WITHIN AND WITHOUT THE BELLY OF THE BEHEMOTH: A CONVERSATION WITH ANDREW ROSS
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CONVERSATIONS

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Keith Beattie.


KB: My first question relates to an area of investigation which links two fields of concern within your work, namely, postmodernism and ecological discourse. In response to a question following the presentation of your paper 'New Age Technoculture' at the 'Cultural Studies: Now and in the Future' conference at the University of Illinois in 1990 you mentioned the beginnings of ways 'to think of situating ecological questions within the context of the postmodern debate', ways which are capable of transforming the terms of this debate. Would you care to expand on this suggestion?

AR: I think there's been a continuing lack of attention to ecological concerns in the circles that are ordinarily thought of as postmodernist. Even in the burgeoning field of science studies there hasn't been much priority given to the ecological sciences, where for the most part the focus has been on the core sciences like physics and biology. Possible exceptions would be environmental ethics which nevertheless is a tradition which has been ill-equipped, because of its purist appeals to a pristine nature ethic, to deal with developments like free market environmentalism: the rise of risk assessment pioneered in environmentalism and now at the heart of government as a new form of administrative rationality and fiscal policy making in our budget-conscious climate.
There have been two major components to how ecological concerns really should be entering into these debates. One of them would be how ecological concerns have fed into the massive public anxiety about the effects of industrialisation. This anxiety is measured in the extent to which technophobia is no longer a knee-jerk response to new fangled objects and elitist expertise among scientists; it's part of our daily lives now to such an extent that I think you can talk of technophobia as a very ordinary critique of technoscience. As such, technophobia is an offshoot of Enlightenment rationality and therefore part of our modernist birthright in the West, and not, as conservatives in science are currently announcing, an antiscience reaction.

That's one context. The other one would be thinking about realism in general, but more specifically scientific realism or the core of the precepts that form the ideology of scientific realism. Much of the work that is being done in science studies, which is generally described as social constructionist work, is currently being very efficiently trivialised in the same way that textualist postmodernist work was trivialised and reduced to a stereotype. Constructionists are portrayed as sort of boffo nihilists who deny the existence of recessive genes or subatomic particles or even the laws of gravity. Of course in the wings is always the effigy of the leftist technophobe Luddite waiting to be wheeled in for a smoky turn on the pyre. So, I would say that at least those two components should be feeding into the debates about postmodernism and ecological discourse.

**KB:** The relationship you posit between ecological discourses and postmodernism distinguishes your work from Bruno Latour's *We Have Never Been Modern*, a book which in certain respects has some features which are similar to your position in *The Chicago Gangster Theory of Life*. Latour argues that modernity constructs systems which mix politics, science, technology and nature, so-called 'hybrids' exemplified in the ozone debate and the idea of global warming. As these systems proliferate, attempts at keeping nature and culture in their separate categories are problematised, a point which is in keeping with your argument in *The Chicago Gangster Theory*. Rather than try to continue to separate nature and culture, Latour proposes that the categories themselves should be redefined, with a resultant rewriting of the definition of modernity. Latour, then, would argue for a renovation of the theory of modernity. Is this a worthwhile task at this moment, or do the 'hybrids' Latour refers to point to the existence of a condition most suitably theorised as postmodern?
AR: I'm as sympathetic to Latour's arguments as to those of Ulrich Beck, the German sociologist of the Risk Society who argues that this popular type of scepticism which I've described is very much an extension of modernity, a phase of reflexive modernisation, as he terms it, rather than an autonomous historical development that some people describe as postmodernist. Having said that, like many American intellectuals I've put the process of theorising on the back burner because of the embattled state of American intellectual life as a result of the culture wars. Many folks are in the same boat as myself; we consider theorising a little bit of a luxury right now because so much of our thought and work is being directed to responding to the neo-McCarthyist onslaught that is a result of the new conservative climate. Recently, we have seen the onset of the Science Wars which are very much a second front which has been opened up in the Culture Wars, coordinated by the same conservative associations and scholars, funded by the same right-wing foundations, and featuring the same kind of multicultural scapegoats who are presented as a clear and present danger to the Republic. The current tactic in the science wars is to link all of the postmodernists and social constructionists and the multiculturalists along with practitioners of Nazi-Aryan science and astrologers and New Agers and advocates of every last cult imaginable as a dangerous antiscience movement that wants to deny the achievements of Enlightenment, modernity and reason.

That's the kind of climate in which one is obliged to think about some of those ideas your question raises, a remarkable reminder of how tenuous knowledge claims can be in a national culture which has a recent memory of McCarthyism and eugenics movements. The return of biologism and biological determinism and social Darwinism to the forefront of social policy making and discussion in the US has been a significant recent development and something which we've had to respond to whether we like it or not. My most recent book, The Chicago Gangster Theory of Life, is very much a polemic against the kind of politics that draws upon the authority of appeals to biology and nature. That's an old struggle, not exactly postmodernist, although sciences like molecular biology have provided a new context for these forms of biopolitics.

KB: I'd like to follow your emphasis on politics within the current US cultural scene by referring to the place of politics of difference within your work. In the Introduction to Universal Abandon? you argue that 'a politics of racial, sexual, and ethnic difference are not only symptoms of, but also essential
strategies for coping with a postmodernist culture’. Such a politics may be a feature of contemporary culture, yet it could be conceived that this presence is nothing more than an extension of the place of such a politics under modernism where the construction of otherness and moments of identity resulted in various forms of political reaction. Have the claims for an exclusive relationship between a politics of difference and contemporary postmodern culture been overstated?

AR: In many cases the relationship has been corrupted. A case in point would be the development of conservative multiculturalism and racist multiculturalism, most infamously in the formulation provided by the authors of The Bell Curve, Charles Murray and Richard Herrnstein. Their term for these features is ‘wise ethnocentrism’ but it basically boils down to the idea that there are cultural differences in society which should be preserved and that ethnic minority cultures in particular should be released from the traditional injunction of American ethnic pluralism to assimilate and to preserve what Murray and Herrnstein call their ‘clannish self-esteem’ and to keep to separate spheres. Cultures are different, and they should remain so — best not to mix at all, in other words. Thus what is basically a prescription for segregationism masquerades as a sort of liberal tolerance for human variation and cultural differences.

Etienne Balibar has written about the rise of neoracism which refers to race based on cultural rather than biological appeals. Culturalism, he argues, has come to replace biologism as the basis for a racism without race. I think that Balibar’s caveats are probably more relevant and appropriate to the insurgent European racisms than perhaps the North American racial formation. I think he’s a little premature for one thing in announcing the passing of biological racism. The Bell Curve is only one example, a particularly egregious example, but there are all sorts of books which have appeared in recent years which revive appeals to genetic determinism and the like.

As for multiculturalism itself, I think that the one thing that needs to be said is that unlike say Australia or Canada, where multiculturalism is top down official government policy, in the US it has been seen as a bottom-up movement which nonetheless has been transmuted into versions compatible with the traditional liberal emphasis on ethnic pluralism. In other words, we are seeing not calls for multiracialism but calls for multiculturalism which tend to gloss over the differences between dominant and subordinate cultures and encourage the idea that racism doesn’t exist any more.
KB: A definition of the new racism in the US is that it displaces race by privileging culture or ethnicity.

AR: Yes. The cult of ethnicity has come to mean that gender critiques and critiques of the hetero normative state have been displaced to some extent. I often think that analogies with other postcolonial settler states such as Australia and Canada are less relevant than the analogy to slavery societies like Brazil. In Brazil, where the official ideology is that of a race-less society, political issues get displaced onto class. In the US where the official ideology is of a classless society politics tends to get displaced on to race. There continues, however, to be massive resistance to dealing with the racial formation of the state. The US did not exclude African Americans from the polity; it included African Americans as non-participants and that's why there are debates about affirmative action right now where I think you can see quite clearly a continuity in the historical behaviour of US elites that have been willing to grant forms of symbolic justice when pushed to the wall but never economic justice. Affirmative action has not for the most part relieved the class polarisation in this country along lines of colour, but it has brought many individuals of colour into the mainstream public sphere. To overcome racism, it has proven necessary to take race into account and not to ignore it. To pretend that the playing field is now 'level' is to display an arrogant contempt for both history and modernity.

KB: The need, then, is not to pursue a link between a politics of difference and postmodern culture but to define a politics of difference within the US context.

AR: Yes. I think the ideal would involve being much more specific about where, when and what claims are to be waged. There is a certain form of radical politics which is very dismissive of the idea of rights and which favours informality in pursuing cultural justice. There are reasons why that should be distrusted now, and not simply because rights are fundamental to any discussion about American history and American politics because of the questions which come up about constitutionality. Civil rights, which are often dismissed by radicals as limited legislation, are very much on the line. The idea of civil rights should be expanded. Patricia Williams has argued that civil rights should include not just the idea of achieving freedoms and rights but also how to expect civility from others, and that's an expanded notion of justice that certainly goes beyond the idea of limited, symbolic legislation.
KB: One central feature of the postmodern condition is what you call technoculture. In your writings on technocultures, I have noted references to Marshall McLuhan whose work you have critiqued as a 1960s romanticisation of 'pre-industrial life in the service of postindustrial ideology'. It could also be argued that McLuhan was postulating an incipient form of globalisation, yet a theory of such devoid of its opposite, the local. The presence of local cultures in certain cases marks the boundaries of technoculture. Local cultures revise or reject aspects of technoculture. My next question concerns this issue: how would you theorise the impact of technoculture in the context of localised reactions to globalisation?

AR: I think you're dead right as to what McLuhan was glowingly celebrating in the 1960s. It was very much the embryonic forms of globalisation that have become ascendant in the intervening years largely as a result of the fact that capitalism has restructured quite specifically around science, technology and medicine. In the process it has developed what has become in many ways an international lingua franca for the professional managerial class which is cybereculture and all its trappings. Access to advanced technologies in the information sector which is accompanied by a language of expertise and a sense of comfort with technology that only that class understands. I think maybe for the first time since the preindustrial and preliterate ages, that is preliteracy for at least the majority of the population, you have these elites speaking a language which is completely inaccessible to large sections of the population. And intellectuals of course have been included in those elites, being a fraction of the knowledge class, and so most of us have been involved in some way with that culture and with that comfort.

The local/global syndrome has probably been most evident in the forms of ethnic self-determination, and subnational sovereignty movements that have sprung up all over the world in response to the globalising tendency, even as the grand bourgeois nation states are on the verge of dissolving, becoming part of supranational formations as a result of NAFTA, GATT, EEC, and the Southern Cone or, in the instance of the multinational formations like the UK, devolving into something quite different altogether. In the US, I think some of the anxiety created by such changes has been evident in the debate between monoculturalists and the multiculturalists over national identity. On the right, there are the race-based phobias about anything approaching cultural equity, and for the liberals an anxiety about the 'centrifugal' tendencies of
cultural fragmentation and on the left anxieties about corporate management of cultural diversity. You can see the symptoms in all sorts of places, even in the rise of the militia movements and the resurrection of states' rights, the new Republican devolution of power into the states, and so forth. This is happening at the same time that federal government is dissolving what is left of the liberal corporate state and removing all national impediments to the path of offshore transnational corporations, most notably in the form of media goliaths like Disney, Rupert Murdoch and Time-Warner, those very corporations that McLuhan was very cosy with.

KB: What have been termed postcolonial nationalist movements have been interpreted as localised reactions to global technoculture. In your latest book you extend this position by arguing that in the case of Polynesia such movements are represented, and represent themselves, through recourse to ecological concerns and questions, not all of which necessarily involve progressive outcomes. In a similar way you noted in Strange Weather that, in the US context, the language of limits associated with ecological movements has often resulted in a particular 'drastic course of action'. It seems to me that one recent drastic course of action, Reaganism, can be read in the context of the discourse of limits. Much of Reagan's popularity was a result of opposition to such rhetoric in an appeal to an abandonment of limits as patriotic, as in his suggestion that 'as Americans we have every right to dream heroic (or limitless) dreams'. Reaganism is still alive in the US in the form of a 'Contract With America'. Would you care to comment on the role or the function of a discourse of limits in this Reaganite context?

AR: Reaganism, of course, spoke with a forked tongue and the rhetoric was aimed at a very particular social sector for whom wealth was redistributed upwards — that was the limitless part which was applied very unevenly. It was under Reagan of course that the US saw the emergence of a two-tier society, which is recognised as one of the now classic features of postindustrialism, where you have a gourmet class and a discount class. The majority of the population came under the regime of austerity economics and austerity politics in a way that hitherto had been applied to third world sectors by the IMF and the World Bank. Here was austerity culture, in other words a discourse of limits coming home to roost in the US where the core of the middle class was being dissipated. Class polarisation resulted, and the most recent statistics are that 1 per cent of the American population owns 40 per cent of the wealth which is
a statistic redolent of the days of the Robber Barons, while poverty levels are higher at 14.5 per cent today than the 12.1 per cent of 1969. What Clinton promised to do was to democratise austerity, to extend the discourse of limits to everyone. So I think that the issues in your question need to be seen in the contexts of the realities and not the rhetoric.

As for the current tax revolt and the Contract With America, white workers have lost 20 per cent of their real wages in the last twenty years. The only way they have left of trying to boost their wages is to reduce taxation. The economic desire for some kind of rock bottom survival has been addressed by the New Right by exploiting the traditional 'wages of whiteness' employed by white workers. Money liberated from the state is money liberated for whites. So too the discourse of limits has now been applied to government in the suggestion that there are limits to government. That's a very particular version of the discourse of limits which is different, I would argue, from an ecological argument about the limits to growth of, say, industrial capitalism.

KB:  Your analysis positions the working class within current US political discourse, something which has not always been the case in other interpretations.

AR:  Well, yes and no. There has been a significant revival of populist rhetoric from the right of the elitist anti-state variety. It's cynical and authoritarian and is encouraging many dangerous tendencies, but in some ways it has re-energised the whole debate, on the left, about whether the popular classes are voting against their interests or not.

KB:  Still within the realm of politics and limits, in The Chicago Gangster Theory of Life, you argue that one of the book's many origins 'lay in the perception that environmentalist discourse about scarcity and limitation in the natural world was beginning to reinforce, if not translate into, calls for a reduction in rights and freedoms in our civil society'. To counteract this movement you argue for a libertarian form of post-scarcity politics. To extend this point, then, how does such a politics translate into an increase in rights and freedoms in society?

AR:  Any form of progressive libertarianism in the current climate has to be interpreted as a position against scarcity politics. The 'luxury' of post-scarcity politics is put to the side, although I developed certain conceptual strategies for thinking about it in the book. We need to throw everything we have against pro-scarcity politics. As for the question of limits, let me give you just
one example, again with respect to race in reference to the so-called ‘colour line’. The persistent idea that there is a black and a white nation within the US bears very little resemblance to a multiracial constituency where the emerging majority of the population is racially mixed. In a pro-scarcity climate, however, what happens is that limited resources are made available which minority communities have to compete over. And what that has meant is that many black leaders have reinforced the colour line to some extent because they have been forced to advance their interests over those of other minorities for the limited resources. Consequently, appeals to the purity of ethnoracial tradition and essentialist culture become paramount. Appeals to hybridity don’t get you very far because they weaken and undermine the legitimacy of identity claims. And then the right wheels in the latest scientific racism like The Bell Curve which suggest to policy makers that no use of resources is going to change the situation of minorities who are seen as ‘cognitively disabled’. And so in a pro-scarcity politics, targeted at the poor and minorities, this combination of social Darwinism and scientific racism translates into a reduction of the resources necessary to ensure rights and freedoms.

Obviously any kind of left libertarian politics has to argue against this situation in what ever ways are possible and to talk about public affluence and enfranchisement and empowerment in ways that go beyond scarcity politics and that’s what I mean by post-scarcity politics — abolish the idea of scarcity because scarcity politics is always a manipulation of a category to impose recessionary strategies upon certain sectors of the population.

KB: In ‘The Ecology of Images’, which first appeared in the South Atlantic Quarterly and which is included in a reworked form in your most recent book, you noted the near complete absence of ‘media oriented ... discussion of ecological issues’. Having read that I immediately mentally cast about for examples of such representations and thought of a relatively commercially successful example from Australia, the film Cane Toads which deals with the ecological problems caused by the introduction of cane toads into the sugar cane fields of Queensland. It seems to me that much of the public acceptance of the film was grounded in the ironic representation of the topic. Your most recent work is concerned in certain ways with dispelling the public image of the ecology movement as a strict anti-libertarian politics, while a recent review in Australia of this work stated that ‘Ross is that most necessary thing in cultural studies, a critical ironist’. If you accept this characterisation, would you also accept that by necessity of its subject, ecological debate requires an
Ironic voice to dispel the seriousness which stems from its appeal to scientific knowledge?

AR: That's a good question. This seriousness is surprising, especially given that so many of our direct encounters with the natural world are often so surprising and contrarian. The house style of so much environmentalism is apocalyptic or evangelistic and in science itself varieties of geewhizzery or technocratic sobriety tend to be the house styles. Critical irony doesn't go a long way in either context. For me irony is a legacy of traditions of radical scepticism in leftist thinking and progressive temper in general. It's also a legacy of the 'personal is political' translated into style, a difficult habit to let go, although I've often been criticised for that sense of irony because it's easily trivialised by sensation journalism in the current, rabid climate.

KB: I would like to move now from aspects of what you have in your work called a 'green cultural criticism' to questions related to the theory of cultural studies in general. In your Introduction to Microphone Fiends I noticed an absence of reference to the term 'opposition' and you refer to 'resistance' as 'an overused term'. I find this noteworthy given the frequent use of these words in cultural studies work. In place of these terms you have focused on a language of what you refer to as 'anger and activism' which emerges from the subject of contemporary youth music and youth culture. While such a language in a sense redefines the themes of an earlier cultural studies, doesn't it also indulge the subculture it represents? As with traditional cultural studies, doesn't it leave the centre (what was once referred to as the dominant) un(der) theorised?

AR: It probably does. Questions about political economy have been undertheorised in a lot of cultural studies work but probably not as much as is often alleged. But it's relative to what cultural studies undertook in the first place which was to provide a corrective to traditions of thinking which had undertheorised cultural politics itself. I have always thought that cultural studies shouldn't be the only story to tell about anything. Such stories have to be told in conjunction with the hard domination theories of political economy — the theories of the centre to which you refer. But I have to confess that I am a little leery about talking about cultural studies in general (which is part of the symptom of denial of people involved in cultural studies). In general, I think that there has been too much talk about cultural studies and not enough doing it.
Getting back to your question, there has been something of a rapprochement, particularly in the US in recent years — as a result of the culture wars — between the cultural justice and the social justice wings of progressive thinking. This is the division which I think you are referring to in your question. I think it’s impossible now after the culture wars to say that cultural politics is a diversionary side-show.

KB: Have you noted any particularly progressive — or fruitful — recent developments in the practice of cultural studies?

AR: One development is the fact that the right has taken on the cause of cultural politics in the US and that many intellectuals have been drawn into these debates, not on their own terms, but nonetheless in a way that seriously addresses the relationship between culture and the state. In many ways these have been debates about cultural policy in a kind of ad hoc way, different from the debates in Australia, for example, about cultural policy which have a formal administrative framework. The policy frameworks which exist largely in the US are neo-conservative, and they exist in the private think tanks and foundations that were set up largely in the 1980s to circumvent the intellectual input of academics.

The most recent debate within cultural studies has been the reintroduction of a discourse about values. Simon Frith’s latest book, Performing Sites, points out that after twenty years of banishing the language of value judgments from cultural studies, the only place where people don’t make value judgments is in cultural studies classrooms. But how you reintroduce the language of values is a complex phenomenon, and again it varies from culture to culture. For example, at present in the US the language of values is totally claimed by the ‘family values’ crowd.

KB: The place of texts in cultural studies is problematic. Traditionally, cultural studies has tended to privilege the study of literary texts, and one example here is the ways in which the organisers of the ‘Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture’ conference situated your contribution to that conference within the collected volume of conference papers. Having said that, I’ve noticed in your recent work a move away from the study of literary (and film) texts towards the study of sources which include anthropological tracts, computer programs, various moral and ecological panics, Susan Sontag’s On Photography, and the products and practices of the biotechnology industry. Has the shift in texts employed been directed by a recognition that cogent
answers to the questions of power and culture which motivate your analyses are to be found in the study of the latter sources?

AR: I would probably want to down play your characterisation of the study of literary texts within cultural studies. I think perhaps even quite the opposite, cultural studies has been associated with the displacement of literary value from its commanding role at least within the humanities side of the field of knowledge. For the most part cultural studies has been associated with attention to visually and technologically mediated culture where questions about authority and power are, as you say, largely negotiated and exercised across a much wider range of cultural sources and practices. That paper you refer to is from an earlier part of my career when I was a poetry critic. It was actually the love of American poetry that first brought me to the US. The editors of that collection may have been emphasising those literary aspects in order to appeal to a literary criticism audience.

Cultural studies in the social sciences has been used as a way of warding off the tendency to select empirical reason as the model for the social sciences and so there has been more of a friendly espousal of literary theory among social scientists. I think quite the opposite is the case among humanists involved in cultural studies, a large proportion of whom have probably been trained in literary studies and are in full flight from that training.

KB: Your reference here to the break-down of the traditional disciplines, or at least a realignment of disciplines, leads into my next question. Throughout the writings by those working in the field of cultural studies there are objections to the commodification and disciplinisation of the field. In one of your writings, ‘Giving Culture Hell’, you stated that ‘Breathing gets difficult for me when cultural studies is almost wholly reduced ... to yet another academic debate about how to define a disciplinary object’. We can avoid this condition since my question is not necessarily concerned with defining cultural studies as a discipline. Rather, what problems or issues do you see associated with moves to entrench cultural studies as a discipline?

AR: That again differs not just from country to country but also from location to location in terms of different universities. In Britain, for example, in the wake of Thatcherism cultural studies as a discipline has been extraordinarily successful. In Australia, where there has been a relatively benign social democratic administration the concern has been with cultural policy. In the
great byzantine behemoth which is the US higher education system, the situation varies from campus to campus depending on the resources available. Tendencies associated with cultural studies flourish on some campuses in the field of literature and others in anthropology and others in communications, and so on. Overall, there are really no cultural studies programs up and running in the US. Despite all of the talk about cultural studies there is nowhere for graduates to go to get such a degree which is perhaps symptomatic of the desire of certain folks in cultural studies not to institutionalise.

KB: Further to this issue I would like to repeat a question you posed in the piece, 'Giving Culture Hell', namely, what is cultural studies for?

AR: Well, I can't answer that one. For me personally it has been a lot about learning how to be a citizen in the fullest possible sense, grounding oneself in a certain cultural history and finding a voice that tries to bridge the journalistic and the academic. In terms of writing, cultural studies for me has always meant trying to write as a non-expert.

KB: Your desire to write as a non-expert is reflected in the dedication of *Strange Weather* in which you thank 'all the science teachers you never had'.

AR: That got me into trouble in the science wars. It's one of those little ironic sayings that has been widely circulated. It got lifted out of context by sensational journalism as evidence of a celebration of ignorance.

KB: I must apologise at the outset if my next question runs the risk of provoking an attack of the kind of asphyxia you mentioned. Recently in an interview in *New York* magazine you mentioned looking to a 'postdisciplinary' American Studies program. How would such a program differ from the established emphases within American Studies upon 'interdisciplinarity'?

AR: American Studies in the US context, at least, is the oldest interdisciplinary field. Its chauvinist origins as a field that celebrates a certain vision of nationalism associated with World War Two made it a very convenient vehicle for consensus scholarship and consensus politics in the immediate postwar period. That embarrassing use made of interdisciplinarity is something that most people working in the field have long tried to disavow.

The period of critical nationalism from the 1960s through the early 1980s was a period when American Studies was struggling to survive, trying to compete with many other interdisciplinary programs, mostly ethnic studies programs
and women's studies programs which were springing up. It survived remarkably well and has been very much in a boom phase in the last ten years or so.

Now the current horizon is not just the postnational phase of American Studies but also the move to involve social scientists more, and as a result I think a lot of the aspirations of scholars of my generation to something like postdisciplinary work have been projected onto American Studies — certainly in my case that's true. What postdisciplinarity really means is something else: it's a utopian project in some respects. Where you draw the line between something that is interdisciplinary and postdisciplinary probably depends on the next generation of scholars working through institutional structures that my generation is trying to create.

KB: You consistently speak of disciplinary fields such as the humanities and the social sciences rather than specific disciplines. Perhaps, in that language practice, we can locate the beginnings of a postdisciplinarity.

AR: One reflection of such a shift in emphasis is that here at New York University the American Studies program is under the aegis of social science, not the humanities, which to me is a welcome move.

KB: That moves on to my next question. I find it interesting given the content of many American Studies forums that the conference you organised at Princeton University in November 1992 to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the American Studies program was on the theme of 'Youth Music and Youth Culture'. I read this as a new direction, indeed an invigoration, of American Studies. Will you be incorporating courses on youth music and youth culture in the program at NYU?

AR: Our particular focus is on urban culture, but we encourage all sorts of work. What we did here was basically to take over one of the oldest graduate programs in American Studies in the country and reformulate it along transdisciplinary lines. Like most American Studies programs, its former existence was tied to literature and history. Students would eventually specialise in one or the other. I did away with those requirements and grouped together scholars from different departments more by reference to their intellectual training than by coverage of periods and created fields such as science, technology, and society; popular culture and daily life; gender, race, and sexuality; ideologies and political economy; law, institutions, and
social movements; media studies; cultural analysis; indigenous America; urban and community studies; nations and transnationalism. Students specialise within three of these fields. I'm very sanguine about American Studies, obviously. I wouldn't have taken over this job if I hadn't have been.

**KB:** You argued before that part of the cultural studies work you do is directed at becoming a better citizen. Would you translate that into a relationship between cultural studies and American Studies by saying that one of the aims of the American Studies program here is to develop citizenship among students of American Studies?

**AR:** To some extent. There is a tinge of irony associated with that given that critiques of the excesses of nationalism would be part and parcel of coming to citizenship. Yet that is a fairly reasonable way of putting it if one has in mind someone who is generally informed and participatory in different public spheres. In other words, it's the opposite pedagogical ideal of the specialised field career academic.

**KB:** In the review from Australia of your latest book which I have mentioned, the critic stated that 'whether he likes it or not, Professor Andrew Ross is a celebrity'. It could be added that this status is implicated with your role as an intellectual. If this assumption is correct, then it impacts upon the issue you raised in *Universal Abandon*? and which permeates *No Respect* concerning the 'role of the intellectual in an age that rejects intellectual vanguardism and vanguardist intellectuals alike'. Is this still the case? Does the age continue to reject intellectual vanguardism and vanguardist intellectuals?

**AR:** In the US, it's obvious that progressive intellectuals have very little opportunity to sway public opinion. I think that the most that could be said is that our job has been to try to keep liberals honest, something which is increasingly difficult in the current climate. We tend to be in a position of providing free therapy for liberals these days. I think they should pay for their therapy quite frankly. But the celebrity part of it is very much a negative celebrity and has come out of this neo-McCarthyist climate whereby certain intellectuals associated with radical ideas or radical politics have been selected by sensational journalism for caricaturing, and I've been one of those people chosen in recent years for that role. The alternative, of course, is self-marginalisation, which the left has made a career of in the US.
But the whole question of celebrity culture is something that deserves analysis in itself. Academics in particular always think they’re immune to developments in other sectors of society, but of course they’re not. The academy has shared in the low-wage revolution and employment crisis visited upon everyone else. Also, we have seen the infamous practice of academic gossip elevated to the order of celebrity, something that the public media and glossy journalism have exploited. And academics, for all their alleged sophistication at reading literary texts, are extraordinarily illiterate when it comes to reading media characterisations of the academic scene, and thus they are easy prey. Obviously there is no reason why intellectuals should be immune to such attacks, whether they like it or not.