

## Book Review

**Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science.** By Donna Haraway. Routledge, New York, 1989, ix + 486 pp., \$35.00 (hardcover).

It is thus not simply false to say that Mallarmé is a Platonist or a Hegelian. But it is above all not true. And vice versa.

*Jacques Derrida (1981, p. 207)*

This is a book that contradicts itself a hundred times; but that is not a criticism of it, because its author thinks contradictions are a sign of intellectual ferment and vitality. This is a book that systematically distorts and selects historical evidence; but that is not a criticism, because its author thinks that all interpretations are biased, and she regards it as her duty to pick and choose her facts to favor her own brand of politics. This is a book full of vaporous, French-intellectual prose that makes Teilhard de Chardin sound like Ernest Hemingway by comparison; but that is not a criticism, because the author likes that sort of prose and has taken lessons in how to write it, and she thinks that plain, homely speech is part of a conspiracy to oppress the poor. This is a book that clatters around in a dark closet of irrelevancies for 450 pages before it bumps accidentally into its index and stops; but that is not a criticism, either, because its author finds it gratifying and refreshing to bang unrelated facts together as a rebuke to stuffy minds. This book infuriated me; but that is not a defect in it, because it is supposed to infuriate people like me, and the author would have been happier still if I had blown out an artery. In short, this book is flawless, because all its deficiencies are deliberate products of art. Given its assumptions, there is nothing here to criticize. The only course open to a reviewer who dislikes this book as much as I do is to question its author's fundamental assumptions—which are big-ticket items involving the nature and relationships of language, knowledge, and science.

Knowledge, says the proverb, is power, and this book exemplifies a school of thought that takes that proverb literally. In our culture, scientists

are given power and prestige because they claim to know how the world works. Conversely, people who resent or fear scientists doubt that claim to knowledge and try to debunk it. There are always ample grounds for doubt. Anybody who practices science knows that it is hard to be objective; our fears and vanity and prejudices creep into our theories as readily as they enter into the speeches of Congressmen or the predictions of astrologers. From that observation, it is only a step to the belief that scientists are nothing but politicians and shamans, and that objective knowledge is itself a myth cooked up by scientists to protect and enhance their power. That belief is the cornerstone of Donna Haraway's book.

The style of thinking and talking that Haraway has adopted in *Primate Visions* is what is sometimes called deconstructionist. She also refers to it as postmodernism or poststructuralism. This style is increasingly prevalent in the humanities and social sciences (where it dominates the Modern Language Association and many fields of social and cultural anthropology), and it is now beginning to be heard in archaeological circles (Bahn, 1990). In some quarters, it is regarded as an essential part of feminist consciousness. The deconstructionist mode can be summed up as a sophisticated skepticism rooted in a deep suspicion of ordinary language. It views plain speech as a Trojan horse full of secret biases that we cannot recognize or criticize if we insist on talking and thinking in a "plain," comfortable way. Deconstructionism derives chiefly from French models like Derrida and Foucault, whose much-imitated prose style—ironical, teasing, ambiguous, sibylline—is studiedly unlike ordinary language. The central tenet of deconstructionist thought, if anything so deliberately oblique can be said to have anything so straightforward as a tenet, is that all texts are subject to an infinite number of interpretations. From this it follows that it is neither interesting nor profitable to ask whether a particular text is "true." All claims to know the "truth" are, at bottom, really something else. What they are usually taken to be is assertions of power over others. As Foucault put it,

It is not the activity of the subject of knowledge that produces a corpus of knowledge . . . but power-knowledge, the processes and struggles that traverse it and of which it is made up, that determines the forms and possible domains of knowledge. (1979, p. 28)

I take this to mean that politics, not empirical inquiry, determines what scientists are allowed to believe, though that may be putting it too baldly.

Donna Haraway quotes these words of Foucault's as an epigraph in this book, in which she attempts a deconstruction of primatology. A deconstruction of a text or concept is a reading that calls into question its underlying assumptions, its supposed objectivity, and its authority.

Deconstruction is not a friendly act, and Haraway's approach to science in general and to primatology in particular is an unfriendly one, which makes no effort to understand or to sympathize with the intentions of scientists. From the very first sentence of *Primate Visions*, Haraway makes it clear that what interests her about primate biology is not its ostensible subject matter. She has no interest in the objective "facts" about primates themselves, for the simple reason that there are none. Facts, reality, and nature are, in her eyes, constructs cooked up by Western scientific elites to justify and enhance their power over the oppressed—chiefly women, colonized third-world peoples, and the working class.

The questions Haraway asks in this book's first paragraph may convey some idea of her critical program, epistemology, and rhetorical style:

How are love, power, and science intertwined in the construction of nature in the late twentieth century? . . . In what specific places, out of which social and intellectual histories, and with what tools is nature constructed as an object of erotic and intellectual desire? How do the terrible marks of gender and race enable and constrain love and knowledge in particular cultural traditions, including the modern natural sciences? Who may contest for what the body of nature will be?

Since facts and data are constructs, Haraway regards primatology and other sciences as literary forms. She acknowledges no epistemological difference between science and science fiction, between *Molecular Biology of the Gene* and *E.T.*: both are stories, differing only in features of narrative style. "Scientific practice may be considered a type of story-telling practice," Haraway writes. "The facts themselves are types of stories" (pp. 3–4). All those old positivist representations of science as cumulative knowledge grounded in observation are stories of another sort—"stories with a particular aesthetic, realism, and a particular politics, commitment to progress" (p. 4). All statements about organisms necessarily take the form of stories:

The discourse of biology, beginning near the first decades of the nineteenth century, has been about organisms, beings with a life history; i.e., a plot with structure and function. Biology is inherently historical, and its form of discourse is inherently narrative. Biology as a way of knowing the world is kin to Romantic literature, with its discourse about organic form and function. Biology is the fiction appropriate to objects called organisms; biology fashions the facts "discovered" from organic beings. (pp. 4–5)

Accordingly, "*Primate Visions* reads the primate text as science fiction, where possible worlds are constantly reinvented in the contest for very real, present worlds" (p. 5)—that is, for political power:

Biology, and primatology, are inherently political discourses, whose chief objects of knowledge, such as organisms and ecosystems, are icons (condensations) of the whole of the history and politics of the culture that constructed them for contemplation and manipulation. The primate body itself is an intriguing kind of political discourse. (p. 10).

As one might expect from all this, the stories Haraway tells about primatology are also an intriguing kind of political discourse. Haraway disavows any intention of writing “a disinterested, objective study” herself, because “such studies are impossible for anyone” (p. 3), and she makes her own political biases perfectly clear from the beginning. Her story depicts the history of primate biology as a contest over the body of nature, played out between the forces of good and evil. The evil cause is that of straight white males, capitalists, liberals, and individualists, who stand for “exploitation of the emergent Third World, obligatory and normative heterosexuality, masculine dominance of a progressively war-based scientific enterprise in industrial civilization . . . White Capitalist Patriarchy . . . How may we name this scandalous Thing?” (pp. 13, 176). The good cause is that of those oppressed by the scandalous Thing. Western primatology originated in the 1930s as a scientific-mythical readout of “the structure of colonial discourse—that complex search for the primitive, authentic, and lost self, sought in the baroque dialectic between the wildly free and subordinated other” (p. 245). White Capitalist Patriarchy dictated the terms of primatological discourse until the mid-1970s, when sociobiology came along and freed primatology from its male-centered paradigms. Nowadays, “primatology is a genre of feminist theory” (p. 277).

The deconstructionist style is not very well suited to affirmation, and so Haraway has more to say about her patriarchal villains than about her feminist heroines. She begins with an attack on the American Museum of Natural History in its palmy days as a “Teddy Bear Patriarchy” (a double reference to stuffed animals and Teddy Roosevelt, consecrated to promulgating the myth of a pristine natural order endangered by the corrupting influences of culture and civilization. For reasons that never became entirely clear to me, she regards that myth as an instrument of the big oil companies (pp. 152, 185). Apparently the man–nature boundary is a construct that provides international corporations with a license to rape nature; when viewed as “wildly free and subordinated other,” nature becomes a commodity. This central axiom of Haraway’s viewpoint is supported only by bald assertions and ironic metaphors, and I was unconvinced by it. The major modern architects of the man–nature boundary—Rousseau, Wordsworth, Thoreau, Jeffers, and so on—seem like unlikely cheerleaders for industrial capitalism.

In succeeding chapters, Haraway deconstructs Robert Yerkes, C. R. Carpenter, and Stuart Altmann (who are depicted as concerned with developing techniques and rationales for maintaining White Male Capitalist control over workers and women), Jane Goodall (another instrument of Big Oil), S. L. Washburn (whose “new physical anthropology” is construed here as part of a neocolonial justification for White Male Capitalist

domination of the third world), Harry Harlow (a phallocratic sadist acting out his misogynistic fantasies with monkeys), and other leading American students of primate behavior. There is some substance to most of Haraway's caricatures, and even those that (like the one of Washburn) strike me as completely wrong-headed are laced with provocative insights.

In Part III of her book, headed "The Politics of Being Female," Haraway examines the work of women like Adrienne Zihlman and Linda Fedigan, whose politics she admires and sees reflected in their scientific writings. But since the only style of analysis she commands is deconstruction, she has no means of praising these scientists in their own terms. The best she can do is to try to make them out as sardonic deconstructionists like herself, interested less in understanding primates than in mocking and subverting the rationalist, gender-inscribed presuppositions of White Male Capitalism. "Laughter is an indispensable tool in deconstructions of the bio-politics of being female," she insists. "Suspicion and irony are basic to feminist reinscriptions of nature's text." When she can reasonably construe the writings of female primatologists as being ironic and subversive, Haraway hails them as fellow architects of a new consciousness. When she can no longer evade the suspicion that some of them are trying to discover truths about the order of nature, she is forced to put them down gently as dupes who have swallowed the patriarchal assumptions imbedded in the concepts of "truth," "order," and "nature." Haraway's deconstructionist language gets denser and more oracular when she criticizes female scientists—for example, when she chides Goodall for failing to promote a postmodernist sensibility at Gombe:

What is too dim [in Goodall's work] is a dimension problematizing (not erasing) the mythic, scientific, and individual axes; i.e., the historical. By history I mean a corrosive sense of the contradiction and multiple material-semiotic processes at the heart of scientific knowledge. History . . . is a discipline reworked by post-modern insights about always split, fragmented, and multiple subjects, identities, and collectivities. All units and actors cohere partially and provisionally, held together by complex material-semiotic-social practices. In the space opened up by such contradictions and multiplicities lies the possibility for reflexive responsibility for the shape of narrative fields. (p. 172)

I don't think that whatever "dimness" Haraway finds in Goodall's work is much illuminated by these words.

There are real insights and intermittent flashes of brilliance scattered through this book, and all primatologists will benefit from reading it and getting their preconceptions shaken up. Haraway's challenging analyses of the social, political, and empirical factors that have induced and guided the growth of feminist ideas in contemporary primatology are worth the modest price of the book all by themselves. But the book's virtues are outweighed by the faults that arise from Haraway's postmodernist epistemol-

ogy. The worst of these faults is her refusal ever to deal with the past on its own terms, to give an account of people's actions in terms of their own ideas and intentions. Because she is not really interested in the thought of the past, but only in poking holes in it to reveal the scandalous Thing lurking within, she does not hesitate to caricature it into unintelligibility, leaving out vast sectors of the primatological tradition and distorting others to make them fit her picture. This approach may be appropriate for Haraway, who believes that reality is an artifact constructed for political ends, but it makes it hard to take her seriously as a historian of ideas.

Haraway's "poststructuralist" approach to history is thoroughly structuralist in its endless suspicious search for unperceived connections concealed behind surface appearances. It accords with Lévi-Strauss's dictum that "understanding consists in the reduction of one type of reality to another; that true reality is never the most obvious of realities, and that . . . to reach reality we must first repudiate experience" (1964, pp. 61–62). In *Primate Visions*, the search for occult understanding takes the form of an allusive play of suggestive juxtapositions hinting at underlying cultural themes too vast, complex, and portentous to be expressed in any less oblique way. Unfortunately, Haraway's juxtapositions often seem whimsical and gratuitous, like the supposed connection between stuffed animals and eugenics that she traces in the American Museum's African Hall:

A hope is implicit in every architectural detail: in immediate vision of the origin, perhaps the future can be fixed. By saving the beginnings, the end can be achieved and the present can be transcended . . . Restoration of the origin, the task of genetic hygiene, is achieved in Carl Akeley's African Hall by an art that began for him in the 1880s with the crude stuffing of P. T. Barnum's elephant, Jumbo, who had been run down by a railroad train, the emblem of the Industrial Revolution. The end of his task came in the 1920s, with his exquisite mounting of . . . the lone silverback male gorilla that dominates the diorama depicting the site of Akeley's own grave in the mountainous rain forest of the Congo, today's Zaire. So it could inhabit Akeley's monument to the purity of nature, this gorilla was killed in 1921, the same year the Museum hosted the Second International Congress of Eugenics . . . Decadence—the threat of the city, civilization, machine—was stayed in the politics of eugenics and the art of taxidermy. (pp. 26–27)

Is any of this really "implicit in every architectural detail?" I doubt it. I also doubt that the train that killed Jumbo is relevant to anything. These are flights of empty poetic fancy, and the whole connection that Haraway wants to draw between eugenics and taxidermy is really just as fanciful. It seems plausible only because the two things went on at the same time in the same building, and because eugenics can in some lights be seen as a backward-looking search for lost origins. But if the Eugenics Congress had been held at a Museum of Science and Technology, Haraway could have found equal significance in *that* conjunction, by describing eugenics as a forward-looking fantasy of racial progress through the new science of

genetics, or some such. In fact, the connection between eugenics and taxidermy at the American Museum in the 1920s lay principally in the person of the Museum's director, Henry Fairfield Osborn (Sutphen, 1988), a haughty, egomaniacal, reactionary bigot about whom Haraway has practically nothing to say.

A poetic intelligence like Haraway's can always draw some sort of connection, however remote, between any two events whatever. But we are not obliged to take such connections seriously unless we are given some reason for thinking that they are not coincidental. Were other natural history museums of the period busy putting up stuffed-animal dioramas? Were those museums also centers of eugenics agitation? If so, then Haraway's perception of Akeley's art deserves some credence; if not, we can discount it as based on a single suggestive coincidence. Haraway has not bothered to test her perceptions in this way. Readers of this journal will recognize in this test the essence of the scientific method: trying to figure out how meaningful a conjunction is by seeing whether it recurs regularly in similar circumstances. I think this is an important difference, maybe the most important single difference, between science and story-telling. Stories say, "Once upon a time"; science says, "Whenever  $x$ , then  $y$ ." Narration is declarative; science is subjunctive.

Despite Haraway's protestations to the contrary, *Primate Visions* strikes me as an expression of hostility and contempt, to the scientific enterprise in general and to primatologists in particular. Science is grounded in the belief that there is a real world and that, by studying it and experimenting with it, we can understand, predict, and control its phenomena. To dismiss this belief as "the aesthetic of realism," a literary convention adopted for political ends, amounts to saying that scientists do not really understand what they are doing, and if they did, they would stop doing science and start doing the sort of thing Haraway demands of Goodall. I think it is fair to describe this contention as hostile and contemptuous.

The contempt for science expressed in *Primate Visions* is not wholly undeserved. Many scientists have deluded themselves into believing that their concepts were given by observation and that their prejudices spoke with the voice of Nature. Theories born of such delusions have engendered a lot of wasted effort and pointless suffering. But we can judge the effort as wasted and the suffering as pointless only because we have reasons for thinking that the underlying theories are (at least relatively) defective; and we cannot find such reasons unless we have valid criteria for evaluating competing accounts of the world.

Haraway, too, apparently thinks that there ought to be such criteria, because she insists that her perspective "does not reduce natural science

to a cynical relativism with no standards beyond arbitrary power" (p. 12). Maybe so. But if there are any other standards that we can legitimately use for choosing between conflicting visions of the world, she never tells us what they are, and never uses any herself. Her own evaluations of scientific theories are rooted in just such a standard of arbitrary power: theories that uphold the powerful are deemed bad, whereas those that question reigning orthodoxies are good. It is not clear that this is really a practical standard to apply to theories about, say, renal physiology or polymer chemistry. Haraway herself questions "whether scientific analysis could every be postmodernist" and wonders, "What would stable, replicable, cumulative knowledge about non-units look like?" (p. 309). To this question, she offers no answer.

"Facts," argues Haraway, "are always theory-laden; theories are value-laden; therefore facts are value-laden" (p. 288). Even if we accept the premises of this syllogism, its conclusion does not follow, because it hinges on a pun. It is rather like saying, "This bus is full of skeptics; skeptics are full of doubt; therefore this bus is full of doubt." Buses do not contain skeptics in the same way that skeptics contain doubt, and facts do not contain theories in the same way that theories contain values. These things are not related to each other like concentric boxes. Facts and theories and values are often all tangled up with each other, but they do not usually entail each other in any simple logical way, and the entanglements between them are not usually obvious ones. They become discernible only at a higher and vaguer level of analysis, at what might be called the level of the surrounding cultural matrix. It is in general not possible to infer underlying values from an isolated factual claim. If facts were always value-laden, we could tell at least *something* about a person's values from any declarative utterance. Since we cannot always make such inferences, the value-ladenness of many factual assertions must be contingent, not logically necessary. Facts must therefore be, at least in principle, independent from values.

In reading Haraway's book, I often thought about another left-wing literary figure, George Orwell, who came to quite different conclusions about the relationship among language, oppression, and the construction of facts. Toward the end of Orwell's *1984*, the inquisitor, O'Brien, forces the hero to abandon his old-fashioned belief in an external reality that limits human power. "Reality," says O'Brien, "is inside the skull . . . You must get rid of those nineteenth-century ideas about the laws of nature. We make the laws of nature." For certain purposes, says O'Brien, it is convenient to assume that the earth circles the sun; for other purposes, the reverse assumption is convenient. We can learn to accept either assumption or both at once if the Party demands it. "The stars can be near



or distant, according as we need them. Do you suppose our mathematicians are unequal to that? Have you forgotten doublethink?" With O'Brien's help, the hero finally shakes off his belief in nature and reality and comes to understand how two twos can make five if the Party says so. I have the uneasy feeling that Haraway might, at least in principle, regard that liberation from the constraints of "fact" as an intellectual triumph.

In its denial of external reality as something given, its obsession with motifs of dominance and power, and its rejection of logical dualisms (war is peace, freedom is slavery, and what is untrue is above all not simply false, and vice versa), the postmodernist sensibility displayed in this book is strangely reminiscent of the official philosophy of Orwell's posttotalitarian state. Haraway is, of course, no propagandist for Big Brother, but she has chosen not to acknowledge a truth that Orwell, like Marx, always insisted on: that there is a world antecedent to human ambition and desire, and that the powerful and arrogant are occasionally constrained to acknowledge that objective reality by having their noses rubbed in it. To deny that reality is to deny that there are external constraints on human power. It amounts to saying that the right TV programs can keep the masses hypnotized forever, because there is nothing beyond the screen that might wake them up unexpectedly. Saying that may feel like a brave gesture of defiance to Haraway, but from where I sit it looks like a capitulation.

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