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THE RESISTANCE TO THEORY AND THE RESISTANCE TO EVIDENCE

by MARK BAUERLEIN

IF A NATURAL PHILOSOPHER from the sixteenth century were miraculously transported into our own, he would, of course, marvel at advances in science and technology. His inquisitorial outlook prepared the ground for those inventions, but he could not have foreseen them, and in the occasional pop culture artifact in which a notable thinker from the past leaps forward in time (for instance, Abraham Lincoln on the Starship Enterprise), his wonder at all the new gadgetry stands out. But while flying machines and televised images would amaze him, another development in the progress of inquiry might throw him into bewilderment. This is the subdivision and professionalization of knowledge. Whereas the natural philosopher regarded all of created nature as his field of study, today's inquirer is a micro-specialist. While the natural philosopher joined a diverse collection of minds scattered across Europe, their sense of unity based upon little more than quasi-scientific/religious curiosity and familiarity with one another's work, today's inquirer can't qualify as a colleague unless he has been accredited by a professional organization or academic department. Guilds, credentialing institutions, private and public funders with narrow agendas, certificate programs, and government agencies, not solitary geniuses, organize the terrains of

Follies of the Wise: Dissenting Essays, by Frederick Crews; 405 pp. Emeryville, Calif.: Shoemaker Hoard, 2006. \$26.00.

knowledge, and they rarely communicate back and forth. Instead, they manage interpretive communities, parceling out domains of inquiry and building pipelines of trainees to populate them.

The modern research university resides at the top, the dominance of the German model regnant now for more than 100 years. In the hard sciences, which mark the glory of the modern university, expertise is narrowed to the smallest of research topics, and in the humanities, the academy's failure, expertise is sometimes exotic in its theoretico/sub-cultural make-up. It would baffle the Renaissance man.

He wouldn't be entirely wrong. For alongside the remarkable benefits of the professionalization of knowledge in the sciences and the dubious hyper-sophistication in the humanities has run an entirely separate current, a social tendency among like-minded inquirers to collect into groups and act out a professional version of group psychology. The segregations are necessary for research to proceed expeditiously, to be sure, and the amount of information and the background understanding required for individuals to contribute to a single domain make the generalist outlook impractical. Still, a counterproductive tendency subsists, and its end point is an utterly un-collegial one: the creation of sects that shield their practices from outside scrutiny. On the disciplinary side, a subject matter is demarcated, its reality most receptive to the particular discipline's methods and assumptions. A tradition of investigation and commentary arises, and practitioners thrive by sharpening their wits to the especial features of their sub-sub-field and dulling their minds to larger questions.

As the specialty matures and individuals make their way into and through it, though, the social side escalates. Research and teaching continue, but so do managerial tasks such as peer review, hiring decisions, conferences and publications . . . in sum, the rites of professionalization. And the more the specialty separates from external forces that provide a measure of independent review, the more the administrative aspects of the specialty sway the conduct of practitioners. After a time, interests narrow and outlooks grow technical, often for very good intellectual reasons, for major scientific breakthroughs can depend on the tiniest of experiments. The social effect, however, is regrettable, especially in the less empirical fields. Spending all their time talking to one another instead of communicating their work to broader parties, insiders begin to mirror each other, agreeing over Big Questions and quibbling over small ones. The personnel in the hallway become more homogeneous. The ideas that circulate are fewer, the premises more habitual. The

gulf between insiders and outsiders grows acute. Prestige and repute set the initiates at different ranks, and rivalries multiply. What should be a system of open inquiry, creative thought, and learned judgment ends up an exercise in groupthink.

Thus what starts by establishing disciplinary and epistemological boundaries, respectively, a subject matter and a conceptual framework, acquires an ever-strengthening institutional boundary—credentials in the field, alignment with other researchers, publication in peer-reviewed venues, etc. Its clearest expression, and a prime index of the condition of the specialty, is the ritual of exclusion. In healthy fields, the exclusion happens because a researcher or a specimen of research does not meet the intellectual standards of the field, for instance, responsible handling of evidence. The contribution will not advance knowledge in the field, and so it is ruled out. In unhealthy fields, though, the exclusion happens because an individual or a specimen meets intellectual standards but doesn't satisfy etiquette. A reader for a quarterly rejects a manuscript submission because it doesn't cite certain favored precursors, and the reader fails to give substantive reasons why those precursors apply to the thesis at hand. Or a lecturer at a conference delivers a paper substantively critical of one of the tutelary spirits of the participants, and the response that follows skips over the criticisms and plunges directly into censure. At a meeting I attended a few years ago in Boston, a panelist delivered a paper bemoaning the loss of Emerson's poetry in American literature anthologies. One person rose in the audience to explain why. "His poetry is so darn bad!" he exclaimed. The panelist slid into a huff, not defending the poetry but declaring that this was just the kind of loutish attitude that led the anthologists to trim Emerson's entry.

The intellectual thrust of such actions may be weak, but in fields in which group feelings preside, they usually suffice. Sometimes, the exclusions sink into facile vilifications. Here is John D. Caputo in an obituary for Jacques Derrida characterizing the deconstructor's critics:

. . . What everyone has more or less picked up about deconstruction, even if they have never read a word of it, is its destabilizing effect on our favorite texts and institutions. . . . But what his critics missed (and here not reading him makes a difference!), and what never made it into the headlines, is that the destabilizing agency in his work is not a reckless relativism or an acidic skepticism but rather an affirmation, a love of what in later years he would call the "undeconstructible." . . . His critics had never heard of this because it was not reported in *Time*, but they did not

hesitate to denounce what they had not read, like the famous signatories of the letter to Cambridge University, who disgracefully declared Derrida unworthy of an honorary degree because he undermined the standards of responsible scholarship—the most elemental tenet of which would surely have been first to read what you criticize in public (a close second being, if you do read it, try to understand it). (*CrossCurrents*, 55 [2005–2006])

One can understand the sulky posture of the disciple simmering upon the death of the master, but Caputo reprimands the critics in a slapdash way, and the insistence on one fault borders on inanity. He pinpoints an egregious crime in scholarship—not reading what you denounce—and reiterates it four times in a single paragraph. As an added condescension, Caputo urges those who do read at least to “try to understand it.” The contrast is vivid, morally and intellectually. Derrida is momentous, his critics are contemptible, and their reliance on *Time* and “headlines” for insight betrays their inferiority.

This is the mindset of the insulated acolyte. The ironies of his outlook are either laughable or pathetic—claiming Derrida’s critics don’t read him, and proving that the acolyte hasn’t read the many critics who have; claiming that the master has “destabilized” certain “texts and institutions,” yet, despite that mighty power, fearing for the master’s legacy. Such tactics are self-defeating. They won’t win any new converts, and those who admire some of Derrida’s work but who also acknowledge substantive criticisms of it will find such defenses repellent. Hemmed in, with numbers dwindling, the acolyte chooses either to erect higher and thicker battlements or to concede the field and retire for some intellectual soul-searching. Unfortunately, protected by tenure and with little accountability in their professional lives, few disciples take the latter course.

In other cases, the exclusion is more elaborate and stage-managed. Fred Crews describes one such episode in his new collection of essays, *Follies of the Wise*, an engaging tour through an array of knowledge (and pseudo-knowledge) domains. In 1998, Crews delivered a paper on Freud at a symposium at Yale University entitled “Whose Freud?” In *Follies*, he includes the talk along with before-and-after remarks on the experience of delivering it. A famous and unforgiving critic of Freud, Crews at first regarded the invitation as a sign of collegiality, the “makings of a lively and fruitful debate” (p. 71). But a look at the day’s schedule convinced him otherwise. Among the 29 presenters and panel leaders, he was the only serious critic of the founder of psychoanalysis. Everyone else, to

greater and lesser extents, accepted Freud as central to humanistic, social, and scientific studies. When he consulted fellow skeptics around the country, most of them milder than himself, they all stated that they'd heard nothing about the meeting. Furthermore, the agenda placed Crews as the inaugural speaker, which meant that he would not be able to craft his remarks in light of any preceding points made. The rest of the participants, on the other hand, would be able to respond to him at length. Crews was being set up as a "token naysayer," he concluded, his presence allowing the organizers to display their "hospitality, however scant, to extreme perspectives" (p. 72).

Nevertheless, he joined the gathering and played his role, stating baldly in his talk, "Take my Freud—please! But do you really want him—the fanatical, self-inflated, ruthless, myopic, yet intricately devious Freud who has been unearthed by the independent scholarship of the past generation? Or would you prefer the Freud of self-created legend, whose name can still conjure the illusion that 'psychoanalytic truth' is authenticated by the sheer genius of its discoverer?" (p. 73). In turn, the pro-Freudian participants acted out their commitments, and did so not only with arguments but with the ostracizing devices of professional cliques. A witness to the proceedings wrote about them and is cited by Crews. As Crews spoke, the attendee heard hisses, whistles of scorn, and many occasions of laughter when Crews said nothing intentionally humorous. A participant sitting next to the podium, Robert Michaels of Cornell medical school, "provided a mimed commentary, smirking, raising his eyebrows, rolling his eyes, and shaking his head" (p. 71).

In subsequent talks, participants operated less adolescently, but not much less ignobly. Judith Butler objected to Crews invoking "*community standards of empiricism*," first repeating the tiresome point about all facts being "theory-laden," and hence never the pure data of an empirical outlook. Crews grants the point, but renders it trivial in light of a more important question: Is a theory proven by facts that emerge strictly out of that particular theory, or by facts that have some independence of the theory in question? Only the latter counts as valid, and psychoanalysis relies too much on the former, for example, proving the premise that childhood masturbation underlies adult hysteria by pointing out Freud's patient Dora fiddling with her purse (p. 80).

In a second move, Butler graduates from cliché to insinuation. She mistrusts the appeal to *community standards*, she says, and it betrays in Crews "a very interesting desire for respectability." Beneath that derision, Crews realized, lies a smear. The desire for respectability, in his

paraphrase, “must entail a tendency to fall in line with social ‘normativity’ in general, especially as it applies to the imposing of heterosexual values and rules on people who should be left in peace to pursue their own goals and pleasures” (p. 80). What may seem an innocent reliance upon ordinary principles of inquiry which scientists observe every day without even thinking, under Butler’s reading, is exposed as social oppression. Crews summarizes: “‘community standards’ meant homophobia.” Butler might have identified her disagreement as an intellectual one, honestly arguing the theory-fact problem, but instead she changed the focus of the debate to one of social implications. And because the charge of homophobia (or racism or sexism) carries such a charge in academia that it merely need be uttered to do its work, Butler didn’t bother to establish that Crews’s assumptions lead to this particular social implication rather than to another one. She just alleged it.

These are the mores of knowledge groups that have turned inward upon themselves. In uniform gatherings and with a rogue such as Crews present but disabled, insiders reaffirm the intellectual grounds of their field and reapply the social glue that keeps the party line intact. They mouth the right catchphrases (facts as “theory-laden”), and rest content with their mouthing. They attribute lesser motives to others (a “desire for respectability”) and principled reactions to themselves. They assess guilt by association and virtue by association. Most tellingly, they attribute oppressive tools to others (community standards) *at the same time* that they implement the tools themselves. For Crews stepped into the Freud gathering and violated precisely that community’s standards, and the fact that his violation was social, not intellectual, bad manners, not bad arguments, only made his incursion more offensive. That the other speakers would tell him so was ordained the moment the invitation was issued. Butler used *her* community standards to intimidate him.

For all of their self-regarding certainty, Crews labels these communities blank pseudo-sciences. They suffer from “‘movement’ belligerence” (p. 10), that is, hostility to people who do not venerate the idols of the school of thought. The discourse they offer is self-ratifying: “it focuses only on congenial instances that serve to keep contrary evidence well out of consideration; it tends to supplant measured argumentation with appeals to group solidarity; it indulges a taste for diffusely explanatory terms such as capitalism, the West, logocentrism, and patriarchy; and it takes a tone of moral absolutism toward the past and, as well, toward the commentator’s adversaries, who, instead of being chided for careless reasoning or incomplete knowledge, are typically condemned as

harboring an intolerably retrograde social or political attitude” (p. 306). One could add parochialism to the sins, the confusion of the horizon of the parish with the limits of the human world, with Freudians a case in point. Freud towers in their minds, yet outside the humanities and small cells in the social sciences, Freud’s legacy dwindles by the year. He is hardly the monument he appears inside English departments.

In contrast to the self-ratifying intellectual cliques stands, Crews says, disciplines. Disciplinarity requires a discerning, self-critical mindset. It includes a preference for clear hypotheses and testable assumptions; receptiveness to disconfirming evidence; willingness to respond to opponents substantively; sensitivity to conflicts of interest; and respect for scientific method in science and norms of argument in the humanities. These are broad principles of inquiry shared by the great philosophers of method in the modern age—Bacon, Hume, Peirce, Popper . . . They are not unique to certain disciplines, and no discipline can survive without practitioners observing them.

With the subdivision of knowledge domains and the hyperspecialization of professionals, however, the reach of disciplinary rules sometimes flags. Small fields can spring up and, influenced by nondisciplinary factors such as a master’s personality or the lure of financial profits, start setting their own protocols of inquiry and collegiality. New ideas about interdisciplinarity, backed by university administrators, can foster new academic programs in which evidentiary norms are relaxed and scholarly traditions ignored. Advances in technology, never lacking enthusiasts, can enter different knowledge domains and establish sub-domains without epistemological rules by which to evaluate them (votaries claim that the innovativeness of the sub-domain renders it unsuitable for traditional review). In such formations, the adherence to especial norms of inquiry and interaction aggravates their segregation, which in turn prompts members to emphasize their difference. They experience their professional sub-identity more intensely, pairing their devotion to the group with enmity to movement critics.

It’s an intensifying spiral, and it has intellectual costs. Inquirers join the group by acquiring detailed and precise knowledge internal to the subfield, and the more they commit to the subfield, the more their general outlook contracts. Learning is extended and particularized, 10 feet deep but only a few inches wide—sophisticated, but hidebound; detailed, but centripetal. The knowledge central to the discipline grows arcane and eccentric, frustrating curious outsiders but impressing insiders as commendable expertise. An award-winning French professor once

regretted to me that critical theorists used to be judged by how well they had mastered a set of texts (*Of Grammatology*, *S/Z*, etc.), but now, with theory elided with socio-politico-sexual themes, they were judged by how well they aligned a pat theoretical axiom with a socio-politico-sexual posture. An unwelcome decline, yes, but both situations favor an “in-the-know” attitude, a sense that certain people understand certain things better than others, and that they are superior for it. In a word, we have groupthink, and if the group isn’t careful, it renders nothing less than “follies of the wise.”

Wealthy and self-governing, the American university harbors several headquarters of false or misdirected learning, and they have frustrated Crews since the beginning of his academic career when he wrote *The Pooh Perplex*, a 1963 send-up of literary studies. Crews proceeded to compose a psychoanalytic study of Hawthorne’s short stories, *The Sins of the Fathers* (1966), a book that spawned a thousand Freudian readings of classic literature, and his experience in the Freudian fold led him to renounce psychoanalysis and devote the bulk of his career to detailing the intellectual corruptions of psychoanalysis and other knowledge sects. *Follies of the Wise* collects several of his essays from *The New York Review of Books* and elsewhere that skewer these movements for their empty claims and pseudo-science. Psychoanalysis Crews censures repeatedly, fatigued as he is with tedious explanations for why we should exempt Freudian principles from ordinary testing (for instance, Foucault’s classification of Freud as not an ordinary scientist but a “founder of discursivity” whose statements are not descriptions of reality but constitutions of a unique discourse). He recurs to the fact that Freudian thought has little standing in the research and practice of psychology, and that “Freudian concepts retain some currency in popular lore, the arts, and the academic humanities, three arenas in which flawed but once modish ideas, secure from the menace of rigorous testing, can be kept indefinitely in play” (p. 16). It is, in fact, only the methodological frailty of these realms that keeps psychoanalysis alive.

Offshoots of psychoanalysis suffer the same empirical defects, while enjoying an enclave existence. Crews recounts the history of the Rorschach Test, a clinical device quirky enough to have filtered into ordinary speech, popular in the training of psychologists, and implemented in legal cases, only to uncover the erratic notions of its founder, little proof of its accuracy, and promotional campaigns for its use in what Crews calls the Rorschach Test’s “wild American ride” (p. 194). The Test offers a classic example, Crews observes, of “confirmation bias,” for just as the

subject is prompted to respond to ambiguous inkblots, the analyst is allowed ample freedom to pick and choose among the responses for signs of a preferred diagnosis.

Another movement only partly derived from psychoanalysis but which runs on the same sectarian energies is poststructuralism. At one point, Crews offers a political explanation for its popularity—"a shadow revolutionism whose very abstruseness insulated it from the real-world shocks being endured by Marxist regimes and movements" (p. 359)—but its primary feature for him is a methodological one. Crews terms it "apriorism," the tendency to reach conclusions determined in advance, to invoke evidence constituted by the very theory undergoing examination. The tendency gets obscured in most renditions of poststructuralism, which credit it with extraordinary insights into the operations of language and literature. Crews cites one version, which unintentionally highlights a far-reaching displacement of poststructuralism's significance. In enumerating the insights, the author asserts how poststructuralism has "forced" scholars to "reconsider" the nature of education, gender roles, race, etc. But this is not a demonstration of insight. It is, Crews recognizes, an assertion of "*methodological imperative*" (pp. 302–3). Poststructuralism doesn't show how society and discourse have a different reality than formerly assumed. It commands scholars to regard society and discourse differently. Under that new regard, it comes as no surprise, poststructuralism is confirmed.

Other movements come under Crews's cutting eye, including Creationism, the UFO abduction movement (larger than you'd think), and the "New Hysterians" among academic feminists (Elaine Showalter). The success that practitioners have found in various pockets of the campus and among psychotherapy networks may dishearten readers who trust in scientific method and disciplinary norms. But along with the spurious methods and self-promotions, these movements share another trait. They are all in decline. Faulty procedures, grandiose and unsupported claims, hero worship, and group identifications may flourish temporarily in an intellectual milieu subdivided into discrete knowledge domains. But institutions can't stay closed forever. They must justify themselves to outside parties, if only to obtain funding from a foundation or a faculty line from a dean. Now and then, they must display how the school of thought benefits other people besides themselves. Accountability is today's watchword among public and private decision makers, and if subfields cannot show outcomes that transcend the endorsement of the subfields themselves, they will not long survive. Practitioners may

insist upon the brilliance of their contributions and the exclusivity of their membership, but soon enough it sounds as if they protest too much. Indeed, the hyperconsciousness of exclusiveness is a sure sign of fragility. Maybe it won't be long before they pass into memory, taking a minor place among other mannerisms of intellectual past, such as spiritualism and planned economies. It is unfortunate, though, that their death rattle has lasted so long, with so much time wasted and so many talents shunned. For that reason, while readers may dispute Crews on this or that point, if his efforts have hastened the demise of these resource-grabbing, disciple-hungry, epistemologically-challenged institutions, he is to be thanked.

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