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Racism and Cultural Studies: Critiques of Multiculturalist Ideology and the Politics of Difference is a welcome treatise that deals provocatively with some of the major limitations of “cultural studies” as it is currently configured within the North American academy. Although the field of cultural studies is far from monolithic, San Juan Jr. identifies major theoretical trends that, in his view, have sufficiently diluted the radical intentions of its earliest progenitors. Innovatively building on his previous work (cf. San Juan Jr., 1998, 2000), the text is at once a theoretical and political indictment of what he calls “orthodox” cultural studies. The author, however, does not seek to dismiss the enterprise of cultural studies entirely; rather he takes issue with the political pusillanimity of some strands of cultural studies that have engaged in a wholesale and uncritical adoption of postmodernist and post-structuralist “doctrines.” In the author’s view, the rhetorical excesses of “post-al” approaches that valorize notions of “indeterminability” and “discursivity” and which lend themselves to an exorbitant “culturalism” have contributed to a “metaphysical turn in cultural studies” (p. 223). Over the span of eight chapters that address issues as varied as racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual politics, postcolonial studies, and academic culture wars, San Juan Jr. provides a wide-ranging critique of these “post-al” tendencies.

The author clearly and unabashedly articulates his frame of intelligibility as one informed by historical materialism and urgently encourages theorists to reclaim the various fertile and dynamic Marxist traditions (both Western and Third World Marxisms) that seek to conceptualize the connection between culture/knowledge production and the struggle for radical social, political, and economic transformation. San Juan Jr. provides a spirited critique of the “new times” and “difference politics” posturing of contemporary cultural studies and takes particular exception to those theories/theorists who have eagerly taken a wide detour around political economy and tended to assume that the principal points of political departure must necessarily be “cultural” or “discursive.” Most but not all “post-al” theorists have gravitated toward a politics of difference and posit their ideas as bold steps forward in advancing the interests of those historically marginalized by dominant social and cultural narratives. Yet, as San Juan Jr. convincingly demonstrates, the anointing of difference as a primary explanatory construct and the “culturalization” of politics have had detrimental effects on “radical” social theory and practice.

“Culturalist” narratives have produced autonomist and reified conceptualizations of difference that have, in effect, merely reduced difference to a question of knowledge/power relations that can presumably be dealt with (negotiated) on a discursive level without a fundamental change in the relations of production. The “subsumption of relations of power to relations of discourse or cultural practices” has resulted in a “one-sided culturalism” that is incapable of grappling with the fundamental issues of capitalist exploitation. In this sense, the politics of difference often serves as a cover for “foundational inequality” and does not “translate into achieved equality or fairness in the redistribution of social wealth” (pp. 152-153). San Juan Jr. also points out that what is called the “politics of difference” is often little more than a demand for inclusion into the club of “representation”—a stance that reinscribes the banality of neoliberal pluralism rooted in the ideology of free market capitalism. Rejecting contemporary theories of “inclusion” as mere affirmations of the capitalist status quo, he offers a dialectical regrounding of the concept of “difference.” Difference, according to the author, needs to be understood as the product of social contradictions in relation to political and economic organization. Since systems of difference almost always involve relations of domination and oppression, it is important to understand difference in relation to the complexities, contradictions, and exploitative relations of capitalism.
He further contends that the limits of contemporary cultural studies stem from the “lack of an alternative, counterhegemonic view of capitalist society” (p. 240), which is at least partially attributable to inflating the realm of culture to proportions that subsume materialist and class politics. “[W]hen the sphere of culture becomes inflated and universalized to function also as politics—call it cultural politics or subaltern resistance—then cultural studies becomes nothing else but an apology for commodity fetishism” (p. 228). In fact, San Juan Jr. argues that cultural studies has worked to reinscribe capitalist social relations by relying on “culturalist strategies” that are “impotent to challenge the havoc wrought by the universalizing effects of finance capital in its new forms” (p. 236). According to the author, capitalism must be challenged at its very core if social relations of oppression (including those associated with “race”) are to be overcome. Far from advocating a return to what has been called “vulgar Marxism,” San Juan Jr. provides a thoughtful synthesis of various proponents of Western and Third World Marxism—from Antonio Gramsci to Frantz Fanon—in order to rescue them from the “post-al” penchant of marginalizing and/or obscuring the historical materialist roots of their original work. This is particularly evident in his discussion of Fanon, whom he feels has been particularly vulnerable to decontextualized and dehistoricized reformulations in the hands of postcolonial theorists.

Indeed, some of his most scathing commentary is reserved for postcolonialism, which he characterizes as a “veritable academic industry” (p. 253) replete with its own set of intellectual “stars.” Postcolonial theory’s seemingly exclusive focus on discourse and its preoccupation with hybridity, mimicry, and other forms of linguistic, semiotic “play” have evaded the material realities of individuals and communities still suffering under post- and neo-colonialist conditions. While postcolonialism has identified its project as an emancipatory one, San Juan Jr. argues that in the face of globalized capitalism, the “paralysis” and “inconsequentiality” of postcolonial theory is evident. In this regard, the author echoes the work of Ahmad (1997), Callinicos (1995), and Dirlik (1997), all of whom have assailed postcolonial discourses in various ways.

San Juan Jr.’s criticisms will likely unsettle the “high priests of Cultural Studies” (p. 245), for he indicts them for their complicity with predatory capital. Nonetheless, in his impassioned plea to activists, cultural workers, and insurgent intellectuals to address the carnage wrought by global capitalism, San Juan Jr. succeeds in challenging us to rethink the constitutive principles that have come to define not only cultural studies but so-called radical social theory as a whole.

References

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