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Theory and the Practice of Critical Democracy

While much of Richard Rorty's early contributions to philosophy centered on his critique of representationalism and his urging of analytic philosophers to follow through on the challenges posed by Quine and Sellars concerning certain assumed distinctions (analytic-synthetic, conceptual-empirical), the thematization of truth in Rorty's latter political writings is generally less appreciated. In his numerous exchanges with political thinkers, critical theorists, and feminists Rorty was resolute in his caution about the prioritization of large-scale social analysis by theorists or philosophers. In this paper I will argue that Rorty's postmodern suspicions about the utility of large-scale historical narratives for liberal democracy and social hope are rooted in his understanding of such narratives as forms of ideology critique which entail an uncovering of some deep truth about human nature, justice, or moral reality. While Rorty's disagreements with radical theorists have focused on a variety of issues regarding validity, recognition, and Marxist critique, I argue that Rorty's fundamental concern here centers on the way in which he takes the analysis of critical theorists like Habermas, Fraser, and Bernstein to be a form of ideology critique that has by now, according to Rorty, run its course.

The focus in this paper will be to show why Rorty charges the theorist with a lingering residue of foundationalism and “the employment of a truth-tracking faculty” (Bernstein, and Voparil 342). The advantage of this exposition will be to illustrate the ways in which Rorty's understanding of critique-as-unmasking is a useful caution for the social critic who argues for an anti-foundationalist conception of democracy. In this way, Nancy Fraser's facilitation of the conversation between feminism and postmodernism tracks this precise tension in two specific forms of social critique. Writing about the different approaches to critique in these two strands,

Fraser suggests that “as a result of this difference in emphasis and direction, the two tendencies have ended up with complementary strengths and weaknesses. Postmodernists offer sophisticated and persuasive criticisms of foundationalism and essentialism, but their conceptions of social criticism tend to be anemic. Feminists offer robust conceptions of social criticism, but they tend, at times, to lapse into foundationalism and essentialism” (Fraser 84). The same might be said about what stands to be gained from a conversation between Rortyan pragmatism and critical theory on the issue of democracy and social hope.

In an effort to contribute to this conversation, the first section of this paper will detail the connections between Rorty's views on truth and Rorty's views on politics. In the second section I will show, mainly through Rorty's exchanges with Nancy Fraser, how these views inhibit Rorty's reception of criticisms of his bourgeois liberalism. Following Richard Bernstein's criticism of Rorty's failure to account for the ways in which “the structural dynamics of bourgeois society systematically undermine and belie liberal ideals” (Bernstein 552) I propose that one can be thoroughly pragmatic and deeply critical in a way that does not betray Rorty's conception of a non-foundational liberal utopia.

No more metaphysics, no more unmasking

Rorty's movement from analytic philosopher to pragmatist, ironist, ethnocentrist, and sometimes poetic redescriptionist was a transition that consistently called into question the notion that we can or should be engaged in a philosophic project with the aspirations of transcending history, grounding knowledge, and arriving at something like universal truth. Like Dewey, Rorty traces the roots of this tradition in Western philosophy to the writings of Plato and extending all the way through to the eighteenth century writings of Kant. However unlike Dewey, Rorty's critique of the tradition is one that begins from within, so-to-speak, by making further use of the

challenges presented by analytic philosophers themselves.

The principal target of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* is the idea that we can obtain something like a correspondence to reality by way of a rational method. Deploying the arguments of Quine, Sellars, Davidson, and Wittgenstein Rorty weaves together a series of criticisms against the tradition which insists that we can discover a pure connection between our conceptual scheme and the objects or reality “out there” to which it refers. According to Rorty, what Quine and Sellars help us to see is that there can be nothing like a privileged representation of reality. The quest for privileged representations by way of epistemological justification is just a further variant of Locke's confusing our being caused to believe x with our being justified in believing x . Against this assumption Rorty, along with Sellars, contends that our beliefs cannot be justified on the basis of givenness alone; that justification is always already wrapped up in what is postulated. Commenting on Quine's attack on the distinction between the necessary and contingent, Rorty writes:

Quine's 'Two Dogmas of Empiricism' challenged this distinction, and with it the standard notion (common to Kant, Husserl, and Russell) that philosophy stood to empirical science as the study of structure to the study of content. Given Quine's doubts (buttressed by similar doubts in Wittgenstein's *Investigations*) about how to tell when we are responding to the compulsion of 'language' rather than that of 'experience,' it became difficult to explain in what sense philosophy had a separate 'formal' field of inquiry, and thus how its results might have the desired apodictic character (PMN 169).

Unlike Sellars and Quine however, Rorty argues for a new conception of philosophy which takes seriously the shift from epistemic justification to conversational justification. Which is to say that he argues for a conception of philosophy which sets aside conceptual systems and does not understand itself as needing to uncover some deep reality which has hitherto been obscured by appearance.

I argue that Rorty's ethical/political philosophy follows through on his commitment to anti-representationalism such that many of his disagreements with Fraser, Bernstein, Habermas,

and Foucault turn on Rorty's charge that these philosophers tacitly make use of essentialist language. They continually slip back into an analysis about the distorted and the undistorted, the natural and the unnatural, or the Just and the Unjust. Such analysis, Rorty cautions, potentially inhibit expanding our conversational justification about political action since they attempt to ground social criticism in some form of moral reality. For a pragmatists like Rorty, ontological foundations for human rights is just as dubious as the search for the ontological foundataions of knowledge. Rorty writes:

The question is not whether human knowledge in fact has 'foundations,' but whether it makes sense to suggest that it does—whether the idea of epistemic or moral authority having a 'ground' in nature is a coherent one. For the pragmatist in morals, the claim that the customs of a given society are 'grounded in human nature' is not one which he knows how to argue about (PMN 178).

We might take Rorty as suggesting to pragmatists or anti-foundationalist thinkers who engage in social critique, that they set aside arguments about ideology and appeals to human nature or Justice. In the section that follows I will detail how Rorty's views on truth are at the center of his criticisms of what he understands to be ideology critique in Fraser and Bernstein. Though Rorty's views on Derridean deconstruction will not be covered here, it is important to point out that Rorty shares similar suspicions about thinkers who make use of a method called deconstruction to uncover the truth of the text, author, or society. The connection between truth and method is apparent when Rorty claims that like Marx and Freud, Derrida has been praised by some because “they think of him as providing new, improved tools for unmasking books and authors—showing what is really going on behind the false front...[however] without the traditional concepts of metaphysics one cannot make sense of the appearance-reality distinction, and without that distinction one cannot make sense of the notion of 'what is really going on'. No more metaphysics, no more unmasking” (Rorty *Remarks* 14).

The Radicals and The Utopians

In his 1990 lecture titled *Feminism and Pragmatism* Rorty offers us a distinction between two types of political thinkers which he refers to as radicals on the one side and utopians on the other. At the core of this distinction, I argue, is notion of a privileged representation of reality or truth. The radicals believe that there are veils that obscure our ability to see what is *really going on* in society. The utopians, or pragmatists, have little use for metaphors of depth or a rich social-theoretic architecture as a means of removing the veil, they instead favor longitudinal metaphors of projection and hope. The radicals, suggests Rorty, “think that deep thinking is required to get down to this deep level, and that only there, when all the superstructural appearances have been undercut, can things be seen as they really are” (Bernstein, and Voparil 340). It is precisely this notion of structural unmasking, which according to Rorty is a hangover from Marxist critique, that pervades certain articulations of feminism and critical theory.

Rorty's criticism of Nancy Fraser's feminist social critique is that it is caught up in a form of ideology critique that takes rather seriously the idea that the structures of liberal democracy are entangled with oppressive capitalist markets that sustain gender inequality and misrecognition such that piecemeal reform is inadequate. Fraser's charge against Rorty's liberal utopia might be formulated in an even stronger variety when she, like Richard Bernstein, alert Rorty to the practical reality that not only might reform be insufficient, but it might also be the case that there are structural and procedural conditions which suffocate the very possibility of reform.

I remain unconvinced by Rorty's claim that Fraser's arguments rely on a belief in a neutral method capable of critiquing ideology or prejudice. I take Fraser to be saying, *contra* Lyotard, that there is a practical need for large scale structural critique in feminist praxis. This means that *contra* Rorty there is a pragmatic need for an anti-foundationalist feminist praxis; a praxis which is not fully capable of being articulated in the language of Rorty's liberalism. Fraser is not

suggesting that postmodern feminists ought to develop a robust ahistorical God's-eye perspective upon which their critique can be grounded. Like Rorty she argues that philosophy cannot ground social criticism. Unlike Rorty however, she does not believe that “contemporary liberal society already contains the institutions for its own improvement” (CIS 63). In her paper with Linda Nicholson titled *Social Criticism Without Philosophy* Fraser argues for a postmodern feminism that is both pragmatic and fallibilistic. She writes that feminists need not abandon:

large historical narratives nor analysis of societal macrostructures...sexism has a long history and is deeply and pervasively embedded in contemporary societies...[thus] theory here would be explicitly historical, attuned to the cultural specificity of different societies and periods and to that of different groups within societies and periods. Thus, the categories of postmodern feminist theory would be inflected by temporality, with historically specific institutional categories (Fraser 101).

On this reading it is difficult to make sense of the validity of Rorty's charge that feminists like Fraser are in the business of merely unmasking ideology.

Rorty's suggestion that the post-metaphysical theorist should adopt a thoroughgoing pragmatist anti-foundationalist approach to social critique is helpful, but often sounds a bit like preaching to the choir when directed toward Fraser, Bernstein, or even Foucault. I argue that Rorty's aversion to theory often has the unfortunate consequence of occluding the suggestions and criticisms of his most respected interlocutors. Rorty's failure to recognize the utility of Fraser's “social-theoretical analysis of large-scale inequalities” and his suspicion about “the possibility that 'the basic institutional framework of [our] society could be unjust” (Bernstein, and Voparil 336) are in part the result of his viewing such critiques as “more or less Marxist in shape” (336).

Rorty consistently maintains that his version of liberalism is equipped with all the tools necessary for making the sorts of changes argued for by feminist and critical theorists alike. The radical thinker carries the burden of showing “us liberals” that our constitutional democracy is in

somewhat structurally problematic. This is precisely what Fraser is alerting Rorty to and precisely why Bernstein criticizes Rorty's liberalism as thin and uncritical. Bernstein claims that Rorty fails to acknowledge certain practical questions raised by Marx in his critique of ideology. He writes that “despite his harsh remarks about Marx and Marxism, I do not see any evidence that Rorty faces up to the *challenge* that Marx poses for us in his critique of ideology, namely, that the structural dynamics of bourgeois society systematically undermine and belie liberal ideals” (Bernstein 552). Rorty's response seems always to be that piecemeal reform is reform enough.

In a curious way, this places Rorty in opposition to both Dewey and Bernstein on the issue of liberal democracy. Recall that it was Dewey in his political writings of the late 1920s and early 30s who spoke of an “eclipse of the public” and of the accompanying difficulty for democracy to function when impersonal and mechanical forces obscure communal life. Dewey's remarks about the entanglement between market forces and democratic practice are as relevant today as they were in the 1930s. In Dewey's lectures at the University of Virginia, collected and published under the title *Liberalism and Social Action* he argued that:

Liberalism must now become radical, meaning by “radical” perception of the necessity of thorough-going changes in the set-up of institutions and corresponding activity to bring the changes to pass. For the gulf between what the actual situation makes possible and the actual state itself is so great that it cannot be bridged by piecemeal policies undertaken *ad hoc* (Dewey 66).

Passages like these and others found in Dewey's political writings of the 30s suggest that it is Bernstein and Fraser, not Rorty who are the inheritors of a thoroughly pragmatic and critical blend of liberal democracy. While Dewey rejected the notion of unmasking ideologies and the practice of violent political revolution, his conception of democracy was one which took seriously what Habermas would later refer to as the colonization of the lifeworld. Critiques of the market forces of late capitalism and their problematic entanglement with democratic procedures are for Rorty merely lingering Marxist concerns that have been sufficiently

assimilated into the social democratic tradition.

On Rorty's account then, there is this peculiar belief that the struggle for liberal democracy has little if any use for theory or philosophy. I have argued that this attitude is an outcome of Rorty's belief that social theorists are merely rehearsing the fantasies of foundationalist philosophers, fantasies that "we pragmatists" cannot indulge in. It remains to be shown however whether pragmatism alone is capable of problematizing our present historical situation such that the potential structural aporias of liberalism can be transformed.

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