into a positivist collection of features and rituals, and that is surely part of it and accessible to Cultural Studies. But I think that the genuine numinousness might be beyond Cultural Studies as is the absence of meaning altogether.

In contrast to the culturalism of Cultural Studies, with its semiotic optimism, critical theory, the Frankfurt School, is heir to the genuine Enlightenment tradition of absolute skepticism, calling every putative meaning into question, subjecting it

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all to an ideological criticism, and imagining every collective identity as manipulated and authoritarian. The only collective identities that the genuine Frankfurt School allows is the totalitarian mob and the movie fans. Now Cultural Studies would say, "Oh no that is all meaningful and we have to figure out what it is all about" whereas Critical Theory would say "Hell, that's meaningful; that is manipulation and enforced stupidity by the culture industry."

Now to come back to "the culture of poverty": the danger of Cultural Studies and its culturalism is to buy into a notion of a "culture of poverty": the poor are just like any other possible collective group with its own culture and one lives this way in the slums with these sorts of rites, meanings and symbols, and one lives this way in the suburbs with these sorts of rites, symbols and meanings and Cultural Studies can examine them both with anthropological equanimity and is ultimately incapable of making a distinction because it is unwilling to address the level either of meaningless or brute force. Following this path Cultural Studies ultimately ends up in a right Hegelian position of justifying the "culture of poverty" as just another culture

disClosure: One about which we have no basis for judgment....

Berman: Sure, because we have denied the existence of universals and norms. So this is why culturalism can become conformism, since with the assumption that everything is meaningful it will inevitably end up claiming that the real is rational, which is right wing Hegelianism.

Regionalisms, Human Rights and the Bases for Moral Judgement

disClosure: Your position on conflict between regionalisms and universalisms leads me to ask if regionalism is always conservative. In a recent talk you gave at the University of Kentucky I got the sense that the regionalists, the people who want to pay attention to localities, somehow always end up politically conservative. You asked "Can normative democracy have a specific character?" And also "How can we talk about human rights in China?" So I'm trying to think through the relations between the region and conservatism.

Berman: The way you talk about human rights in China is by insisting that being human entails some inalienable rights, which is akin to the Enlightenment declaration of independence in thought. I remember during the Vietnam era, in response to some of the self immolations of Buddhist monks protesting American intervention, General Westmoreland said that the American public should not be concerned

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about this because Asians have a different relationship to death. Now that is cultural relativism writ large, and I think that Cultural Studies has to figure out a way to distinguish itself epistemologically from General Westmoreland. Clearly Cultural Studies is at pains to distinguish itself politically and empirically, wrapping itself in the red flag as it were, saying "Oh we have nothing to do with Westmoreland." But in fact this is the same epistemological terrain; it has no grounds to talk about human rights in China, because the only way to do so is to try to imagine some kind of universalist capacity. Now that universalist capacity does not have to be as positive as "Everyone has access to salvation through Christ," but must be open to an emphatic critique of the question "what is human"? If one denounces that discourse as an expression of "western imperialism" then there are no grounds for that criticism. But of course if there are no grounds for the critique of human rights in China, then there are probably no grounds for critique of Apartheid in South Africa, also another culture. And if there is no grounds for critique of Apartheid in South Africa, then there are probably no grounds for Americans to talk about British police actions in Northern Ireland. And if there are no grounds for Americans to talk of British police actions in Northern Ireland, there are probably no grounds for... ad infinitum. Every critique becomes a matter of outside intervention which is denounced from the standpoint of Cultural Studies' "semiotic optimism."

disClosure: So on what can we ground universalist claims, or claims to some value?

Berman: Well, I suggested one before: the capacity for culture itself. That does not necessarily lead to any particular conclusion. It is probably somewhat more conservative than the UN Declaration on Human Rights which has a sort of Jacobin clarity to it. But the human capacity to create meaningful worlds could be read in both an *individual* sense, drawing on the young Marx's belief that every human can be free, creative and active, and therefore structures that deny this freedom might be subject to sanction. Or it could be read in a *communitarian* way, for culture is also a shared collective undertaking. That is why I say Cultural Studies would not necessarily lead to a particular judgment in individual cases. But that is not necessarily bad because in all judgments there is always a big pragmatic dimension and we might as well concede it. That is the answer to the remark regarding universalism.

Frankly right now I find more interesting the question about regionalism and conservatism. Much of the history of the past two or three hundred years has involved the creation of larger and larger political and economic structures. There are

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probably counter examples, but it is also probably indisputable that it is itself intimately related to the Enlightenment. So at least in this period there is a directionality to human activities. Regionally, in addition to this bigger sphere there is also heightened mobility. Therefore a regional identification necessarily tends to be conservative as measured against the general trend of modernization. Again there can be counter examples.

disClosure: I was just trying to think it through in the context of German unification. Many people argue that the constitutional clause which was applied to East Germany unification had originally been written for the Alsace, and that each of the five states of the former GDR should have had its own referendum and autonomously requested (or refused) annexation to the larger union. So I am thinking too of the possibility that a state, say perhaps Thüringen, might have said that it did indeed want to join the West, but that would have been quite a different sort of process.

Berman: The question I would have asked would be whether regional identification, which can be both an expression of current local interest including community control and direct democracy, as well as possibly including a stronger temporal dimension, will tend to be "the expression of those who have not yet moved away." This may, perhaps, be the source of greater counter-hegemonic potential than one would expect, which is to say that in this case maybe conservatism is more counter-hegemonic than progressivism.

disClosure: I can certainly see that in the German case.

Berman: We can talk about Germany of course, but I still want to challenge Cultural Studies; I think that conservatism is probably the genuine alterity to Cultural Studies and the one alterity that it is afraid to touch.

disClosure: An alterity that Cultural Studies is likely to represent as no alterior, but as the hegemonic center. I am interested in your critique of the Cultural Studies attack on the dominant actor by going out to the rest of the world and setting up the idea that perhaps it is the *outside* that is actually active, through the complex play of power, domination and hegemony, while the *inside* is inactive, hegemonic, and boring. You suggest that the inside also acts and there is a genuine interaction. When I read this claim in the introduction to *Cultural Studies of Modern Germany*, my first reaction was "Oh you can't say that, that is conservative." You are saying

the inside might affect something positively. I would like you to talk some more about the relations between "insides" and "outsides."

Berman: I think that you put it quite well. The received opinion is that the margin, minority, the fragment—it is all a sort of romantic trope—is the interesting site as opposed to the hegemonic, stable, reified, ossified, morbid center. I wonder if that binary is not just a vestige of 18th century sentimentalism, and that in fact culture works much differently. In particular there is always an interaction between center and margin, between subversion and order, and that the possibility of culture, or of successful culture, might depend on a capacity for traditionalism. By traditionalism I mean a constant reference to the past in a non-reified way, that is to say a past which includes its reevaluation and restructuring.

Traditionalism is denounced in a caricatured form as holding on desperately to a long dead canon, or pre-modern values. But maybe traditionalism transforms the past in passing it on. Maybe one way I can highlight the claim I am making is to suggest that in many of the theoretical statements around Cultural Studies, the insistence on the non-essentialism of identity is made and instead identity is cast as relationship. What is meant is that the differences among various simultaneous actors is the frame of the terrain in which symbolic orders are played out, rather than, perhaps, each actor having a clear and legible identity in isolation from what used to be called a "soul."

Now, my critique of that is not to try to resurrect the soul, perish the thought, but to suggest that the model of relationality, derived as it is from certain structuralist accounts, suffers from the presentism of structuralism, what is often called the "anthropological present," and tends to obscure temporal connections. Identity is spatialized, and temporality comes up short. Within relationality then, I would want to include a temporal relationality as well, which includes therefore an involvement both with the past and with the future, and in fact, which recognizes that a capacity to engage with the future depends on a vital relationship with the past, hence traditionalism. The enforced amnesia of contemporary society, in which both Disneyland and Cultural Studies presentism participate, effectively rob communities of relations to their past, and therefore prohibits them from having any capacity to act teleologically toward an improved future.

disClosure: I'd like to consider "amnesia" as you have just described it a bit more. A notion of "unification as forgetting" was set up in discussion around your lecture when you suggested that "we have to have amnesia in order to get out of this

business." In the current-day German context I think of Rambout and Gauck, who oversee dissemination of information from the files of the East German Secret police. I see at least three possibilities for these files. Many people say "let's just keep those files hidden". But there's also Benjamin's critique of Saint-Simonianism: we should not rebuild cities, because we need them there as a reminder of what's happened. That would suggest that the files should be preserved as a sobering monument or warning. The third alternative is the dead weight of history, what Benjamin calls historicism, which I think in the unification context would probably be the PDS (the old "Communist" party in East Germany). I wonder if you could talk about how to operationalize Benjamin's analysis of materialist pedagogy when we think about unification in the 90s in Germany.

Berman: We were moving beyond the presentism of one-dimensional culture studies and we're beginning to recognize the importance of a relationship to the past, a productive and vital relationship to the past. Then we noticed Nietzsche with his distinction among various uses and abuses of history. Not any relation to the past is a good relation to the past, and there are some unfortunate relations to the past that are not merely forgetting, antiquarianism, a dead weight of the past, but that can debilitate. These may well be constitutive in any identity formation as the character to resist the forces of reunification.

Now, the argument that I make with regard to German unification is that the 40 years of experience in the GDR are now being subsumed into a triumphalist history of West Germany. And without in any way suggesting that the East Germans' Socialism was a successful undertaking, I do note that there are 17 million people there who went through an awful lot, and are faced with a set of current discourses which imply an across-the-board devaluation of their biographies. They're being told that 40 years of their lives don't count, that they were worthless and any defender of the worth of that experience (not the worth of the regime, but the worth of the experience) runs the risk of being subjected to police-state like leaks from the hidden documents. So the Stasi documents, evidence of massive collaboration, this dead weight of the past is held over the East German population to assure its docility in the process of unification. The result will be alienation and resentment.

The extraordinary success of the PDS is due not to Communist nostalgia, although that's some component of it, or to any of the other excuses that are mounted for it. This is an expression of resentment against the universalist arrogance of West German political culture. In many ways, therefore, this situation is comparable to

resentment in the former Confederacy against the universalist arrogance of the Union after 1865. Hence the image I use of "carpet-bagging Wessies."

disClosure: Which gets back to question of how do we balance those two? There's no easy formula.

Berman: Right, there's no easy formula. I don't know. It may be that there is a way to theorize this, but it also may be a matter of examining particular cases. What would be the two possible options? One of them would be to say "the universal norms are valid and applied, but one should be extremely reluctant in imposing their application". There's a difference—a big difference—between critiquing the "ethnic cleansing" and intervening to stop the "ethnic cleansing." There's a difference between judgment and action. Or the other way to balance it is to understand that local memories are always going to become complex and diverse and that there's an obligation to side with the particular local memory closest to the universalist aspirations. That second model would be the justification for the North's invasion of the South in the US Civil War, if the North had invaded the South to put an end to slavery. But of course that's a dubious claim.

Western Cultural Hegemony and the Collapse of the Former Soviet Bloc

disClosure: I would like to explore a point that I think in some ways speaks to the Western response to the collapse of the so-called Eastern bloc and relate it to some of the points we discussed a moment ago about Cultural Studies. There are those, among them Mary Louise Pratt and Stephan Greenblatt, who suggest that the Enlightenment experience of new lands and new peoples is not just a matter of trying to cram these people and places into a flat topos, the taxonomy of Linnaeus, but also, at every moment, is a reflexive reconstitution of the Western self. I think Greenblatt makes this most clear in his book *Marvelous Possessions*. What that seems to imply is a kind of anxiety that's inherent in Western Enlightenment, and one almost gets the sense that this was the primary drive behind the Western response to the collapse of Eastern Bloc: the colonization of Eastern European identities as "other", as pure lack/absence in comparison with presence of the triumphant West. That impulse seems to drive a complete devalorization of Eastern Bloc experience, as you've specifically mentioned vis a vis the former GDR.

Berman: I see those two movements at the beginning and at the end of the West, as so very different. In the 16th, 17th, 18th, 19th centuries, the West was attempting to draw the non-European lands into this sphere. After 1989, the West

was extremely confused by the collapse of the Soviet Empire, even today, has by no means come up with the anything like a coherent foreign policy. On the one hand, the applause for Gorbachev and his dismantling of Communism, seen as the ultimate victory of capitalism, and the end of the Cold War; on the other hand, let us just review the glorious histories of the presidents of the "land of the free," from President Bush, in his Kiev speech, arguing against Ukrainian independence, his appalling apologies for the Gorbachev massacres, to president Clinton's memorable remark that the bombing of Grozny, Chechnya was an internal Russian affair, presumably in the same sense as the massacre in Waco was an internal American affair. Now, in these cases, there is an effort not to include Russia and its realm, but to *exclude* it.

The same ambiguity applies in the Balkan War, which leads to this extraordinary debilitation, and the same Faustian dividedness in soul, that is characteristic of the born-again Republicans with regard to foreign policy. For, if you think they're confused on domestic policy, I challenge you to tell me what their foreign policy would be. It can range from giving in to their long-standing anti-Russian hostilities and therefore deciding to bomb the Serbs, or giving in to their long-standing isolationist sympathies, and telling the Bosnians to "go to Hell". And it's also a choice between the globalism of Dole and Bush or the isolationism of Buchanan. So I don't think there's a clear response on the part of the West.

I've just spoken about the United States and Americans, but you're absolutely right that, as different as this is from the colonial model, the same kinds of fundamental issues are at stake. The specificity of the West and the assertion of the universal validity of these structures are at stake. If we looked at the colonial period more closely we would find similar splits. I know that in the history of German colonialism there was a lot of conservative opposition to colonialism, as I'm sure there was in England or France. Colonialism was a very weird undertaking, and it by no means represented what the whole nation or even the whole ruling class, if I may, wanted to do. That's another reason why a certain kind of post-colonial theory is amiss if it sees colonialism as the sole necessary outcome of Western Eurocentricity, because there were surely many opponents of Western culture: including Germans, French, British, and Russians who didn't want to get involved in colonizing, for both progressive *and* conservative reasons.

In many of these cases it's precisely the progressive elements who are for colonialism because colonialism is seen as a modernizing impulse. Colonialism is just the prehistory of foreign aid. The old new left critique that foreign aid is part of

imperialism means that foreign aid is just the post World War II version of colonialism. So then what is the Congressional Black Caucus up to when it wants to preserve foreign aid?

disClosure: With respect to the former Yugoslavia I can see clearly how we end up in this situation of "involved noninvolvement" as a result of these rather mixed, crossed motives. On the one hand we want to gauge our force, on the other hand we want to assuage our political consciences by emplacing an embargo, which in fact is a form of involvement.

Berman: I don't think that the embargo's going to assuage anybody's conscience. The act of the embargo is like the ban on selling arms to the Spanish Republicans in the Spanish Civil War; a minimal step in the right direction would be lifting the embargo.

I think that, looked at in any kind of sober way, the only way to preserve Yugoslavia would have been if the West had been prepared to introduce a massive influx of arms to keep it together. It's very difficult to find a compelling moral argument against Croats living in independence, just as I think, by the way, that it's very difficult to find a compelling moral argument against Chechnian independence, except for the absolute priority of the right of Moskovites to cheap oil. If historically constituted peoples want to achieve a kind of national sovereignty, on what grounds do outsiders have a right to embargo against it? One could certainly force them back, but let's not pretend that this is a right.

disClosure: What you've just articulated, I think, speaks back to your earlier comment about cultural universalism based on, as I understood what you were saying, essentially an empathizing with other individuals, other peoples' desires to be distinct, and to articulate themselves with different spaces and times.

Berman: What would happen if one of these peoples declared itself to be distinct, and decided to persecute an internal minority? At what point do other states, should other states, imagine intervening? In other words, put it to a test. It's a very interesting question, but let's not pretend that we've gotten very far on it. The only case where intervention has international legitimacy in order to protect minorities was the United Nations decision to limit Iraqi sovereignty with regard to its persecution of the Kurds and the Shiites. Because of the potential ramifications for national sovereignty globally surely the United Nations is not going to do that to any of the members of the Security Council.

disClosure: And on that note, you sound very much like that part of Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* which castigates not Enlightenment as such, but as I think they put it, Enlightenment which has relinquished the possibilities for its own realization.

Berman: Enlightenment thought should engage the possibility for its own unrealized through encounters with alterities in ways that do not segregate those alterities and assume their absolute incompatibility.

disClosure: And by extension refuse to recognize one's own, the alterity of the "I" within that system, which I think is one of the components of, certainly Adorno's writings, and probably also Benjamin's, that Western scholars find most uncomfortable: their steadfast pushing of the implications theoretically and politically of the recognition of the alterior "I" itself. Perhaps that's the opposite moment of that colonizing aspect of Enlightenment.

French Theory, German Theory, Cultural Theory

disClosure: We've been talking about the Frankfurt School and dominance, but of course there's the poststructuralist argument for particularity. I want to build a bridge across the Rhine of theory. What kind of affinities and distinctions do you see between Poststructuralism and Critical Theory?

Berman: I think that, in the culture war within the left (as opposed to the culture war between the left and the right) a lot of trivial comments are made about German theory/ French theory. Theory doesn't have a passport. "Theory doesn't need a passport" is what I'd like to say, because, as theory, it raises claims to universal validity. Otherwise it's not theory. The distinction is more specious given the clear indebtedness of the Structuralist and post-structuralist tradition to Heidegger and Freud, those noted Frenchmen, and the strong internalization on the part of the German Enlightenment historically of Rousseau and other French thinkers. So to think about this as German thought or as French thought is initially wrong. And it's also subsequently wrong. Nevertheless, there will remain thinkers within Germany and thinkers within France—to the extent that thinkers remain at all.

I think the issue is, in both cases, that theory entails statements which lay claim to universal validity but which derive from particular experience. Then the question becomes: What is the particular experience and especially, imagined sheer particular experience in Germany and France. So I think the delightful surprise for Cultural

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Studies is that in both cases the issue of national identity is sure to continue to concern thinkers in those two countries in coming years both because of the extent of refugee movements and labor mobility but also because of the challenges facing the European Union.

disClosure: What does the Frankfurt School offer us on this that post-structuralists don't or can't?

Berman: I think what the Frankfurt School and poststructuralism have in common has to do with the fragility and diversity of identity structures. In a sense, I suppose, that betrays homologous intellectual historical lineages. The Frankfurt School is a paratactic answer to the cohesive wholeness of Hegelian Marxism, Georg Lukac and of orthodox Marxism in general. Now, poststructuralism is a de-centered alternative to the reified structures that bored French students to tears in the 1960s, so in a certain sense they're parallel, they're both moving toward more complex formulations. In both cases there's a particular historical reason. And one has to ask what can one get from each critique of reason, and what is incompatible with that critique of reason. I think one might begin with the discussion that in some poststructuralism, by no means all, there's a real emphatic theorization of gender issues for example, not very noticeable in the Frankfurt School, although that may be an expression of generational difference.

disClosure: Well, including surely, even a critique of the possibility of theory itself, which is not often as manifest in poststructuralist thinking as, for example in the late works of Adorno, *Minima Moralia* in particular, and I guess in all the works of Benjamin. Which returns us, I think, to somewhere near where we began, in the sense that we not theorize just the appropriate mode of theorizing about cultures, which is very much one of the primary motivations of Cultural Studies as such, but a critique of theorizing as such and its relation to culture and politics, in which I think much more of the Adorno-Benjamin axis.

Berman: Yes, I think that's a good distinction between the two tendencies. Poststructuralism, for all its anti-logocentricity, pretty much ends up politically correct and conformist, whereas Critical Theory is rarely politically correct and its theory is much more naturally politically incorrect because of its much more emphatic doubts about the substance of progressivism. I think there are strong elitist and hegemonic moments within poststructuralism, I think to the extent that it has involved a multiplicity of language games and therefore gives up universality, it strips away any possibility of an effective and consistent critique say, of the, dis-

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mantling of the redistributive mechanisms of the welfare state. But despite that conformist banter, despite that moment in poststructuralism, it exists in the academy in a strange hybridization with the progressivist sympathies of many of its proponents. That is, poststructuralists tend to be liberals despite the labile connection between progressivism in politics and the theoretical resistance to any narrative of progress. In contrast, the Frankfurt School raises grand doubts about the substance of any particularly positive progressivism while at the same time, in the background, there is an aspiration to ultimate emancipation. So it stands the poststructuralist situation on its head.