

Surely, I said, knowledge is the food of the soul, and we must take care, my friend, that the Sophist does not deceive us when he praises what he sells, like the dealers, wholesale or retail, who sell the food of the body, for they praise indiscriminately all their goods without knowing what is really beneficial or hurtful for the body. . . . If you know which of his wares are good and which are evil, you may safely buy knowledge of Protagoras or of anyone, but if not, then, my friend, watch out, don't take risks, don't gamble, with the most precious thing you have. For there is far greater risk in buying knowledge than in buying food and drink. The one you purchase of the wholesale or retail dealer, and carry them away in other vessels, and before you receive them into the body as food or drink, you may deposit them at home and call in an expert to give you advice—who knows what is good to be eaten and drunk, and what not, and how much, and when, and then the risk of purchasing them is not so great. But you cannot buy knowledge and carry it away in another vessel, when you have paid for it you must receive it into the soul and go on your way, either greatly harmed or greatly benefited. These things let us investigate with our elders, for we are still young—too young to determine such a matter. And now let us go, as we were intending, and hear Protagoras.

SOCRATES IN PLATO'S *Protagoras*

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PREFACE

For many writers and scholars, the current prominence of literary theory is evidenced in the "postmodernist" consensus that seems to exist among progressive thinkers, activists, and cultural workers. Those on the Left who defend theory often point to the need for a thoroughgoing critique of some of the traditionally enshrined ideals of the dominant culture: truth, rationality, the objectivity of knowledge and values. What is specifically postmodernist, however, is not the critique of tradition itself—for such a critique was central to the Enlightenment project of modernity as well—but rather the more far-reaching claim that truth and rationality are always socially and discursively constructed and their validity and applicability are necessarily limited to their particular contexts or situations. They have, it is claimed in principle, no general or universal import.

One of my intentions in this book is to examine this postmodernist claim by breaking it down into some of its constituent assertions and presuppositions. Since I believe postmodernism is a popular intellectual position on the Left, I look at it critically and politically to decipher both the reasons for its attractiveness and the theoretical conclusions it implies or entails. My critique attempts to cut a bit deeper than standard arguments for or against postmodernism (or, in literary-critical circles, specific versions of poststructuralism) have allowed us to do. Thus I recast the issues by focusing most centrally on the various postmodernist arguments against objectivity, examining the move from local discussions about textual meaning or the complexity of cultural interpretation to the larger claims about the status of knowledge.

My other aim in this book is to explore and develop a theoretical alternative to the notion of objectivity which is assailed by postmodernists, an alternative position that can be characterized in philosophical terms as "realist." Since I believe that a strong and defensible notion of objectivity best serves our progressive cultural and political projects, my critique of postmodernism's epistemological claims and my elaboration of a realist alternative should be seen as a left critique of what is now the dominant current within the Left. They also constitute an invitation to readers to reexamine some of the key arguments and positions in contemporary cultural theory and politics. That is why I have organized the book as a more or less continuously developed argument, with the first part (Chapters 1-4) examining familiar positions and debates in literary theory and the second part (Chapters 5-7) urging the need for a reformulation of the epistemological issues underlying our cultural debates.

For polemical purposes, my central theses can be summarized and situated in the following way: The key postmodernist claims I identify derive from well-motivated political desires and agendas but are seriously underdemonstrated. Underlying these claims is a cluster of arguments about the untenability of objective knowledge, but these arguments cannot be adequately examined without a consideration of strong theoretical alternatives such as those realism provides. Seen in this comparative light, postmodernism does not appear very attractive as a philosophical position or as a political perspective. I maintain that a postpositivist realism (of the kind developed in the 1970s and the 1980s) would be attentive to the postmodernist's cautions about the social and historical entanglements of knowledge and would enable us to explain the distortions of ideology and political power. At the same time, however, it can provide us with a sophisticated and usable notion of objectivity as an ideal of inquiry, as a reasonable social hope rather than the dream of transcendence.

It is on the basis of such a notion of objectivity that I sketch (in Chapter 7) the outlines of a cultural politics that can combine a radical universalist moral vision with a genuine multiculturalism. I thus implicitly reformulate the terms of a very old debate over the Enlightenment's claims to a progressive epistemology and politics. Since Johann Georg Hamann and Johann Gottfried Herder mounted their powerful attacks on the Enlightenment's universalist conceptions of reason, morality, and history, arguing instead for the irreducibility of cultural particularity and diversity, many writers and scholars have tended to see universalism and particularism as inevitably opposed ideals. European

romanticism defined and deepened this tendency, seeing its project as a defense of culture against reason, of diversity of values against monism and uniformity. My realist accounts of cultural identity, reason, and value are meant to take us beyond this opposition by showing how moral universalism and multiculturalism are compatible and indeed complementary ideals. I outline a vision of cultural diversity based on the claim that "cultures" are fields of moral inquiry, with room for objective knowledge as well as for error or mystification. Multiculturalism, I argue, should be defined as a form of epistemic cooperation across cultures.

A serious critical debate between postmodernism and the realist position thus requires clarity about the underlying theoretical issues and questions. While these theoretical issues surface in current debates in literary and cultural criticism, they in fact also reflect the urgencies of our progressive social and political movements, the deepest challenges posed by contemporary history. My understanding of the issues and questions I write about here is shaped by my personal engagement with these problems and these ideals. The decolonization of the third world and our postcolonial dreams of both internationalist solidarity and cultural pluralism, the ongoing struggles against racism, sexism, and social inequalities of all kinds, the democratic and anti-imperialist movements of our own day as well as the ethical imperative to reexamine and transform our personal and social identities—these are some of the contexts that have defined for me the tasks and goals of theory, including literary theory. This book is an attempt at a certain kind of clarification. It is also a call to reformulate and extend the terms of our theoretical debates.

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