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On the Redskins of Scientism and the Aesthetes in the Circled Wagons

Frank Kelleter uses ›neo-naturalism‹ as a cover term for approaches belonging to cognitive science, evolutionary biology, and neurophysiology, as well as for the efforts of *Empirische Literaturwissenschaft* (empirical study of literature) – in other words, just about everything that treats the methods and insights of the empirical sciences as a source of anthropological knowledge. This diverse mixture is rounded off with a number of quasi-religious and quasi-philosophical statements by public thinkers, specifically Edward O. Wilson and Steven Weinberg. In this way, Kelleter constructs a compact scientific ideology that asserts total authority and competes with the authority asserted by the culturalist paradigm. The question of usefulness on a more down-to-earth level is thereby reduced to secondary importance from the beginning. Nonetheless, Kelleter does take the time to demonstrate in detail why the positions he criticizes cannot be supported. Now, it is not particularly difficult to find points to criticize in such a jumble of positions, and I am able to agree with Kelleter entirely on a number of issues. Kelleter's criticism, however, is exclusively destructive. In his portrayal, the things discovered by the neo-naturalists have either long since been known, or are trivial or uninteresting. For the space of a paragraph (and in his abstract), he does acknowledge that neo-naturalist tendencies could help to offset obscurantism and excessive cultural relativism. But nothing is likely to come of that if neo-naturalism is really as flawed as Kelleter portrays it to be.

The corrections I provide, of some misleading details in Kelleter's depiction, do not need to be summarized here. In general, a ›not ... but ...‹ strategy predominates, suggesting that it is necessary to decide between two mutually exclusive claims: not biological conditions but culture. What is lost here is the fact that the very interaction between the two factors, as well as the cultural uses, modifications, and regulations of ›natural‹ givens, could be of particular value and relevance. Accordingly, one is struck again and again by the fact that Kelleter does not consider the lines of enquiry pursued by the positions he reviews on their own terms, but instead declares them to be of no interest or asks questions of them that they were never meant to answer. In material terms, it is regrettable that his coverage of recent biological positions is confined to the case of sociobiology, not that of Evolutionary Psychology. Providing a summary of several approaches based on the empirical sciences would have been eminently sensible here. Evolutionary Psychology is no longer fixated on analogies and homologies with the animal kingdom, but seeks in particular to explain the peculiarities of human cognition on an evolutionary basis. This, moreover, means that it is able

to provide the cognitive sciences, which at times place rather too much emphasis on concepts, with an important supplemental form of empirically based cross bearing. Similarly, functional aspects can be added to enrich neurophysiology, and a historical dimension could be added to empirical psychology.

Kelleter's objections, though, are of such a fundamental nature that it is of no further importance how accurate or up to date the material details are. He adopts an asymmetric scholarly dualism in which any challenge to hermeneutic scholarship by the empirical sciences is rejected. The distinction formulated in his concept of ›two natures‹ does no more than give him the opportunity to put the first aside. This places him firmly in the tradition of healthy human reason refined by education, whose thought begins with an intuition of life as a whole and therefore perceives scientific tendencies as a threat to human wholeness. Committing a naturalistic fallacy, Kelleter even suspects that the attempt of cognitive science to study the reading processes of the general public is an attack on his own reading practices. To modernize his dualistic position and make it possible to accuse neo-naturalism of making a fundamental logical error, Kelleter introduces Bennett and Hacker as expert witnesses. They have set out a fundamental criticism of popular neuroscience, but have also made dogma of their own position as an a priori one and thereby immunized themselves against criticism coming from the empirical sciences. Criticism that leads down a one-way street in this manner is not acceptable and fails, at the latest, when the attempt is made to extend the status of unassailability to traditional hermeneutics.

The aversion to scientific and biologicistic approaches in cultural studies is probably due primarily to the fear that a position of scientism might *replace* the hermeneutic one based on everyday language as a source of orientation in the world. Occasionally, philosophizing natural scientists continue to stir up these fears by declaring such hopes, which are really no more than science fiction. This, though, is a case of mistaken (self-)impressions. In practical life, hermeneutic knowledge based on everyday language will retain its primacy for as long as people are born, live, love, and die. The findings of the empirical sciences can only ever provide partial illuminations and corrections for our otherwise ›wholistic‹ real-world orientation (and reading). It does not in any way need to be protected by walls and made resistant to criticism; instead, it should be conceived of as eager for knowledge and open to correction. Someone who takes concepts such as reflection, responsibility, and the like as a source of orientation should be the last to condemn the systematic study of the dependencies and consequences of our behaviour. Understanding the first nature is an utterly essential part of the second.

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