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The Ethnography of Intellectuals and the Predicaments of Theory Today

TALK and DISCUSSION

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Rethinking Postmodernism through the Ethnography of Intellectual Culture

“Postmodernism” is hardly the inflammatory topic that it once was. So perhaps this is a good time to reconsider why it became such a locus of celebration and contention, and above all attention, in 1980’s and 1990’s academic and public culture in the first place. How and where did certainty regarding a postmodern turn in knowledge and culture arise? Can we understand it as something more or other than an epistemological shift (in the manner of Lyotard) or as the ideological corona of late capitalism (in the manner of Jameson or Zizek)? My argument is that while postmodernism surely has its epistemological and ideological features these do not alone explain the phenomenon nor the discourse surrounding it. I turn to historical and contemporary ethnography of western intellectual culture in order to show how discourse on the postmodern also signals an intimate phenomenological awareness of the contingency of expert knowledge in an abundant, yet deeply specialized and segmented intellectual culture. Talk of a crisis or shift in the character of modern knowledge was therefore not new to the 1980’s and 1990’s; indeed, as I argue, it reflects the reflexive capacity of modern cultures of expertise (including academic professionals among others) to identify the social conditions of possibility upon which their claims to expert knowledge are staked. What is distinctive to our historical moment is the degree to which this reflexive capacity has been publicized and coordinated as western intellectual cultures experienced unprecedented professionalization, commercialization and governmentalization in the postwar period. Yet, the core of what is referred to as ‘postmodernism’ remains a specialized attention to epistemic contingency of which all cultures of expertise are, in principle, capable.

March 20, 2007

3:30-5:00 PM

SSPB 4250

Light Refreshments