Newsforum

Colloquim: "Zadig's Method," the Historical Sciences, Museums and the Performance of Progress

Tony Bennett, professor at Griffith University (Australia) and director of the Institute for Cultural Policy Studies, was at Carleton this Spring to present a paper at a public forum sponsored by the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, the Centre for Research on Culture and Society, and the School for Studies in Art and Culture. Bennett is the author of numerous books and articles in the field of media and cultural studies, including *Popular Culture: Themes and Issues* (1981), *Bond and Beyond: The Political Career of a Popular Hero* (with Janet Woollacott, 1987), and *Outside Literature* (1990).

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Bennett's recent work signals a curious retreat from his earlier preoccupations with the 'Gramscian' tradition in cultural studies. Originally intended to overcome the perceived impasse between 'culturalist' and 'structuralist' approaches in British cultural studies, the incorporation of Gramsci's notion of 'hegemony'—a state of moral, cultural and political leadership that is actively won and not simply imposed upon subordinate social groups—offered the discipline a less mechanistic and monolithic view of the ideological domination of a ruling class or bloc. Whereas structuralist formulations of ideology suggested that cultural change and political resistance were next to impossible since domination was achieved through manipulating the world view of the masses, the concept of hegemony stressed that in order for cultural leadership to be achieved, dominant groups must 'negotiate' or engage with opposing groups.

In British cultural studies, the turn to Gramsci signalled a profound shift in thinking. Popular culture was no longer seen as part of some repressive ideological apparatus nor, alternatively, as an impulsive and

liberating expression of the 'people'. Rather, it was viewed as contradictory and contested—it was both dominated and oppositional. The field of popular culture was implicated in the struggle for hegemony in so far as it remained structured by the attempt of the ruling class to secure hegemony, and by the actions of other groups to oppose that project. Politically, cultural studies championed a transformative politics of 'counter-hegemony'—of organizing or articulating subjects into a collective political force to challenge the dominant power bloc. Developed against the backdrop of Thatcherism and its accompanying 'enterprise culture,' this political project took on an added urgency.

Despite Bennett's pivotal contribution to this important theoretical shift, his current work argues for a move 'beyond hegemony'. For Bennett, the politics of counter-hegemony is "institutionally indifferent." Since all cultural practices are conceived as bound up with the struggle for hegemony, the dominant tendency has been to see cultural struggle as the same in all cases. In effect, cultural studies has paid insufficient attention to the specific sets of discursive and structural power relations that operate within distinct cultural practices.

Bennett's current work on the 19th century museum is partially an attempt to work through these issues. Bennett rejects the view that sees the museum simply as an ideological instrument of the ruling bloc. Instead, he intends to explore in detail the specific practices, techniques, and operations of the museum that constitute it as a 'technology' (in Foucault's sense of the term) that produces a socially coded vision of the past. This vision, expressed through the performative regimes of the museum, conscripts subjects as active participants in the scientific and reformist narrative of progress.

The 'Zadig' that Bennett refers to in his lecture is a character drawn from Voltaire and later adopted by Thomas Huxley. Zadig possessed the remarkable power of 'backtelling'—by looking at tracks left by an animal he was able to faithfully visualize and reconstruct that animal. This process of generating retrospective visions—of making the invisible visible—is mirrored in the modern scientific method where causes are inferred from effects.

For Bennett, the 19th century British museum is principally a narrative machinery for 'backtelling'. The museum makes history 'visible' through the application of certain apparatuses or sets of technologies. Spatially, the museum is organized to compress time into a visible and performable 'pathway' through history. Through techniques of 'typological display' in which similar artifacts from various time periods are presented in series from the 'simple' to the 'complex,' the museum encourages visitors to engage in an "organized walking through evolutionary time." Witnessing, for example, the progression from an Aboriginal throwing stick to a spear, bow and arrow, and eventually a modern gun, visitors become 'self-teaching,' actively engaging in a progressive, civilizing, and heuristic performance.

Typological displays had deeper political motivations, according to Bennett. Showing progress as a succession of incremental improvements suggested that the rate of social change was a pre-ordained law of history. This view contrasted sharply with emerging notions of revolutionary socialism which advocated that human societies could 'jump' from one stage to another. Not surprisingly, the didactic message of typological displays were **149** first directed at the working class at the Bethel Green Museum in London. Here, the 'technology of the series' was codified to create a progressive but conservative subject, one that recognized the 'inevitability' of gradual reform.

The 19th century British museum, therefore, worked to reinforce other emerging social institutions. From new pedagogical techniques in education to emerging methods of clinical psychology, the era was characterized by the development of 'regimes of truth' that emphasized discipline, training, and self-improvement. Increasingly, human beings were seen as creatures in need of progressive improvement and development.

While any clear assessment of Bennett's research is premature at this point, his work does nevertheless raise some intriguing questions about the nature of political interventions into the arena of cultural policy. The types of interventions suggested by the perspective of hegemony have been largely discursive—i.e. restructuring representational practices in order to allow for

the emergence of an oppositional subject. The difficulty with this position, as Bennett's analysis suggests, is that it fails to connect this 'counter-hegemonic' politics with the larger structural conditions that determine representational practices in the first instance. The promise of Bennett's work is that by providing an examination of the forms and relations of political conflict specific to particular cultural technologies, his analysis may in fact lead to more concrete political interventions that are capable of affecting the actions of agents within those technologies.

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