Cultural Criticism and Society:

Historical and Comparative Views

A special session; session leader: Morris Dickstein, Queens Coll., City Univ. of New York

1. "Wordsworth and the Problem of Authority in Cultural Criticism," Michael Fischer, Univ. of New Mexico

2. "The Career of an American Metaphor," Andrew Delbanco, Columbia Univ.

3. "The Politics of Cultural Freedom: The 1950s in India," Margery Sabin, Wellesley Coll.

4. "From Culture to Ideology: A Postmodern Tale," Eugene Goodheart, Brandeis Univ.

Nothing is more characteristic of the critical scene today than the revival of cultural criticism. The formal, language-based approaches of the New Criticism in the 1940s and 50s and deconstruction in the 1970s have been succeeded by a proliferation of social and cultural studies. Their aim has been to reintegrate literature and the arts into their historical contexts and analyze aesthetic forms and cultural ideas as social constructions of a particular era. Yet cultural studies has been far less conscious of its own history than of the histories it analyzes. While acknowledging the influence of the Frankfurt school, of Foucault and Althusser, of Raymond Williams and the Birmingham school, it generally ignores or dismisses the long history of cultural criticism in England and America.

For this session I have invited four distinguished and well-known critics to offer some depth of historical perspective on the issues raised by cultural criticism today. The first speaker, Michael Fischer, is best known for his books and essays on criticism itself, such as Does Deconstruction Make Any Difference? (Indiana, 1985) and Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism (Chicago, 1989). But he is also a strong student of English Romanticism. In his paper he will deal with the problem of authority in contemporary criticism--an issue raised by Richard Rorty and others--by reaching back to the Romantics, especially to Wordsworth's Preface to the Lyrical Ballads as a significant early encounter with this issue.

The second paper will parallel Fischer's English example with an American one. Andrew Delbanco has been working on the problem of evil in American culture. His paper will trace the changing metaphors by which Americans have represented evil and examine the contexts in which each of these metaphors emerged. In doing so, he will compare the approach of cultural critics today with that of predecessors like Trilling and Niebuhr and, before them, Collingwood and Cassirer. Like Fischer, his aim will be to highlight contemporary practice by dealing with a concrete cultural issue in terms of earlier critical methods. Delbanco's focus is on the varieties of historicism, past and present, and he will use the problem of evil to show the differences.

Delbanco's previous work includes a book on William Ellery Channing (Harvard, 1981) and The Puritan Ordeal (Harvard, 1989), but he also frequently reviews books on American literature, history, and religion for The New Republic and other periodicals.

In recent years, cultural studies has been concentrating less on England and America than on third-world and post-colonial settings and issues. This is what Margery Sabin will take on in the third paper. Sabin has been doing research in London and elsewhere on the post-colonial tensions and conflicts in the India of the 1950s. She has been studying the files of the Congress for Cultural Freedom, which tried to influence Indian intellectuals by funding journals like Quest--among other things, by trying to encourage the revival of native traditions. This in turn was resisted by many Indians who feared an upsurge of nationalism and Hindu fundamentalism--exactly what has since occurred--and remained more sympathetic to some Western attitudes.

Sabin's will be the most empirical of the four papers; she will explore this paradoxical situation to provide a historical framework for understanding the concept of "cultural freedom" within a post-colonial context. Like the other speakers, indeed, like most cultural critics, Margery Sabin's work has been extremely varied, including a book on English Romanticism and the French Tradition (Harvard, 1976) and The Dialect of the Tribe: Speech and Community in Modern Fiction (Oxford, 1987). But she also has two recent essays in Raritan related to issues of colonialism, one on China ("Lu Xun: Revolution and Individual Talent"), the other on India ("The Suttee Romance").

The last paper, by Eugene Goodheart, a sharp student of contemporary criticism, will follow directly from the issues raised by Sabin's discussion. Goodheart will examine how the notion of culture, which in the past provided the ground for an idealist critique of industrial society, has more recently been attacked as an expression of ideology. His paper will examine the claims of ideology critique by juxtaposing an essay by the Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski with the writings of the African novelist Chinua Achebe. Without defending European claims of universalism, Kolakowski emphasizes the Western traditions of self-criticism and self-correction, while Achebe argues that Enlightenment universalism is a mystification that simply masks the self-interest of European imperialism. This issue is at the heart of both the criticism of ideology and third-world cultural studies, and it does much to explain why recent cultural critics have ignored or rejected most of their predecessors.

Eugene Goodheart is best known for his books on cultural criticism and theory such as Culture and the Radical Conscience (Harvard, 1973), The Failure of Criticism (Harvard, 1978), The Skeptic Disposition in Contemporary Criticism (Princeton, 1984, 1991), Pieces of Resistance (Cambridge, 1987), and Desire and Its Discontents (Columbia, 1991).

In sum, we have here a range of distinct historical and comparative perspectives on the issues in cultural criticism today. Two of the speakers, Delbanco and Sabin, will focus on concrete problems in American and post-colonial cultures, while the other two, Fischer and Goodheart, will empahsize key theoretical issues within cultural criticism by bringing in provocative and significant examples. None of the four speakers falls back either on the old idealist notion of Culture as a critical category or on newer themes of race, class, and gender that have become somewhat routinized in recent criticism. What I expect to hear is four approaches that will be both historically specific and intellectually inventive, with the goal of putting cultural criticism today on a sounder, more secure, but also more self-conscious and thoughtful grounding.