
"canon wars" may be toward conciliation, there's little likelihood that Fish will have a seat at the peace table if multiculturalists and traditionalists bury their differences and shake hands on the White House lawn. Fish, a professor of literature and law at Duke University, is an idiosyncratic and infuriating army of one. Welcoming the charge that he is a "contemporary sophist," he does battle with all sides while coyly refusing to stake out an agenda of his own. His battle cry is "Hearkening to me will lead to nothing. Hearkening to me, from my point of view, is supposed to lead to nothing."

Fish's latest collection is a smorgasbord of law, literature, and campus politics. Last year the author traveled the country with the right-wing polemicist Dinesh D'Souza, and several of the essays printed here are culled from their acrimonious exchanges. In them, Fish argues that much of the debate about political correctness has taken place under false pretenses. Conservative critics of campus radicalism have disguised their own partisan ends by appealing to "neutral" standards of high-mindedness, tolerance, and "common ground." They have exaggerated the spread of the multicultural curriculum and misstated their reasons for opposing it. And they have disingenuously opposed the "politicization of the humanities" while themselves occupying positions of considerable power and prestige.

Fish casts similar aspersions upon the academic Left. While he agrees with New Historicists and other practitioners of advanced literary criticism who declare that everything is "historical" or "political," he denounces their efforts to judge the worthiness of critical enterprises by the degree to which they are historical or political. To those critics who assume that the study of a poem's political implications is more properly "historical" than the study of its aesthetic principles, Fish replies that aesthetics is itself a historical tradition, and one that weighed heavily on poets in the past. These scholars' political aspirations, in short, are both self-contradictory and naive: "Those who conflate and confuse literary and political work end up doing neither well."

Although Fish's targets are scattered, his work clings to a central notion: that human beings cannot get any kind of critical distance from their activities. Instead, they are simply con-

signed to continue along in them as best they can. "Focus cannot be expanded," he argues, "it can only be adjusted." Therefore, Fish loathes any abstract concept—"fairness," "merit," "neutrality"—that promises to free us from our perspectives and guide us toward transcendent truth or open-minded flexibility. It is always, in his view, a false promise.

As a conscientious gadfly, Fish deflates other people's ideals with impressive panache. But he has hardly disposed of those ideals for good. Fish barely pauses to consider, for instance, the possible hazards of speech codes and other restrictions on free speech. It's easy to suspect that his cautious support of such policies is based less on a conviction that they are sound than on his irritation with their opponents.

Although Fish advises all thinkers to forsake "theory" and dwell in the "local," it is plain that he is most comfortable operating on a theoretical level. He is more aroused by the fact that all our perspectives are partial than he is by the content of any particular perspective. Like his fellow pragmatist Richard Rorty, who gestures toward the end of philosophy and the beginning of an age of free-floating conversation without ever quite getting around to joining that conversation himself, Fish apparently would prefer to travel busily across several disciplines than find a local habitation of his own. This champion of the situated self proudly keeps himself afloat.

Science & Technology

SILENT TRAVELERS: Germs, Genes and the Immigrant Menace. By Alan Kraut. HarperCollins. 352 pp. \$25

Americans of the late 19th century were ambivalent about immigration. Because the nation's booming industrial economy created a need for laborers, popular opinion grudgingly tolerated the admittance of foreigners. At the



same time, as Kraut, an American University historian, shows, Americans' xenophobic tendencies (never too deeply buried) were stirred up by contemporary beliefs about the origins of disease. According to the dominant theory of the late 19th century, infections and epidemics were caused by decaying organic matter that provided a hospitable environment for disease-causing "contagia." By popular logic, the damp, filthy tenements where immigrants lived offered a perfect environment for the contagia to flourish. Branding immigrants agents of disease, Americans cried out for measures to protect the public health.

States responded with various quarantine measures, which further stigmatized newcomers as a menace to the national welfare. By the 1890s, American concern over disease-carrying foreigners had reached such a pitch that Congress passed an act requiring immigrants to have physical examinations before departing from their native countries and after arriving in the United States. Those who failed were barred from entry.

The collision of cultures only began at Ellis Island, where an authority-cowed immigrant could be rejected as a mental defective for displaying anxiety in front of the uniformed Public Health Service physicians. Misunderstandings and distrust continued thereafter. American health professionals and reformers tried to preach the gospel of sanitation to immigrants living in overcrowded, unsanitary conditions. But many foreigners chafed at the exhortations of intrusive Americans asking them to abandon their traditions. Preferring to rely on amulets and herbal remedies to cure disease, many immigrants distrusted hospitals ("a place you go to die") and organized American medicine in general ("cold and impersonal").

Yet, as Kraut relates, the history of immigration and public health has some bright spots. The swell of immigration from the 1880s to the 1920s brought improvements in health care for all Americans. Hospital construction boomed. The institution of the "school nurse" came as a boon to all children who were not receiving proper medical attention at home. Yearly physical and eye examinations for schoolchildren became mandatory. And, finally, the infusion of foreigners into the labor force, often in dangerous jobs,

forced lawmakers to pass legislation protecting the health of all U.S. workers.

The story that Kraut tells is not completely behind us. The government's classification of Haitians during the 1980s as a high-risk category because of AIDS and more recent worries about foreigners infected with tuberculosis show that some things remain the same.

UNCOMMON SENSE: The Heretical Nature of Science. By Alan Cromer. Oxford. 240 pp. \$23

The primary stumbling block to scientific progress, says Cromer, has always been the human mind: It cannot naturally perform feats of logical thought. This explains the persistence of belief in animism, spiritualism, and UFOs, and also why, in Cromer's experience, American college students "don't have the critical thinking skills needed to distinguish the fanciful claims of astrology from the extraordinary claims of astronomy."

According to Cromer, a professor of physics at Northeastern University, the unnaturalness of logical thought also explains why science has not experienced a steady progression from the discovery of fire to the unlocking of the atom. Instead, it has followed the bumpy course described by Thomas Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962): "a succession of tradition-bound periods punctuated by non-cumulative breaks." The ideas of Copernicus, Galileo, and Isaac Newton displaced existing notions precisely because such thinkers came up with revolutionary ways of viewing the universe.

Cromer says that the reason science first appeared in ancient Greece, and that so many advances occurred during the Renaissance, was that people at both times developed the unusual ability to break through "the barrier of egocentricism" that characterizes most human thought. Greek culture, with its emphasis on assembly and a "maritime economy that prevented isolation and parochialism," gave the Greeks an opportunity to test new ideas and discard ones that were useless. Renaissance thinkers, rediscovering Greek ideas through medieval texts, adopted Greek-style methods of learning and thus were able to lay the groundwork for