The Ideology of "Epistemological Ecumenicalism": A Response to Carol Berkenkotter

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Carol Berkenkotter’s "The Legacy of Positivism in Empirical Composition Research" in the last issue of JAC responds to articles by David Foster and me that appeared in volume eight. I must confess that Berkenkotter's piece bewildered me at first. It struck me as irrelevant to my original article. Berkenkotter accuses me of faulting empirical research for continued devotion to "positivism," yet I made no such charge and never even mentioned "positivism." Indeed, Berkenkotter herself makes this allegation as she explains how positivism has historically infused empirical research and still proves "hard to avoid." Berkenkotter suggests I know little about the empirical research tradition but cites nothing from my article to support this charge. Indeed, she rarely quotes me directly. Furthermore, aside from her obligatory citation of my title, one would never know from her article that mine focused on ideology. Indeed, she never discusses the word at all. In fact, one would never know from her article that mine closely analyzed a piece she co-authored: "Conventions, Conversations, and the Writer: Case Study of a Student in a Rhetoric Ph.D. Program" (Research in the Teaching of English 22 [1988]: 9-44). Unfortunately, she does not directly address a single assertion I made about it.

I considered not responding to Berkenkotter, but I realized she might have been similarly confused when she encountered my analysis of her "Conventions" article. I sensed, too, that our reactions might exemplify a larger state of affairs within the field. More precisely, the conclusion of my original article came back to haunt me. Observing "that people interested in examining the ideologies of composition and people interested in empirical research aren't reading each other's work," I went on to claim, "To the extent that scholarship between them isn't exchanged and translated into their respective vocabularies, the interplay between them will be left unilluminated—as will the implications of their differences for the culture surrounding them" (28). The passage suggests the camps may continue to diverge. It resists the homogeneity that Berkenkotter demands when she ends by calling for Foster and me to "do the same" as she does. Yet, when I resorted to the classic metaphor of "translation" and indicated that the languages of various research traditions can neatly correspond, I slighted how "responses" to texts can actually reconfigure them, placing them in contexts their authors did not consider. And even though argumentation in any discipline can entail such
"rewriting," composition seems especially prone to it, given the various theories and methodologies the field presently encompasses.

How debates within the field should therefore proceed remains an open question. Certainly, scholars should ponder the self-descriptions of whomever they criticize. At the same time, the latter should not expect critics of their work to share their own values, paradigm, and vocabulary. Others ultimately will judge who is doing justice to whom, presumably by comparing texts with the responses to them and by theorizing the contexts that research should acknowledge.

I doubt this effort will profit, though, from "epistemological ecumenicalism," which Berkenkotter ultimately celebrates in responding to Foster and me. I realize I might appear to tarnish an unimpeachable ideal. Just as "pluralism" has inspired devotion in literary studies, so "epistemological ecumenicalism" may command respect in composition. Nevertheless, I think "ecumenicalism" is a myth, and "epistemology" too narrow a focus. Whatever the term's validity, any text that advocates "ecumenicalism" should be closely examined to determine if—the cliché is irresistible—it practices what it preaches. Berkenkotter's "ecumenicalism" provokes such inquiry when it simultaneously chides Foster and me for lacking her own "good faith." The appeal to "epistemological ecumenicalism" merits particular scrutiny because it can marginalize history and politics. When Berkenkotter completely blacks out my discussion of "ideology" by substituting a discussion of "epistemology," I naturally consider her "ecumenicalism" to be not benign tolerance but active manipulation. Overall, I think that when she invokes "epistemological ecumenicalism" she once more engages in an ideological move. Let me briefly elaborate on this.

First, Berkenkotter evades my concern with the ideology of her "Conventions" piece by associating me with a problematic that she can handle with ease. More specifically, she contends that Foster and I represent the opposite side in a perennial conflict between "hermeneutically trained observers of the composition scene" and "the empirical research community." Again, I did not challenge the whole "empirical research community." Mainly, I suggested that questions of ideology could get obscured as composition gets more professionalized, in part because professions often aspire to the alleged neutrality of scientific language. Far from criticizing all empirical scholarship, I then took Berkenkotter's particular article as "a case study of how certain political questions can get dodged in the effort to legitimate both a certain research paradigm and a certain institution embodying it." Even as I traced how she and her co-authors subtly exalt the Carnegie Mellon rhetoric program, I noted that "I basically wish to raise issues I think we should consider in reading any composition article or book." Moreover, I did not affiliate myself with "hermeneutics," nor have I ever. I agree with John Brenkman that hermeneuticists like Gadamer dodge the same issues of power that Berkenkotter slights.
Although she accuses Foster and me of prolonging tension between "hermeneutists" and empiricists," Berkenkotter imports this familiar dualism herself. She thereby replaces my concern about the ideology of her article with what is for her a more reassuring debate, inviting time-honored strategies. One can say of this act what she says about the ritualistic closing section of the scientific paper: "What is original (and potentially threatening) in the study is neutralized through its being contextualized into the community's existing knowledge" (76). When she admits, for example, that empirical researchers did embrace positivism and now seek to expunge it, she suggests that others need not worry: the tradition takes care of its own dirty linen. Yet, she brackets the topic of ideology not only by pushing aside my article, but also by clinging to the history of ideas. She embeds her story of the empirical tradition within the academy, barely acknowledging larger cultural influences and effects. Ending with composition's epistemological shifts in the 1970s, she does allude to "economic, and socio-political reasons for these changes"; however, she quickly adds that they are "too complex for me to attempt to discuss here" (79).

When Berkenkotter relegates these factors to the periphery of her concerns, we should bear in mind that "epistemology" is not the same as "ideology." Admittedly, composition scholars have sometimes conflated them. Kenneth Bruffee suggests, for example, that antifoundationalism should make one a liberal, and James Berlin assumes that expressivists serve the forces of reaction. The analysis of "ideology" entails, though, more attention to particular historical conjunctures than the classic debates of "epistemology" have involved. In critiquing pluralism in literary studies, Ellen Rooney points out in Seductive Reasoning (Cornell UP, 1989) that scholars who confine debates to "epistemological terms" often "displace...local historical, political and theoretical crises" (42). Thus, when Berkenkotter turns her back on "ideologies" and invokes instead "models of knowing," she discourages attention to the whole ensemble of material processes through which knowledge is developed, articulated, wielded, and fought over.

In other words, Berkenkotter's "ecumenicalism" betrays a logic of exclusion. This looms as well in her implication that only those who practice a certain kind of research can accurately describe it. When she charges Foster and me—indeed, all her "hermeneutically trained colleagues"—with "epistemological ethnocentrism," the label seems to apply just as well to her own defensiveness. Consider a statement she approvingly quotes in a book review elsewhere in the same issue: "You have to know something from the inside before you can fairly criticize it" (211). The drawing of a firm inside/outside opposition ignores how research traditions relate to one another, if only by differentiating themselves. More important, it fails to recognize how "outsiders" to traditions can provide them with useful perspectives their "insiders" lack. Actually, a world that took Berkenkotter's statement literally would
deny people the right to criticize Nazis unless they had been Nazis. I am also troubled when she declares, "Strong criticism from colleagues with rival theories keeps us honest; too much discord, however, may be counterproductive." I cannot help but think of this as the Deng Xiaoping policy toward dissent: ostensibly encourage it but actually strive to limit it. At any rate, I wonder what Berkenkotter considers the appropriate amount of "discord," and whom she would ultimately allow to decide.

I conclude by underscoring another impediment to the ideal of "ecumenicalism": the written nature of our discursive exchanges. Because we often communicate with one another through articles and books, our interpretations of one another will never smoothly coincide. When Berkenkotter ends her response by imagining what she would say to Foster and me in person, she indicates how writing must often unfortunately substitute for conversation. Significantly, when she calls for "productive dialogue," she takes as a model the "Research Network" forum at CCC. Just as significant, though, the only artifact of it she can cite is "a sheath of essays" next to her. Of course, a deconstructionist would argue that even face-to-face speech mediates meaning rather than displays it in some full presence. Berkenkotter probably credits speakers with too much Cartesian lucidity when she suggests that a future "Research Network" panelist "will be acknowledging the sources of her assumptions." A distaste for writing can also reflect dismay over how our "epistemologies" get mediated by all kinds of institutions. We can deny their heavy influence by fixating on "epistemological ecumenicalism"; then again, we might be able to confront it through attention to "ideology."

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