

who an outsider would describe as a redneck. There he is holding a sign reading 'King's Dream Lives!' After this was all over, I went on retreat with some of the leaders. There was a lot of crying and opening up. My God, how these men's values have changed. They talked about how working to rule was the most liberating moment of their lives, how they were for once in control. They come away from this with values of solidarity and community, values beyond striving only for a few dollars more. They come away with that which is very difficult to find today: their humanity."

It would be nice if that were the end of this story. The next night I meet Pat Buchanan's local coordinator, 49-year-old Teamster member John (Bob) Patkus. He's just gotten some bad news: A few hours earlier he was told he would soon lose his \$6,000-a-year second job. ABF Freight Company has announced 450 layoffs, and after twenty years of working weekends, he's one of them. He's also not too happy about the concessions his full-time employer, RJR Nabisco, has been demanding as of late. "There are no more real jobs

out there," he says. "Americans are getting squeezed."

Patkus has brought me to his Glad Tidings Assembly of God church, a fundamentalist group that has mushroomed from a pro-life prayer circle into a 500-strong congregation in the same handful of years as the Decatur labor wars. Here one finds a cradle-to-grave operation, providing all the social services and community once offered to immigrant groups by labor organizations. One also finds lots of blue-collar workers here, many of them active union members. One U.P.I.U. worker from Mueller Company, dressed in the khaki uniform of the Assembly's worldwide corps of "God-centered" Royal Rangers—a kind of Cub Scouts for Jesus—says he was sympathetic to the Staley workers and fears twelve-hour shifts are coming his way, too. How is he planning to vote? Anybody But Clinton. Probably Bob Dole. "I'm pro-life," he says. I meet another Teamster, Tom Campbell, who says he loves the church and is proud of its expansion. What's the secret to its growth, I ask? "Pastor has taught us the value of teamwork. Individuals are powerless," Campbell says. "He has taught us that in union there is strength." ■

THE RIGHT'S ATTACK ON 'CULTURAL RELATIVISM' AS SYNECDOCHE FOR ALL THAT AILS US

# Patterns of Culture Wars

MICAELA DI LEONARDO

*In the public sphere, the New Right's having hissy fits,*

*Talking of Boas and Mead and Herskovits.*

*(with apologies to T.S. Eliot)*



IGOR KOPELITSKY

As Jane Austen might have written: It is a truth universally acknowledged that a right wing in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a winning ideology. Thus our Culture Wars, literally manufactured since the 1970s, as Ellen Messer-Davidow and others have documented, through massive, strategic infusions of cash. For decades, we have been engaged in nearly futile wars of position in debates on political correctness, multiculturalism and women's studies versus "academic standards" in the schools; the morals of rap music and television serials; public funding of "obscene" art and the proper public messages to be disseminated by museums. This process is a shell game, a pre-empting of intelligent public discussion of the grotesque, federal policy-driven upward shift in income and wealth distribution since the 1970s—the United States is now the most unequal industrialized state in the world, with the smallest middle class. It is at the same time an attack on public cultural phenomena that are real, and real in their effects. For good reason, then, the buzz inside the Beltway now is that the Republicans' motto for the coming elections is "It's the culture, stupid."

Far more, however, is being accomplished under the flag of Culture Wars than has been recognized. In particular, since the 1980s neoconservatives have developed an increasing fascination with anthropological topics. We've seen Pat Buchanan's *Zulus*, Saul Bellow's "Proust of the Papuans," Allan Bloom's indictment of the discipline's "sex obsession," Newt Gingrich's innately giraffe-hunting men and the multiple scathing references to Boas, Mead, Benedict, Herskovits and a host of contemporary practitioners in Dinesh D'Souza's latest simulacrum of scholarship, *The End of Racism*. Thus the Culture Wars onslaught means both art, entertainment and higher education, and the "other cultures," including domestic ones, thought to be the province of anthropology. The growing negative cynosure of the New Right's eye, however, is not anthropology as a whole but the anthropological construction of cultural relativism, or the attempt to envision other cultures from within their own cognitive frameworks. That knackered old warhorse of the introductory anthropology classroom is up and running again, stung to seeming life with injections of New Right steroids.

Coincidentally, this academic year marks the centenaries of two anthropologists today most closely associated with the concept—of Franz Boas's first appointment at Columbia University and of the birth of his student, Melville Herskovits, who founded the department of anthropology at Northwestern University. And this *fin de siècle*, eerily like the last, witnesses the perverse combination of rapidly increasing class and race in-

*Micaela di Leonardo is completing Exotics at Home: Anthropologies, Others, American Modernity (Chicago). She teaches anthropology and women's studies at Northwestern University.*

equalities, resurgent racism mixed with voyeuristic denunciation of sexual "perversity," xenophobia, institutionalized feminism under duress and tempted toward bourgeois and racist interests—all coexisting with the most bathetic romanticization of The Primitive. In order to fight this century's Culture Wars more effectively than we did the last, we would do well to attend to both senses of "culture."

Sheer volume is one good index of cultural relativism's growing importance in the public sphere. A Lexis/Nexis search reveals scattered but increasing—and almost all negative—references to the topic in the popular press during the 1970s and into the mid-1980s. At first, in the Carter years, the references are made by moderates, and are used to indict straw people, just off-camera, who are "going too far." Christopher Jencks, for example, complains in 1978 in *The Washington Post* of a "kind of spongy cultural relativism that treats all ideas as equally defensible." *The New York Times*, in a 1980 editorial against execution by stoning in Khomeini's Iran, thunders, "Cultural relativism has its limits, and at some point tolerance becomes complicity." But then the gloves come off, and all pretense of reasoned debate is abandoned. The Heritage Foundation announces with horror in 1981 cultural relativism's "deep and, it would seem, lasting inroads into society." Leonard Kriegel in 1984 approvingly cites William Bennett, and complains of American education that "cultural relativism was in; the traditional literary canon was out"; while Phyllis Schlafly's Eagle Forum comes out against "secular humanism and cultural relativism" in the schools. Note the slipperiness of "culture" across these references, the way that appreciating Toni Morrison and wussing out on judging cruel and unusual punishment (and just exactly where were these Western cheerleaders for Khomeini?) get equated in the new all-purpose rightist indictment.

At mid-decade, with Reagan's second term, the pattern of occurrence takes on the mathematical neatness of the wren-tit's call: deliberate notes, each incrementally faster than the next, until all individuality is lost in a buzzing trill of noise. References are not as frequent as those to O.J. or Madonna, of course, but from the early 1990s into the present, no week has passed without one or two snide print media swipes, part of our rodomontade of xenophobic babbitt. *The New Republic* whines in 1987 that "cultural relativism stops us saying that our ways are best." William Pfaff complains in 1988 that cultural relativism allows universities (Orwell is turning in his grave) "to shove truth down the memory hole." Digby Anderson in *National Review* in 1991, not to be outdone, excoriates "repellent cultural relativism" that says "that any culture is as good as any other, you know, black Africans had a Renaissance which outshone the West's, it's just that the West has obliterated it with colonialism." William Henry, in *In Defense of Elitism* (1994), favorably reviewed in *The New York Times*, actually writes that "it is scarcely the same thing to put a man on the moon as to put a bone in your nose."

For the New Right, obviously, cultural relativism is simply one of the many arrows in its Culture Wars quiver that successfully reaches its mark—that is picked up across popular cul-

ture—and so is used again and again. (Even the radical *Village Voice* columnist Ellen Willis recently blamed it for the American left's incoherence on Bosnia.) "Secular humanism," for example, which was attacked frequently in the early Reagan years, was found to have no appeal outside the already committed Christian right, and has been largely jettisoned. But newly respectable racism and anxieties about an increasingly multiracial America and the diminished place of the United States in the New World Order have combined to give the concept tremendous negative salience. If

*For the New Right, cultural relativism is simply one of the many arrows in its Culture Wars quiver that successfully reaches its mark.*

"cultural relativism as stigma" were a movie, we'd have to say it's got real legs.

But what exactly animates those legs? The diatribe

against "cultural relativism" is an extraordinary one-stop shop for a *bricolage* of New Right causes. Consider: It links parochial American notions of the "heathen ways" of foreigners and domestic racial minorities to the widespread public sense that, in spawning civil rights, feminism, gay rights and "entitlement" (economic democracy), the 1960s "went too far," "denied our Western traditions" in favor of a "permissiveness" connected somehow to exactly those "heathen ways." Thus the rightist feeding frenzy surrounding Derek Freeman's 1983 attack on Margaret Mead's Samoa research.

D'Souza, inspired by Allan Bloom's diatribes against it, sees cultural relativism as the product of anthropology's early-century dominance by Franz Boas, whose leftism and Jewishness he finds reason to mention repeatedly. He mounts a broad-based indictment of the "culturally relativist" work of Boas and all his students, which somehow also indicts feminism and gay rights. He interprets cultural relativism in typical kitchen-sink fashion as the heresy that "denies that race is a meaningful natural category and holds that all cultures are equal...group differences are largely the product of environment and specifically of unjust discrimination...the mission of sound policy is not to civilize the barbarians, but to fight racism and discrimination... According to the relativist paradigm, the apparently outrageous customs of other cultures were to be politely overlooked, or explained as ingenious and necessary adaptations to the special needs of a particular environment."

Not only is this a ridiculous set of statements—even as parody it is a mush of three separate arguments: the modern scientific understanding of race as contingent gene frequencies, not permanently bounded populations; classic liberal political pluralism; and the radical demand that culture be considered in the context of wealth and political power. But there is strategy in intellectual mushiness, and this potpourri of criticisms reanimates the dominant Victorian view of race, culture and civilization.

This vision is nowadays, as my childhood family physician Doctor Sal used to say of viruses, "goin' around." Despite the fact that his egregious racism was bare-faced enough to prompt black neocons Robert Woodson and Glenn Loury to resign in a huff from the American Enterprise Institute, D'Souza is clearly part of a larger rightist attempt to siphon off diffuse but growing nostalgia for the style and certainties of the Victorians and Edwardians—*Masterpiece Theatre*, *Victoria* magazine,

Merchant/Ivory productions—for its own agenda. Paul Johnson's call for European recolonization of the Third World, Samuel Huntington's absurd racist pronouncements about the "coming clash of civilizations," Arthur Schlesinger's trumpeting of Europe as the "unique source" of all liberating ideas in world history, Gertrude Himmelfarb's fervent approval of the starving proletariat and workhouses of the Victorians, Murray and Herrnstein's racist revanchism in *The Bell Curve* and D'Souza's attempts to rehabilitate the old racist, imperialist traditions of nineteenth-century anthropology and to vilify their twentieth-century anthropological detractors are all part of this well-remunerated rightist campaign.

This campaign takes place, as it were, with and without footnotes—largely purged of its anti-Semitic base by and for the *Commentary* crowd, or not. Witness the extraordinary parallels between D'Souza and others and the anonymous filth that showed up recently in faculty mailboxes at Northwestern University (and that also has been circulating on the Internet). "Anti-Semitism—Found" rambles on, through eight tiny-print pages, about Jews as the "eternal enemy of mankind" who endanger America through their ownership of all mass media, using them to promote "the Jewish doctrines of race mixing, feminism, homosexual rights, etc." Franz Boas bulks large in the narrative as "a European Jew who came to dominate the Anthropology Department at Columbia University in 1896 when that science was in its embryonic stages." Boas's students—among them Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict ("two Gentile ladies whose books and field studies became mandatory reading for a whole genera-

tion")—"spread like a cancer across our land and began indoctrinating Americans with their Jewish Liberal point of view." Inherent to this doctrine is cultural relativism, which declares "there can be no objective standards by which any culture can be judged. A skull sucking aborigine is exactly equivalent to Thomas Jefferson." The only clear difference between these anonymous fascists and the other rightists higher on the ladder of respectability is simply which national and global populations they strategically include, in historian David Hollinger's phrase, in "the circle of the we."

Despite chimerical portraits drawn from without and within, anthropology's historical circle of the we has never been exactly global. Founded within the crucible of Victorian imperialism, the discipline was Janus-faced from its inception—involved both in the repeated discovery of the "psychic unity" of all humans, in E.B. Tylor's phrase, and in the tortured racist circumlocutions of skull-measuring biological anthropology, a tradition only ended after World War II and recently revived under the banner of sociobiology. Anthropological practice in every decade of this century, like that of all intellectual disciplines, has reflected the changing *Zeitgeist* and contemporary political contestations.

So whose "cultural relativism" is being dissed here? The term, like many of those adopted into popular culture from anthropology—"culture" itself, ethnocentrism, culture shock, ethnography—is a political and historical Rorschach blot. Whimsical popular commentators gloss it in Cole Porter terms: "anything

# BE ALERT!

Frustrated by the massive amount of mail and calls the right is able to muster on any issue at all? Tired of reading about one travesty of justice after another and not knowing what to do about it? Want to do something concrete to help further the progressive agenda?

Now *The Nation* has a special service to help you get your message across. Each month, *NationAlert* issues a hot-button bulletin on an issue you care about: human rights, health care reform, foreign policy, social justice, minority rights, the environment—so you can do something about the injustices reported on in our pages.

We'll put at your disposal our insider's Rolodex of key legislators, corporate decision-makers and progressive friends, so you can reach them by phone, letter, e-mail or fax. Plus, *NationAlert* gives you a detailed summary of the issue, a bibliography for further reading and updates on the effects of grass-roots initiatives.

**Make your voice heard! Become part of a growing political force!** Join *NationAlert* by sending \$18 for a one-year membership (12 monthly issues) to *NationAlert*, c/o *The Nation*, 72 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10011. Or enroll by phone with your Visa or MasterCard at (212) 242-8400 x207. Call or write now to receive our next alert!

**Nation**  
**ALERT**

IT'S YOUR VOICE—USE IT!

goes"—or, for the baby boom set, à la Sly Stone, "different strokes for different folks." Clearly the term bears some connection to Einsteinian relativity, and to other High Modernist schools of thought recognizing the intersubjectivity of knowledge. But anthropologists have meant, by and large, something rather narrower and more technical by the term. Despite popular imaginings, romantic visions of "the primitive" have been produced largely outside the discipline, and many anthropologists have warned of the inherent connections between "noble" and "nasty savage" representations. Moreover, in the name of science or of social justice, a significant group of anthropologists has always energetically rejected cultural relativism.

Franz Boas was a socialist in the nineteenth-century German tradition whose evolving concerns reflected both belief in a broad-based "science"—scholarly rigor—and intellectual organizing against racially restrictive immigration and eugenics movements, ultimately against fascism. His early ethnological experiences with Baffinland Eskimos confirmed his socialist humanitarianism. "The idea of a 'cultured' individual is merely relative," he wrote, and "a person's worth should be judged by his *Herzensbildung* [formation of the heart].... All that man can do for humanity is to further the truth, whether it be sweet or bitter."

Margaret Mead departed considerably from her adviser. A child of the Progressive Era, despite the many twists and turns of her half-century career, she was fundamentally a social engineer who envisioned Others as "natural laboratories" from whom "we"—she explicitly meant the Anglo-Saxon bourgeoisie and petite bourgeoisie—might borrow bits of culture to improve the mechanics of our own civilization. Neither Mead nor Boas, in any event, self-consciously articulated cultural relativism as a concept.

Ruth Benedict, far more politically attuned to Boas, also made use of the natural laboratory model in a creative amalgam with Gestalt psychology and a deeply egalitarian concern. Benedict did indeed articulate the notion that "the diversity of the possible combinations of culture-traits is endless, and adequate social orders can be built indiscriminately upon a great variety of them." But she also grasped the nettle of cultural difference in a world of power politics, arguing that "world-wide [white] cultural diffusion...has given to our culture a massive universality...which we read off...as necessary and inevitable." Melville Herskovits could be considered the discipline's uncultural relativist. He did write in 1955 that "morality is univer-

sal, exact forms are relative." But he explicitly confined this orientation to fieldwork, rejecting the "moral relativism" his attackers accused him of espousing.

The cold war-era anthropology that Herskovits represented, the array of structures of feeling and practices that James Clifford has labeled "ethnographic liberalism," reflected a specific orientation to politics in a specific historical conjuncture. Many anthropologists in this period found their niche in describing "culture" purely as shared cognition—and in defining their disciplinary place *beneath* the structures of state power. A major theme of such work was the illumination of alternative cultural logics, ways in which differing languages, kinship systems, notions of health and healing, legal practices, religious cosmologies, functioned together in other cultural settings. Such work rarely engaged with contemporary politics. Rather, anthropologists as a whole (with noteworthy radical exceptions) attempted to describe "culture change" in decolonizing and neocolonizing states as if the tumultuous political shifts of the postwar era had little to do with U.S. imperialism and Big Power politics.

Classic "cultural relativism," then, is a fascinating oxymoron, an exercise in powerful powerlessness. In its heyday it was a toothless liberalism that spoke judiciously and tolerantly of the varying "ways of mankind"—while remaining largely silent on both the role of Western power in the political-economic settings of these shifting practices and on the comfortable evaluative position of the Western (or non-Western) ethnographer viewing them. For a form of relativism, in other words, it wasn't very bloody relative.

In fact, contrary to the new conservative apologists for "our humanist traditions," cultural relativism is actually the descendant of our own precious Western belletristic heritage, a recurrent trope in the learned armchair essay in cultural criticism. Montaigne, in the sixteenth-century "Of Cannibals," famously adjures us to "take care not to cling to common opinions...[to] judge by the way of reason, and not by common report." He notes of Brazilian Indians' cannibalism that "there is more barbarity in eating a man alive [by European torture] than in eating him dead. We may, then, well call these people barbarians in respect to the rules of reason, but not in respect to ourselves, who, in all sorts of barbarity, exceed them." Montaigne allows the Indians to turn the tables on French society: "They observed that there were among us men full and crammed with all kinds of good things, while their [fellow citizens] were begging at their doors, emaciated with hunger and poverty; and they thought it strange that these needy [citizens] were able to suffer such injustice, and that they did not take the others by the throat and fire their houses."

Rightists, in fact, have made lavish use of this venerable trope. They simply reverse the evaluative arrows—as in "blacks and Arabs profited from the slave trade too"—or split relativist hairs in stigmatizing some while lauding other Others. Social thought is innately comparative, finding grounds for emulation and avoidance in the practices of temporal and geographic "other countries." For conservatives, it has always been a case of cultural relativism for me, but not for thee.

The attack on cultural relativism, then, is of a piece with the entire New Rightist program: the hypocritical attempt to rewrite the American morality play, to lay claim to virtue through focusing on

## SUBSCRIBER SERVICES

### MOVING?

Send both your old mailing label and your new address to:

THE NATION  
P O Box 37072  
Boone, IA 50037

Please allow 4-6 weeks for processing.

### PROBLEMS?

If you have any problems or questions regarding your subscription, please write to us at the address to the left, or call:

**1 (800) 333-8536**

Monday to Friday  
7:00 am to 11:00 pm CST  
Saturday & Sunday  
8:00 am to 6:00 pm CST

the mote in Others' eyes while ignoring the beam in one's own. Certainly, moral principles are important. But claiming that "cultural relativism tells us there are no ultimate moral principles" is a canard. All that most of the practitioners of my benighted discipline have ever advocated is the attempt, from the bedrock of one's own enculturation, to empathize with the moral logics of others. The planks of a progressive program, in any event—economic democracy, antiracism, feminism, gay rights, etc.—rest precisely on the invocation of ultimate moral principles. It's not a case of conservative tradition versus present-day license or rebellion, nor of "Western" civilization versus barbarism. We all have histories to extol and deplore; and, thanks to colonialism, all our histories are intermixed over the last half-millennium. It's their choice of globally produced traditions versus ours.

No, a self-conscious, politically engaged cultural relativism describes the intellectual process, as in the reception of art, of

willful suspension of disbelief for the purpose of gaining access to alternative ways of apprehending the universe—because they are there; because we are heirs to long (distinctly but not uniquely) Western traditions of stigmatizing Others that need to be unraveled if we are to know ourselves properly; because Western colonialism has affected even those customs we think of as most Other, and vice versa; because, in the Latin tag, nothing human is alien to us. Such a process is always partial: As the postmodernists are finally figuring out, relativizing is a liberatory technique that must always arise from a contingent, but nevertheless real, Archimedean standpoint. That standpoint is the investigation of the complex contours of political power for the purposes of furthering economic and political democracy. We need to judge, as Montaigne advised, "by the way of reason, and not by common report." Only in this way can we gain access to Boas's sweet and bitter truth. ■

'CORPORATE CAMPAIGNS' HIT BUSINESSES WHERE THEY LIVE. SO THEY'RE CRYING 'FOUL!'

# Union Do's: 'Smart Solidarity'

EYAL PRESS

*Thank God we have a system of labor where there can be a strike. Whatever the pressure, there is a point where the working man may stop.*

—Abraham Lincoln, 1860

*By striking they've quit their jobs.*

—Ronald Reagan, on the PATCO strikers, 1981



Fifteen years after Ronald Reagan fired the air traffic controllers, strikes in America have dipped to a fifty-year low, a mere one-eighth the level of two decades ago. If you think that business leaders no longer worry about the power of workers to take direct action, though, think again. With laws already on the books allowing temporary and permanent replacements, with the threats of downsizing and corporate flight further casting shadows over labor militancy, business leaders are nevertheless pressing ahead to win one added advantage over their employees. They now want Congress to ban organized labor's most effective recent tactical innovation—the anticorporate campaign.

Often called a "corporate campaign," its objective is to hit powerful and highly diversified companies on all fronts by investigating their affiliates, scrutinizing their environmental and investment records, organizing consumer boycotts, submitting shareholder resolutions, complaining to regulatory agencies and doing whatever else it takes to pressure management into a fair settlement.

On September 21 of last year a host of prominent business leaders—including Thomas Donahue, president of the Ameri-

can Trucking Association; Gary Hess, head of Associated Builders and Contractors; and Paul Huard, a senior vice president of the National Association of Manufacturers—gathered at the Marriott Hotel in Washington to demand that Congress take immediate steps toward making these campaigns illegal. "This kind of reprehensible conduct has no place in America and is totally beyond the bounds of the time-honored traditions of labor-management relations," thundered Donahue. A month later, Representative Peter Hoekstra of Michigan obliged with the first of what

may be many hearings on what is to be done. "We must make sure that the American workplace is a constructive arena in which the employee and the employer can work together," said Hoekstra, who chairs the House subcommittee that is investigating the matter.

Although labor's record with anticorporate campaigns is mixed (where they are used to the exclusion of or as a substitute for mass action they can demobilize the rank and file), what's worrying business now is a versatile and relentless offensive directed out of La Place, Louisiana, by United Steelworkers Local 9121 against Bayou Steel and RSR, one of the world's largest secondary lead smelters.

"This issue has reached the ideological boiling point for business," says Ed Keyser, representative of the Steelworkers' corporate campaign department. Keyser began helping the Steelworkers in 1993, when the Local struck Bayou, rejecting a contract proposal that called for no pay increases for six years and gave management the freedom to contract out any job. Since then the Steelworkers have attacked Bayou every which way—which is where RSR comes into the story. The two com-

Copyright of Nation is the property of Nation Company, Inc.. The copyright in an individual article may be maintained by the author in certain cases. Content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.