

Art | Theory | Criticism | Politics

OCTOBER

53

Stuart Hall

Catharine Stimpson
Barbara Harlow

Mark Poster

Paul A. Bové

Cornel West

The Humanities as Social Technology
A Special Issue

*The Emergence of Cultural
Studies and the Crisis of the
Humanities*

Federal Papers

*Political Detention: Countering
the University*

*Words without Things: The
Mode of Information*

*Power and Freedom: Opposition
and the Humanities*

*The New Cultural Politics of
Difference*

\$8.00/Summer 1990

Published by the MIT Press

OCTOBER

editors

Joan Copjec
Rosalind Krauss
Annette Michelson

managing editor

Martha Buskirk

advisory board

Parveen Adams
Luigi Ballerini
Leo Bersani
Homi Bhabha
Yve-Alain Bois
Benjamin H. D. Buchloh
Rosalyn Deutsche
Mary Ann Doane
Hal Foster
Denis Hollier
Andreas Huyssen
Fredric Jameson
Laura Mulvey
Allan Sekula
Peter Wollen
Slavoj Žižek

OCTOBER (ISSN 0162-2870) (ISBN 0-262-75203-4) is published quarterly (Summer, Fall, Winter, Spring) by the MIT Press, 55 Hayward Street, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02142, and London, England.

Subscriptions: individuals \$25.00; institutions \$60.00; students and retired \$20.00. Foreign subscriptions outside USA and Canada add \$12.00 for surface mail or \$18.00 for air mail. Prices subject to change without notice.

Address subscriptions to OCTOBER, MIT Press Journals, 55 Hayward Street, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02142.

Manuscripts, in duplicate and accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelope, should be sent to OCTOBER, 19 Union Square West, New York, NY 10003. No responsibility is assumed for loss or injury.

Second class postage paid at Boston, MA, and at additional mailing offices. To be honored free of charge, claims for missing copies must be made immediately upon receipt of the next published issue.

POSTMASTER: send address changes to OCTOBER, MIT Press Journals, 55 Hayward Street, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02142.

OCTOBER is distributed in the USA by B. Deboer, Inc., 113 East Centre Street, Nutley, New Jersey 07110.

Copyright © 1990 by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and October Magazine, Ltd. Statements of fact and opinion appearing in OCTOBER are made on the responsibility of the authors alone, and do not imply the endorsement of the editors or the publisher.

53

Eugene W. Holland and Vassilis Lambropoulos Stuart Hall	<i>Introduction</i>	3
	<i>The Emergence of Cultural Studies and the Crisis of the Humanities</i>	11
Catharine Stimpson Barbara Harlow	<i>Federal Papers</i>	25
	<i>Political Detention: Countering the University</i>	41
Mark Poster	<i>Words without Things: The Mode of Information</i>	63
Paul A. Bové	<i>Power and Freedom: Opposition and the Humanities</i>	78
Cornel West	<i>The New Cultural Politics of Difference</i>	93
Douglas Crimp/ The Editors	<i>To Our Readers</i>	110

PAUL BOVÉ is Professor of English at the University of Pittsburgh. He is author of *Intellectuals in Power: A Genealogy of Critical Humanism* (1988) and *The Culture of Theory* (forthcoming), and is editor of *boundary 2*.

STUART HALL is Professor of Sociology at the Open University, London. He is author of *Reproducing Ideologies* (1984) and *The Hard Road to Renewal* (1988). He has coedited numerous volumes including *The Idea of the Modern State* (1984) and *Politics and Ideology* (1986).

BARBARA HARLOW is Associate Professor of English at the University of Texas, Austin, and author of *Resistance Literature* (1987) and *Barred Women: Women, Writing, and Political Detention* (forthcoming). She translated Jacques Derrida's *Spurs* (1979) and is consulting editor of the University of Minnesota Press Series "Emergent Literatures."

MARK POSTER is Professor of History at the University of California, Irvine. His books include *Critical Theory and Poststructuralism: In Search of Content* (1989) and *The Mode of Information* (forthcoming). He edited *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings* (1988) and coedited *California's Post-Suburban Metropolis* (forthcoming).

CATHARINE STIMPSON is Professor of English and Vice Provost for Graduate Education at Rutgers University. She was founding editor of *Signs* (1974–80). She is the author of a novel, *Class Notes* (1979), a collection of essays, *Where the Meanings Are* (1988), and a study of Gertrude Stein (forthcoming).

CORNEL WEST is Professor of Religion and Director of the Afro-American Studies Program at Princeton University. His publications include *Prophetic Fragment* (1987), *Philosophy, Race and Politics* (1987), and *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (1989). He is coeditor of *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1990).

Introduction

EUGENE W. HOLLAND and
VASSILIS LAMBROPOULOS

From a theoretical viewpoint, it seems redundant to talk about the humanities in crisis, because the humanities has always faced crisis, indeed emerged as the managing of a particular crisis: the demise of the stratified theocentric feudal order. The task of the humanities, since the Battle of the Books at the turn of the eighteenth century at least, has been to manage the affairs of the individual man as Human—as an independent self endowed with the universal quality of autonomous reason. And universal Man lives in a permanent crisis of identity, caught between the luminous promise of insight and *Bildung*, on the one hand, and the threat of ignorance and self-forgetfulness, on the other. This pursuit of secular illumination, the relentless individual critique of (self-)knowledge, constitutes the humanities as the guardian and judge of enlightened reason. Philosophy from Kant to Derrida, art from Goya to Holtzer, literature from Cervantes to Pynchon have all proceeded in full cognizance of this fundamental critical task.

Yet, from a historical perspective, the present crisis of the humanities represents a special case, and belongs to the apocalyptic moment of late capitalism. The very market forces that dissolved theocratic society and may at one time have fostered autonomous reason in free individuals now pulverize individuality and obliterate independent rationality. Scientific reason appears inseparable from the technological domination of nature worldwide and is deployed in all-pervasive technologies of social domination serving the nation-state; critical reason seems finally unable to counteract the subordination of rationality to the market calculations of the “cash nexus” and the power calculus of state reason. Even outside the natural and social sciences, the realm of aesthetics is increasingly recuperated and refunctionalized by institutions ranging from campaign-management and museum sponsorship to advertising. The institutions and modes of thought that once sustained the humanities—empirical science, rational social thought, autonomous art—have deserted, leaving it to face crisis without apparent intellectual resources or sacrosanct cultural domains: this time, the crisis is not for, but of, the humanities.

The breadth of its impact in this country alone (the American case being specific, not to say “unique”) is impressive: it takes shape in countless intellectual, scholarly, pedagogical, artistic, political, and business concerns. Discussions focus on such diverse topics as moral standards for federally supported art, cultural or literal illiteracy, competitiveness in the international marketplace, biases in school curricula, the training of scientists, the demographics of higher education, challenges to the canon, the politicization of research (especially in terms of race, class, and gender), accuracy in the media, and the need for a national language. Public and administrative interest has rarely been so intense: business magazines devote special issues to education; George Bush, having promised to be the “education President,” convenes an extraordinary governors’ education summit; books by Allan Bloom and E. D. Hirsch on the closing and refilling of the American mind become best-sellers; radio and TV devote entire programs to school problems; curriculum-revision movements sweep the academy; statements and initiatives of the directors of the National Endowments for the Humanities and the Arts make headlines. This unprecedented attention indicates a special crisis, and at the same time suggests the centrality acquired by the arts and humanities in the larger American intellectual and educational landscape. For it is mainly in the area of the so-called liberal arts that the stakes have been raised regarding concerns as broad as industrial productivity, definitions of high and low culture (particularly in the arts), sexual conduct, national literacy, medical ethics, and others. Yet however urgent the crisis, however high the stakes, prognosis remains uncertain: overall, the arts and humanities can be seen either as suffering a paralyzing onslaught or as enjoying well-deserved and invigorating attention.

Perhaps the most interesting feature of this crisis, which radically differentiates it from previous ones, is the focus on the institutional dimension—the challenge not just to prevailing views and traditions themselves, but to their organizational basis of legitimacy, as well. All cultural institutions—from the university to the museum, from the anthology to the textbook, from research centers to federal agencies—have come under severe attack for their authoritarian practices and ideological biases. The struggle of ideas alone has now expanded to contestation of the sites in and from which dominant discourses operate. This discovery of the institutional operations of hegemony, in what is often perceived as a state of siege or war, has in turn broadened our perspective on power, which is now seen as a condition, a dimension, a parameter, even a resource in the domain of culture and society whose potential is not determined a priori but is always negotiated. Power no longer means just tyranny and oppression; it can be an enabling as well as a disabling condition. Since power is now understood as the inevitable horizon rather than a distinctive characteristic of action, the time has come to explore its productive potential: its associations with creativity, knowledge, critique, and freedom. This new understanding of power as both managing and enabling technology, of knowledge as both regime and

resistance, has played a major role in the current reorientation of the humanities away from the position of guardian of reason and servant of tradition, toward a more activist stance within society.

It was with these ideas in mind that we organized the Tenth Annual Humanities Symposium at the Ohio State University in October 1989. The title of the symposium was the same as that of this issue, and the papers included here were presented on that occasion. Our purpose was to provide a forum for an examination of the politics of the truth of Man and for a critical assessment of the ways in which the knowledge produced in the humanities affects culture and society. We believe that the essays we have collected—with their interdisciplinary approaches to vastly different topics—represent some of the most challenging positions in the field (while contributing to the collapse of traditional distinctions among its disciplines): they look closely at the truth the humanities speaks, the stories it tells, the territory it claims, the understanding it dictates, the authority it exercises, the jurisdictions it polices, the mechanisms it controls, the interests it serves, the techniques it employs. In addition, while criticizing its foundationalist assumptions, they propose a reorientation in terms of subject matter, methodology, and political commitment which demands a new, interventionist scholarship and pedagogy for the humanities. In what follows, we sketch a composite view of the field that emerges out of this collective inquiry into its historical constitution and social role.

*

The humanities is the principal social technology that has supported and (re-)produced the individual as autonomous self in modernity. It emerged around the turn of the seventeenth century as an explanatory scheme and scholarly paradigm proposing, and offering to account for, a new social position: (the universal) Man. The individual (man or woman) was constituted as a self when s/he acquired depth—a private and unique interior where personal identity was to be defined and defended. The journey into depth, the search for essence and origin, is exemplified in the act of interpretation. The new person, the individual of modernity, the Man of the Humanities, practices and finds her/his self above all in interpretation, in a movement from the depth of the soul toward the (bottomless) depth of a text or artwork possessing comparable qualities (like self-regulating autonomy).

The interpretive act, which takes place in the interior of one's (re-)collection (of books, artifacts, manuscripts, and the like), removes understanding from the public realm of ritual or politics to the private sphere of cultural appreciation. It is the basic exercise of freedom and *Bildung*. As an exercise of personal freedom, interpretation is the ultimate civil right: the right to one's own understanding, unrestrained by outside coercion (especially church dogma). As an exercise in *Bildung*, it promotes the highest goal in life, the cultivation of a truly

enlightened and independent self. Thus, interpretation is both askesis and fulfillment. Although it first arose, as a type of conduct and attitude, in the Protestant North, it became the model of humanity per se, which European colonialism and imperialism have exported to the rest of the world well into this century. Thus, as an assemblage of disciplines centering on the constitution and continual (re-)elaboration of autonomous subjectivity, the humanities has contributed to human knowledge, identity, truth, presence, ethics, and legitimacy, becoming an integral part of the subject's reality through its diagnostic, advisory, therapeutic, and gnosiological functions.

It is a commonplace among scholars and intellectuals—if not always among the government agencies, politicians, and bureaucrats that sometimes support scholarship and art—that high culture in the West, at least since the Enlightenment, has often been critical of the prevailing social order. After all, the public face of the interpreter is the citizen: equality as an interpretive right soon becomes a civil one. For three centuries, often at great personal risk, the high culture of intellectuals turned against authoritarian establishments and questioned their legitimacy. Even today, one rationale often given for liberal education is that it affords a critical perspective on the status quo. It is therefore puzzling to many intellectuals that the projects of liberal humanist critique—even the supposedly radical avant-garde—have lost their critical edge and end up serving the very social order they were meant to contest: Russian-formalist “defamiliarization,” for example, has become a fashionable advertising gimmick for reprogramming consumer society. In his essay propounding the heuristic concept of “the mode of information,” Mark Poster examines some of the ways in which electronic mediation of communication has transformed postmodern subjectivity, showing how the deep self of interpretation gives way to the disseminated self of information as the privileged locus of intellectual activity which was the library gets reformatted by computer networking, data bases, and Compuserve.

With the demise of virulent colonialism abroad and benign Fordism at home, capitalism turns inward, subsuming absolutely all activity under the laws of the market and the regime of productivity. Noncommodifiable thought—preeminently critical thought, of course—thus has no place in the neoliberal economy, or is at most relegated to the purely private sphere of enjoyment (or despair). Meaning that the end of colonialism, however desirable and necessary in and for itself, signals the instauration of neo-colonialism at home as well as abroad, and thus—neoliberal ambitions notwithstanding—the expansion of antihegemonic struggle into social institutions everywhere. In the period of anticolonial national liberation movements directly after World War II, imperialist wars were clearly fought elsewhere, around the globe; now, generalized neocolonialism brings the war home—as the growing number of homeless, the battle against unions, the attacks on women's and minority rights, chronic unemployment, and the disappearance of the middle class into the gaping rift between

rich and poor all clearly attest. The importance of Barbara Harlow's essay, in this context, is to show that not all space is completely flattened and homogenized under these postmodern conditions. The high-technology security state—and not just in the Third World—cannot do without two crucially similar institutions: prisons and universities; through them pass increasingly large numbers of social subjects to be processed and formatted. The parallel between the two, both construed as humanities institutions, suggests that the immediacy of canny resistance to brutal oppression in the one should inform the more flaccid versions of the same in the other, since the power relations of neocolonialism pervade them both.

The period since World War II has seen the end of empire and of attendant notions of European superiority; and then, more recently, the decline of American super-dominance and of notions of the superiority of the West over the East and of North over South, as well as the end of the Cold War and the beginning of a new era in Eastern Europe. It has also seen the instauration of neocolonialism abroad and—in the form of enforced reaccumulation at the heart of the beast—at home as well (under the name of Reaganomics in the United States and Thatcherism in the United Kingdom). If in such a context, confidence in traditional humanities programs for building national character has been shaken by their failure to impose coherence and assure global hegemony, it has not been shattered, and such programs have not simply disappeared. On the contrary, a number of high-visibility “return to . . .” educational proposals have followed the recently proclaimed “crisis in higher education” in this country, and a similar assault on progressive trends in higher education has taken place in Great Britain. Hence the urgent importance of examining how national cultures (as well as geo-regional traditions such as “western civilization”) have been and are being (re-)constructed, as well as the importance of exploring how they could be adapted to new geo-political realities. In his essay tracing the emergence of cultural studies in England, Stuart Hall undertakes such an examination of the attempt to reinforce British national tradition under Thatcherism, and of the political, intellectual, and pedagogical strategies of attack and resistance essayed by cultural studies from its position on the margins of the English academy. Catharine Stimpson documents the parallel attempt of the Reagan Administration to use federal endowment policy as a directly political weapon to roll back the advances made by women and ethnic and racial minorities in the domain of cultural expression during the '60s and '70s.

Over the past forty years, then, the globalization of economics and politics, the social integration of populations via consumption, the accelerating commodification of knowledge, the dislocation of use-value by sign-value and of basic production by rapid circulation, the paradigm shifts from visions of liberation to narratives of resistance, have radically altered the place of culture in the post-modern world and the role of the humanities within it. This is the context in which Stanford University's curricular revisions deemphasizing the Western tra-

dition in favor of global cultural multiversity generated such furor and nationwide media attention, as a challenge to Euro-American ethnocentrism. In concert with struggles for national liberation abroad, marginalized groups within national boundaries have also vigorously challenged oppression and discrimination. A renewed women's movement, for example, has taken up the struggle, targeting, as the civil rights movement did, the inequities of cultural disenfranchisement along with the more blatant mechanisms of economic exploitation and political exclusion. These developments have had especially visible repercussions for traditional high culture and higher education, since the period of economic expansion and demand for an expanded high-tech work force during the 1950s and '60s opened the academy to women and to minorities in unprecedented numbers. This influx generated sharp challenges to an alien, or downright alienating, canon effectively monopolized by white, usually Anglo-Saxon males.

Variouly experienced as disturbing or exhilarating within the academy itself, in the subsequent period of economic retrenchment since 1974, challenges to canon, norm, rule, and dogma have increasingly appeared to many outside as dangerously subversive or simply unacceptable, and politicians and bureaucrats have tried to close ranks around traditional values and heritage. The battle lines are now drawn—unfortunately, not usually from our own initiative.*

Before taking sides on issues relating canons to tradition, modernity, and the postmodern condition—precisely in order to be able to do so more effectively—we would do well to inquire into the aims the hallowed canon is supposed to further, as well as its actual effects: Whom does it serve or privilege? Whom does it exclude or disadvantage? What should the function of humanities canons in postmodern culture be, and how are they (to be) formed and/or re-formed? How can research and teaching reinforce, alter, or subvert their function? With respect to which specific groups and in what contexts can a canon be enabling or disabling? What practices and modes of cognition or types of social interaction are enabled or disabled by canons and by the various humanities programs that shape their formation, transmission, and reception? The relevance of questions like these is by no means limited to the academy, for they—or more often, presumed answers to them—shape debates raging everywhere from local school boards and state legislatures to Congress and the White House.

Important scholarly work already under way examines the effects of institutionalization and professionalization on disciplinary research and teaching in

* In symposium papers not included here, Barbara Hernstein Smith pronounced a scathing critique of the "cultural literacy" movement, which has in some circles set the terms of the debate over the public role of the humanities; and George Marcus sketched the outlines of a critical ethnography of the J. Paul Getty art empire and its attempt to restore and maintain (from Los Angeles, of all places!) the canon of the European, high art tradition in the face of global, economic, and cultural restructuring.

the humanities. Meanwhile, highly visible discussions of the relations among the humanities, higher education, morality, language, and society take place which largely ignore important issues raised by the operationalization of culture in late capitalism, the increasing interdependence of states and cultures around the globe, and the accelerating specialization of research. While recent, related investigations have emphasized difference, otherness, and heterology (reiterating critiques of exploitation and indictments of oppression), this issue of *October*, by also investigating the conditions of the production of knowledge of identity (self, same, essence, foundation, origin), explores the truth and the power, the limitations and the possibilities, of the Man of Humanities.

After the apocalyptic critique and subsequent death of such cherished humanistic notions as man, the author, literature, art, and so on, some disciplines have moved rapidly from their traditional roles of interpretation and criticism to theory and intervention. Paul Bové's essay traces the shift in focus of Foucault's work from the technologies of domination that engulfed and subverted Humanist Man by subjecting him to power, to the potential for and necessity of exercising freedom within the horizon of power. Against the historical background—and failures—of programs of liberal criticism, Cornel West proposes a demystifying and “prophetic cultural criticism” linked specifically to the aspirations and active struggles of Third World and minority artists and intellectuals. These essays (along with those of Hall and Harlow, especially) assert the need not only to explore the socio-political implications of various humanities research paradigms—particularly their constructions of gender, race, religion, sexual preference, ethnicity, class, national culture, subjectivity, agency, language, and history—but also to raise questions that move beyond the ethics of opposition into the interests and tactics of intervention. By what means should the knowledge produced in the humanities affect society at large? If we accept that technology mediates between hard science research and society, and that public policy, public relations, and mass marketing mediate between social science research and society, what media should link humanities research with the public sphere, and how should those links be forged? What modes of expertise will engagement in the postmodern world require of intellectuals, and how will that expertise attain legitimacy and exercise power?

We are concerned, then, with the ways various conceptions of the humanities shape culture and influence social relations, economic developments, political action. Hence our title, “The Humanities as Social Technology,” with its allusion to human engineering of some kind: through a wide variety of media and institutions—from federal endowments to private trusts, from university teaching to prison resistance, from scholarly research paradigms to electronic communications and mass culture productions—the discourses and practices comprising the subject matter of the humanities in effect construct social subjects and mold today's citizens. Our aim is threefold: to examine the ways in which various discourses and practices in the humanities reinforce or undermine ideol-

ogies of universal man, the economy of bourgeois experience, ethnocentric First World perspectives, and other essentialisms; to assess the means by which and the ends for which the discourses and practices of the humanities produce knowledge and exercise power in social context; and ultimately, to formulate agenda for more direct and active intervention by the humanities in the public sphere of culture and society.