

Pragmatism Old and New

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American pragmatism has always been less a coherent philosophical school or movement than a family--often a contentious family--of philosophers holding distinct if related positions on the nature of knowledge, meaning, and truth. Almost from the moment William James first used the term to refer to a philosophical creed, it was repudiated or qualified by those whom James sought to embrace warmly as fellow pragmatists. Charles S. Peirce, the friend to whom James granted an honored place as father of the pragmatic method, quickly denied paternity of the child James had adopted and announced he would henceforth refer to his own doctrine as "pragmaticism," a word "ugly enough to be safe from kidnappers." John Dewey, though deeply indebted to James's thinking, nonetheless took care to distinguish his own "instrumentalism" from what he took to be James's more tender-minded efforts to use pragmatism to protect religious belief. Peirce, in turn, responded to Dewey's praise of his essay on "What Pragmatism Is" (1905) with a puzzled letter noting that Dewey's instrumental logic "forbids all such researches as those which I have been absorbed in for the last eighteen years." And when one extends the term "pragmatism" to include the metaphysical, ethical, aesthetic, religious, and political arguments that Peirce, James, and Dewey attached more or less loosely to their epistemological

positions, the differences between these three philosophers become even more apparent.¹

If anything, contemporary "neo-pragmatism" is even more diverse than that which arose at the turn of the century. Today we are confronted with an often bewildering array of efforts by philosophers, political theorists, legal scholars, and literary critics to reappropriate, recast, and reconstruct pragmatism. Part of the explanation for this diversity may lie in broad way in which contemporary pragmatism has come to be defined. As Giles Gunn has said, "contemporary pragmatic theory has long since given up James's somewhat restricted focus on the nature of knowledge and the meaning of truth and has turned its attention more broadly to issues that are essentially moral and political." The difficulty that this turn presents for any effort to pin down neo-pragmatism is that pragmatism, narrowly conceived as a set of arguments about knowledge, meaning, and truth, has no determinate moral and political implications. As James said, it "stands for no particular results. It has no dogmas, and no doctrines save its method. . . . Innumerable chambers

¹Charles S. Peirce, Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1935), 5.414-437; 8.243-44; John Dewey, "What Pragmatism Means by Practical" (1908), The Middle Works of John Dewey (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1977), 4:98-115. See also Garry Brodsky, "The Pragmatic Movement," Review of Metaphysics 25 (1971/72): 262-291.

open out of it." What most neo-pragmatists have done is adopt pragmatism as their "anti-foundationalist" epistemological theory of choice and then couple it with a variety of moral and political commitments which owe more or less of a debt to Peirce, James, and Dewey. Thus in trying to sort out the neo-pragmatists and discern their relationship to the old pragmatists, we should, perhaps, discriminate between the reappropriation of pragmatism and the reappropriation of the thinking of those philosophers who were, among other things, pragmatists. I should like to say a bit today about the former, yet concentrate my remarks on one aspect of the latter.²

²Giles Gunn, Thinking Across the American Grain: Ideology, Intellect, and the New Pragmatism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p.4; William James, Pragmatism (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), p. 32. The political heterogeneity of neo-pragmatism is perhaps most evident in legal theory, in which the new pragmatists range from radical feminists to market-loving adherents of the law and economics school. See the "Symposium on the Renaissance of Pragmatism in American Law," Southern California Law Review 63 (1990): esp. 1587-1670, 1699-1746, 1763-1782; and Richard A. Posner, The Problems of Jurisprudence (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), pp. 454-469. Peirce may have put his finger on another source of confusion. "At present," he complained in 1905, "[pragmatism] begins to be met with occasionally in the literary journals, where it gets abused in the merciless way that words have to expect when they fall into literary clutches" (Collected Papers, 5.414).

I

As far as the reappropriation of pragmatism as a theory of knowledge, meaning, and truth is concerned, perhaps the most noteworthy divide among new pragmatists is that between philosophers and other theorists who have turned to pragmatism in order to work their way out of the skeptical implications and moral relativism of much postmodernist thinking and philosophers and other theorists who have embraced pragmatism because they see it as a homespun, American version of such skepticism. This divide is, for example, one way one might plausibly describe the differences separating the two major neo-pragmatist philosophers, Hilary Putnam and Richard Rorty.

The Putnam-Rorty face off reminds a good deal of the disagreements between Peirce and James. Although Putnam is a sharp critic of the correspondence theory of truth and what he calls "metaphysical realism" and he loads his pragmatism (which he terms "internal realism" or "realism with a human face") with historicist and contextualist arguments, he does subscribe to three principles which he says--correctly I believe--Rorty would not accept:

1. In ordinary circumstances, there is usually a

fact of the matter as to whether the statements people make are warranted or not.

2. Whether a statement is warranted or not is independent of whether the majority of one's cultural peers would say it is warranted or unwarranted. . . .

5. Our norms and standards of anything--including warranted assertibility--are capable of reform.

There are better and worse norms and standards.³

Rorty, Putnam says, cannot speak, as he does, of ideas which "pay their way" without specifying what this means--without, that is, positing some way of distinguishing between warranted ("profitable") and unwarranted ("unprofitable") ideas. And, taking a Peircean turn, Putnam argues that--even if we link truth to the practices of communities of inquiry--we cannot make do without a notion of truth that stands apart from the momentary consensus of any particular community. Putnam contends that "to claim of any statement that it is true, that is, that it is true in its place, in its context,

³Hilary Putnam, Realism with a Human Face (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 21. The other two principles--which Rorty would no doubt accept--are: "3. Our norms and standards of warranted assertibility are historical products; they evolve in time. 4. Our norms and standards always reflect our interests and values. Our picture of intellectual flourishing is part of, and only makes sense as part of, our picture of human flourishing in general."

in its conceptual scheme is, roughly, to claim that it could be justified were epistemic conditions good enough." Rorty, who thinks Peirce suffered from too many Kantian hangovers to earn title to genuine pragmatism, denies that we need any gold standard such as "ideal epistemic conditions" by which to measure the worth of our ideas. Without such a standard, Putnam responds, Rorty falls prey to relativism and solipsism, albeit solipsism of a communitarian sort ("solipsism with a 'we' instead of an 'I'"). If, as Rorty said some years ago, the old pragmatists "are waiting at the end of the road which Foucault and Deleuze are currently traveling," they are, Putnam would say, waiting there to warn us that we are about to go over a cliff and to urge us to turn back and follow their neglected path along the edge of the abyss.⁴

Without really arguing the point, let me say that my own sympathies are with Putnam and others who are wary of the alliances that Rorty, and others have tried to forge between pragmatism and contemporary literary theory and other strains

⁴Putnam, Realism with a Human Face, pp. vii-ix, 105-119; Richard Rorty, Consequences of Pragmatism (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), xviii, 161. See also Hilary Putnam, Reason, Truth, and History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), esp. ch. 5; and Jeffrey Stout, Ethics After Babel (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988). Putnam distinguishes his standard from Peirce's "utopian" epistemic ideal of "a situation ('finished science') in which the community would be in a position to justify every true statement (and to disconfirm every false one)." He means only to say that "there are better and worse epistemic situations with respect to particular statements" (Reason with a Human Face, vii-viii).

of postmodernism. As a matter of intellectual history, it seems to me that the thinking of the former is more continuous with that of the old pragmatists than that of the latter, and as a matter of epistemology and ethics, it seems to me that they afford us a more promising prospect. Gunn may be correct as far as intellectual fashions go when he says that American pragmatism "would never have been capable of revival if it had not seemed to complement (and in some ways to confirm) rather than contest that body of critical and theoretical thought already transmitted from the Continent." But be that as it may, we should not necessarily applaud, as he does, the conjoining of the James and Dewey with the likes of Jacques Derrida, Stanley Fish, Jürgen Habermas, Frank Lentricchia, and Barbara Herrnstein Smith. My own view is that if James and Dewey were invited to this party they would throw Habermas in the back seat and go looking for a more congenial gathering.⁵

What joins Habermas to the old pragmatists (leaving aside what divides him from them), is a shared unwillingness to abandon entirely the Enlightenment legacy or, to put it more positively, a willingness to stick with science while at the same time calling into question any claims that science (or any other mode of inquiry) might make to certain truth. As Habermas says, postmodernist thinkers "believe that they

⁵Gunn, Thinking Across the American Grain, p. 3.

have to tear philosophy away from the madness of expounding a theory that has the last word" and forget that "the fallibilist consciousness of the sciences caught up with philosophy, too, a long time ago." One place where it caught up first was in the United States, for as Putnam has noted, "you only get the flavor of [pragmatism] is you try to wrap your mind around the idea of being fallibilistic and anti-skeptical at the same time."⁶

Postmodernists turn to the old pragmatists because they (correctly) see them as potential partners in a tag-team wrestling match against "strong," that is absolutist and totalizing, conceptions of truth. But what they neglect is the old pragmatists' conviction that once they were confident they had kicked some absolutist butt they could step out of the ring and travel down the road of inquiry in a more fuel-efficient vehicle than Reason toward a more modest destination than Truth. That is, they saw no need to abandon reason and truth or, as Dewey put it to avoid confusion, "intelligence" and "warranted assertibility." As Richard Bernstein observes, the old pragmatists "were not obsessed with attacking over and over again the absolutism and foun-

⁶Jürgen Habermas, The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), p. 408n28; Hilary Putnam, "Afterword," Southern California Law Review 63 (1990): 1914. On the relationship between Habermas and pragmatism see the special issue of Symbolic Interaction 15 (Fall 1992), especially Eugene Halton, "Habermas and Rorty: Between Scylla and Charybdis," 333-358.

dationalism that they rejected. The primary problem was how to reconstruct philosophy in a manner that was compatible with a fallibilistic orientation and an appreciation of the radical plurality of experience. . . . The creative task is to learn to live with an irreducible contingency and ambiguity--not to ignore it and not to wallow in it. . . . Although we may abandon any claim to infallible rationality, we cannot give up on the demand for making reasonable discriminations. This is just what the pragmatists sought to do."⁷

II

Let me now happily leave behind what Dewey called the "epistemology industry." If we turn to the broader dimensions of the thinking of the old pragmatists, it will come as no surprise for me to say that I believe Dewey's democratic theory is one of the richest veins that neo-pragmatists should mine, and hence I think one of the most significant disagreements among contemporary pragmatists is that between Rorty and his critics about what a "neo-Deweyan" ethics and politics might mean, criticism spawned by Rorty's loyalty to

⁷Richard J. Bernstein, "The Resurgence of Pragmatism," Social Research (forthcoming).

what he teasingly calls "postmodernist bourgeois liberalism."⁸

One of the leaders among Rorty's critics is Cornel West, and I should like to focus on the competing "Deweyan" visions of these two philosophers. West's quarrel with Rorty is very much a family affair: he was once Rorty's student and the disputes between these two philosophers are friendly contests, suffused with mutual respect and obvious affection. Indeed, one looking for a good example of the sort of "conversation" that Rorty idealizes would be hard pressed to find a better one than the dialogue he and West have conducted. Nonetheless, the differences between Rorty and West are substantial and of considerable moment, for, unlike many such controversies nowadays, this one is more than academic. At stake, is nothing less than the "social hope" we Americans, and we American intellectuals in particular, might reasonably nourish.⁹

West's work has from the early 1980s been marked by an effort to integrate American pragmatism with the variety of other traditions shaping his thinking, especially evangelical

⁸Richard Rorty, "Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism" (1983), in Rorty, Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers Volume 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 197-202.

⁹Richard Rorty, "Method, Social Science, and Social Hope," in Rorty, Consequences of Pragmatism (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), pp. 190-210.

Christianity, African-American social thought, and Marxism. And his disagreements with Rorty have been apparent for some time as well. All this comes to a head in The American Evasion of Philosophy (1989), and it is here that West most clearly stakes out his claim to offer a reappropriation of the pragmatic tradition, and of Dewey's philosophy in particular, more satisfying than that of Rorty and other rivals. "Rorty's neo-pragmatism," he complains, "only kicks the philosophical props from under liberal bourgeois capitalist societies; it requires no change in our cultural and political practices." Rorty kicks out these props in order to demonstrate that our conviction that they provide essential support for the "liberal bourgeois" society he favors is an unnecessary illusion. West wants a pragmatism that will not only kick out these props but recommend some major structural renovations in that same society. He calls for "a reconception of philosophy as a form of cultural criticism that attempts to transform linguistic, social, cultural, and political traditions for the purposes of increasing the scope of individual development and democratic operations."¹⁰

¹⁰Cornel West, The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1989), pp. 206, 230. Subsequent citations of this book will be made parenthetically in the text. West outlines his intellectual autobiography in Prophesy Deliverance!: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), pp. 13-24 and The Ethical Dimensions of Marxist Thought (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1991), xi-xxxiv. His criticisms of Rorty are anticipated in "The

West's reappropriation of pragmatism takes the form of the sort of "dramatic narrative" of the history of philosophy which pragmatists--Dewey and Rorty in particular--have often deployed effectively. Such narratives comprise a Whiggish variety of history which Rorty, following Hegel, has termed Geistesgeschichte. This is history, he observes, that "wants to justify the historian and his friends in having the sort of philosophical concerns they have--in taking philosophy to be what they take it to be. . . . It wants to give plausibility to a certain image of philosophy." At the heart of this history is an effort at canon reformation. The Geisteshistoriker assembles a pantheon of heroes who serve as the main characters in a drama that "shows how we have come to ask the questions we now think inescapable and profound. Where these characters left writings behind, those writings then form a canon, a reading-list which one must have gone through in order to justify being what one is." We require such heroes and such canons, Rorty concludes, because "we need to tell ourselves detailed stories about the mighty dead in order to make our hopes of surpassing them concrete."¹¹

Politics of American Neo-Pragmatism" in John Rajchman and Cornel West, eds., Post-Analytic Philosophy (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 259-275.

¹¹Richard Rorty, "The Historiography of Philosophy: Four Genres," in Richard Rorty, J.B. Schneewind, and Quentin Skinner, eds., Philosophy in History (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 57, 61, 73. Rorty usefully contrasts Geistesgeschichte with the equally Whiggish

The common claim of every neo-pragmatist Geisteshistoriker is that one or more of the major American pragmatists must be rescued from the limbo in which they have resided for two generations and assume a prominent place in the current canon. Thus, one might well date the origins of neo-pragmatic narratives to Rorty's surprising assertion at the beginning of Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (1979) that Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Dewey were "the three most important philosophers of our century." Lately another common feature of these stories has become established as well, for several neo-pragmatists (though not Rorty) have joined in arguing that their tale must begin with Ralph Waldo Emerson. West advances one of the most vigorous and compelling versions of this argument.¹²

"historical reconstructions" performed by many analytical philosophers which seek to justify the philosopher/historian and his friends in "giving the particular solutions to philosophical problems they give" and to lend "plausibility to a particular solution of a given philosophical problem by pointing out how a great dead philosopher anticipated, or interestingly failed to anticipate, this solution" (57).

¹²Richard Rorty, Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 5. Besides West, others arguing for the central place of Emerson in the pragmatic tradition include Russell B. Goodman, American Philosophy and the Romantic Tradition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); David Marr, American Worlds Since Emerson (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988); and Richard Poirer, The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections (New York: Random House, 1987) and Poetry and Pragmatism (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992). This new interest in Emerson and his legacy owes much to the work of Stanley Cavell. See especially Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism

In Emerson, West argues, we find the origins of two valuable strains of thought as well as a debilitating limitation that subsequently shaped the thinking of most of the great and near-great among American philosophers. First, Emerson initiated the healthy "evasion" of the "epistemology-centered problematic of modern philosophy" with its quest for incorrigible foundations for knowledge in favor of a view of knowledge "not as a set of representations to be justified, grounded, or privileged but rather as instrumental effects of human will as it is guided by human interests, which are in turn produced by transactions with other humans and nature" (36). Second, Emerson launched a "theodicy" of "power, provocation, and personality" which stressed the "dynamic character of selves and structures, the malleability of tradition and the transformative potential in human history" (10).¹³ Third (and less happily), West finds in Emerson an irrepressibly bourgeois individualism and elitism. Despite

(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

¹³West is a professor of religion and I am not, but I nevertheless am puzzled by his use of the term "theodicy," which as I understand it refers to the problem of explaining evil in the face of God's omnipotence and goodness. I do not see how one can call Emerson's views on "power, provocation, and personality" a theodicy. They seem to me to be more of an American version of what, to borrow a term from Isaiah Berlin and Charles Taylor, might be called romantic "expressivism," more a philosophical anthropology than a theodicy. When I think of Emerson's theodicy, I think of his essay on "Compensation" with its view of a long-run, cosmic balancing of the accounts of good and evil--a view from which James and Dewey vigorously dissented.

the disruptive features of his philosophy and the democratic cast of his rhetoric, Emerson's politics rested on "a refined perspective that highlights individual conscience along with political impotence, moral transgression devoid of fundamental social transformation, power without empowering the lower classes, provocation and stimulation bereft of regulated markets, and human personality disjoined from communal action" (40).¹⁴

Emerson's salutary evasion of the quest for certainty, his romantic vision of human agency and possibility, and his bourgeois blindnesses echoed in the thought of Peirce, James, and Dewey, whether or not they acknowledged the reverbera-

¹⁴One measure of the diversity of neo-pragmatism is the gulf that separates West's argument about Emerson and his legacy from that of Richard Poirer, one of the most vigorous proponents of a postmodernist pragmatism. Poirer construes pragmatism as "a form of linguistic skepticism" and says that "insofar as America is represented by Emersonian pragmatists it has always been what is called postmodernist." Linguistic skepticism and the acts of imagination it generates, Poirer contends, are necessarily the work of a cultural elite of poet-philosophers who can expect to have little immediate effect on the lives of their fellow citizens. "Pragmatism, as I understand it," he says, is not essentially addressed to--indeed it shies away from--historical crises, real or concocted." Pragmatists, preoccupied as they are with "the work with language" can have "only an indirect and minimal effect on existing realities, and can probably have little effect at all on the nature of work done beyond the study or on the page" (Poetry and Pragmatism, pp. 5, 135, 132, 94). What West sees as Emerson's shortcomings, Poirer sees as an untroubling implication of the elite project that his "pragmatism" required. Needless to say, Poirer's conception of the American pragmatic tradition is not one in which Dewey can be included, and whatever one makes of his reading of Emerson, a genealogy of pragmatism that squeezes Dewey out is suspect.

tions: "Dewey plays Joshua to Emerson's Moses, with Peirce as a ground-breaking yet forgotten Aaron and James a brilliant and iconoclastic Eleazar" (76). Though West scrutinizes the work of Peirce and James at length, his long chapter on Dewey is the centerpiece of the story he tells, and rightly so. For as West says (pulling yet another analogy out of the same bag), "if Emerson is the inventor of the American religion, Dewey is its Luther--that is, he must seriously think through the implications of the notions of power, provocation, and personality, the themes of voluntarism, optimism, individualism, and meliorism in relation to the plethora of intervening intellectual breakthroughs and in light of the prevailing conditions in order to give direction as well as vitality to the American religion" (85). It is Dewey who gave the philosophical evasion its most powerful formulation, who provided Emerson's romanticism with a more social and democratic complexion, and who stretched middle-class reform to its limits.

Heroic though Dewey's efforts to reconstruct and extend this tradition were, it was, West tells us, in deep trouble at mid-century: "meretricious Stalinism, pernicious fascism, obstinate imperialism, and myopic Americanism were formidable foes that left American pragmatism with little room to maneuver" (113). In this context, W.V. Quine, Wilfred Sellars, and Nelson Goodman kept the evasion alive among

professional philosophers; Sidney Hook, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Lionel Trilling gave the theodicy a more realistic cast by providing it with a tragic sensibility; and C. Wright Mills and W.E.B. DuBois tried to supply pragmatists with a social theory that would take better account of the constraints of class and elite power and racial oppression. But no one was able or willing to bring it all together and reinfuse the mixture with Dewey's radically democratic meliorism. Instead, post-war pragmatism gave way to "an Augustinian pessimism regarding the human lot coupled with a fervent privatism and careerism in an expanding economy" (114).

These things more or less remained for pragmatism until Rorty shook things up by giving a new paint job to the pragmatic evasion of the foundational obsessions of modern philosophy in the early 1980s.¹⁵ But Rorty's neo-pragmatism couples philosophical audacity with a social and political

¹⁵This is not to say that the pragmatists were altogether ignored until Rorty came along. As West says, one should not overlook "the contributions of those lonely laborers in the vineyard who continued to keep alive the pragmatist tradition during the age of logical positivism" (194)--Richard Bernstein, James Gouinlock, John McDermott, Sandra Rosenthal, John Smith, Morton White, and others--even though they were unable to foster anything approaching the current interest in pragmatism despite the fact (or perhaps because of the fact) that their work--call it perhaps "paleo-pragmatism"--represents better historical scholarship than that of many recent converts to pragmatism. It was Rorty's willingness to borrow very selectively from Dewey's philosophy which enabled him to link pragmatism to more fashionable currents of thought and thereby earn Dewey a second look among the fashionably inclined.

conservatism, "a fervent vigilance to preserve the prevailing bourgeois way of life" (206). So what we really need, West concludes, is a new "prophetic pragmatism" that is epistemologically evasive, romantically hopeful in an Emersonian vein yet alert to the tragic constraints on human will, open to the lessons of Marxism and postmodernism, and dedicated to the interests of the "wretched of the earth" (212). So like the dramatic narratives of a typical Geisteshistoriker, West's history ends with himself.

III

Despite his title, West is far less interested in the American evasion of philosophy than in the fate of the Emersonian theodicy and the "culture of creative democracy" it promises. What animates West's story, above all, is his contention that, until Dewey came along, the Emersonian commitment to democracy was a limited one and his distress that the Deweyan moment was so short-lived and practically impotent. One can, on West's own evidence, be a pragmatist in the narrow sense (an "evader") and not subscribe to the Emersonian theodicy. And one can be an Emersonian romantic (or one of its immanent critics) without giving much thought to epistemological questions. Strictly speaking, West has two narratives at work here, which come together whenever one

of his Emersonian romantics--James, Dewey, himself--is also a pragmatist.

Thus, despite the impression West sometimes leaves, the connections between the pragmatic evasion of philosophy and Emersonian democracy are contingent, not necessary. Rorty has made this point forcefully. Pragmatism, he says, "is neutral between alternative prophecies, and thus neutral between democrats and fascists." One should not, he says, look to "professorial pragmatism" for prophecy, and he ruefully accepts West's contention that his own work as a professional philosopher is "barren" of political implication. The anti-epistemological evasion "is socially useful only if teamed up with prophecies--fairly concrete prophecies of a utopian social future. Pragmatist philosophy professors like Quine, Putnam, Davidson, Bernstein, and myself can play a social role only if they can find some prophet to whom to attach themselves." To Rorty, the term "prophetic pragmatism" sounds as odd as "charismatic trash-disposal."¹⁶

Rorty is not entirely on target here. He acknowledges that in an earlier era there was still some relation between pragmatic philosophical doctrines and social reform because conservatives were "still trying to justify repressive institutions in either religious or rationalist terms. So

¹⁶Richard Rorty, "The Professor and the Prophet," Transition 52 (1991): 75-77.

bringing pragmatist arguments to bear against religious or rationalist arguments for political conservatism was a useful thing for James and Dewey to do." I still think this kind of dismantling of absolutisms (of the left as well as the right) is something that needs to be done, and Rorty's sense that this is no longer necessary suggests a certain blindness to the character of American politics. But what can no longer be said is that there is any necessary affinity between pragmatism and liberal democracy, as Dewey was sometimes inclined to argue. A pragmatic anti-foundationalism can be tied to some pretty nasty social prophecies, as the example of Heidegger suggests. This contingency also explains why so many of West's evaders prove disappointing democrats.¹⁷

Rorty also admits that James and Dewey managed to be both pragmatists and prophets. But he now thinks a division of labor should prevail, which West--by force of his own example--disputes (though, to be sure, he has yet to make his mark as a professional philosopher). However, what Rorty wants to contest, above all, is Dewey's contention that philosophers have something special--what he called general "ground maps"--for social and cultural criticism. West would, I believe, dispute this as well, although he (like

¹⁷Ibid., 76. On Heidegger's pragmatism see Mark Okrent, Heidegger's Pragmatism: Understanding, Being, and the Critique of Metaphysics (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988).

Dewey) wants a cultural criticism that breaks down disciplinary barriers. As long as foundationalism remains a powerful force in our culture, there is something perfectly sound about "prophetic pragmatism." But in our own time, a prophetic pragmatist must also be prepared to do battle with other evaders, not at the level of "ground maps" but at the level of prophecy. Among intellectuals--especially when the struggle is among putative democrats--there is less need for epistemological preliminaries. One can cut to the ethical chase, and, as Dewey said, ask not who has the superior knowledge but who has the greater wisdom, that is, "a sense for the better kind of life to be led."¹⁸

What Rorty and West are arguing about is less Dewey's pragmatism than his prophecy and his wisdom. What West and others (including myself) have shown is that Dewey transformed Emersonian romanticism into a vision of an inclusive and full-participatory democratic culture. This is not an aspect of Dewey's thought (though I would say it is at the heart of his philosophy) which Rorty has sought to appropriate. His own lightly sketched political philosophy owes more to John Rawls than to Dewey. For Rorty, liberal-

¹⁸John Dewey, Experience and Nature (1925), The Later Works of John Dewey (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1981), 1:309; and "Philosophy and Democracy" (1918), The Middle Works of John Dewey (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982), 11:143-144. Rorty denies any need for even Deweyan "ground maps" in "Dewey's Metaphysics," in Consequences of Pragmatism, pp. 72-89.

democratic politics involves little more than making sure that individuals hurt one another as little as possible and interfere minimally in the private life of each. There is little in his social or political vision of the communitarian side of Dewey's thinking, nothing of Dewey's veneration of the shared experience of citizens. He argues for the centrality of solidarity in public life, but his is an extremely thin solidarity, amounting to little more than a common aversion to pain and humiliation and explicitly not "a common possession or a shared power." Rorty's is a politics centered on negative liberty, "our ability to leave people alone."¹⁹

West's democratic vision is much closer to Dewey's own. Though he repeats the charge of Niebuhr and Mills that Dewey was blind to the realities of power--a charge belied by Dewey's activism in the 1930s--and gives Dewey insufficient credit for the alliances he forged with "working people," West clearly shares Dewey's hope for a more participatory democracy. "To speak of an Emersonian culture of creative democracy," he declares, "is to speak of a society and culture where politically adjudicated forms of knowledge are

¹⁹Richard Rorty, Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 91; and "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy" (1988), in Rorty, Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth, pp. 175-196. I am repeating here the characterization of Rorty's thinking that I offered in John Dewey and American Democracy (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 539-542.

produced in which human participation is encouraged and for which human personalities are enhanced. Social experimentation is the basic norm, yet it is operative only when those who must suffer the consequences have effective control over the institutions that yield the consequences, i.e., access to decision-making processes" (213).

It is unfair to Rorty to picture him as altogether complacent about the ills of our social order. He is in most respects a good old-fashioned New Deal liberal, and one might even extend to him the label of social democrat. He cares deeply about the plight of the wretched of the earth, and of late he has written movingly about the need to institute a more adequate program of technocratic social engineering to care for their needs (and of the irrelevance of the politics of the academic left to these needs). Moreover, he does not deny that he has failed to appropriate Dewey's radical democratic vision, nor does he fail to understand how others could find it appealing. He just thinks it has exhausted its relevance for "rich North Atlantic democracies" and for "downbeat Alexandrian" intellectuals like himself--though he is willing to admit it might have some relevance in such places as Brazil.²⁰

²⁰See Richard Rorty, "Intellectuals in Politics," Dissent (Fall 1991): 483-490; "On Intellectuals in Politics" (an exchange with Andrew Ross), Dissent (Spring 1992): 263-267; and "The Intellectuals at the End of Socialism," Yale Review 80 (1992): 1-16; and "Unger, Castoriadis, and the

The contrast between Rorty and West reminds me a great deal of that between Walter Lippmann and Dewey in the 1920s. Against Dewey's insistence that participatory democracy must remain the central regulative ideal of American life, Lippmann contended that it had lost its relevance to modern industrial societies and polities. Most people, he argued, regard self-government as a secondary, purely instrumental good, and if they can be assured of welfare and security without it, they will settle for a minimal and relatively insignificant role as citizens. The criterion that should be used to assess a government, Lippmann said, was not the extent to which citizens were self-governing but "whether it is producing a certain minimum of health, of decent housing, of material necessities, of education, of freedom, of pleasures, of beauty." Without denying the need for such things, Dewey contended that one might still hope that the American people could have a significant say as citizens and workers about how and in what form they were to provide them to one another. Roberto Unger has said that "the great political question of our day has become: Is social democracy the best that we can reasonably hope for?" If so, then Rorty's answer to this question is (with Lippmann) "Yes, if

"Romance of a National Future" (1990), in Rorty, Essays on Heidegger and Others: Philosophical Papers: Volume 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 177-192.

that," while West has responded (with Dewey and Unger) "No, not by a longshot."²¹

IV

His book, West tells us, "is, among other things, a political act" (8). "Prophetic pragmatism," he concludes, "rests upon the conviction that the American evasion of philosophy is not an evasion of serious thought and moral action. Rather such evasion is a rich and revisable tradition that serves as the occasion for cultural criticism and political engagement in the service of an Emersonian culture of creative democracy" (239).

This rhetorically buoyant conclusion brings to mind an exchange of letters John Dewey had with his friend and fellow philosopher, Max Otto, in early 1941. Otto wrote to Dewey to tell him he had been reading Dewey's 1903 essay on Emerson with his students at the University of Wisconsin, and that he was troubled by Dewey's "contention that Emerson is the philosopher of democracy." No one, Otto ventured to say, who had as little to say as Emerson did about the practice of

²¹Walter Lippmann, Public Opinion (New York: Free Press, 1965 [1922]), pp. 196-197; Roberto M. Unger, Social Theory: Its Situation and Its Task (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 14. For a full account of the Lippmann-Dewey debate see John Dewey and American Democracy, pp. 293-318.

democracy could lay claim to that title. "Emerson's negative attitude toward the means and organizations which are necessary to make democratic ideals function seems to me a serious weakness. Emerson was transported by the spirit of reform; but from every device of reform he turned resolutely away."²²

Dewey responded that he had forgotten he had ever said Emerson was the philosopher of democracy, and this was certainly not something he would say in 1941. Whatever he had said nearly forty years ago had to be put into its context, "before the World War, before lots of things, that have changed the meaning of things, democracy and philosophers included." Dewey still thought Emerson was "a great representative of democratic ideas," as long as he was properly "translated." Otto was right about his neglect of means, but unlike most commentators, Dewey thought this neglect could not be attributed to a naive optimism on Emerson's part. "Instead of being over optimistic," Dewey concluded, "he was, it seems to me, unduly pessimistic about actualities, his optimism being for (rather abstract) possibilities."²³

²²Max Otto to John Dewey, 4 January 1941, Max Otto Papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison.

²³John Dewey to Max Otto, 23 January 1941, Otto Papers.

Like Emerson, West is transported by the spirit of democratic reform, yet decidedly vague about if not, like Emerson, resolutely averse to its devices. And, if West cannot be said to be unduly pessimistic about "actualities," his plea for a prophetic pragmatism is marked by an almost feverish optimism for rather abstract possibilities. Prophetic pragmatism, he says, can be "a material force for individuality and democracy . . . a practice that has some potency and effect or makes a difference in the world" (232). Not one to underestimate the power of the word--even when its distribution is in the hands of a small university press--West tells us that, while revisiting American pragmatism with him will not provide a "panacea for our ills," it will help us to "reinvigorate our moribund academic life, our lethargic political life, our decadent cultural life, and our chaotic personal lives for the flowering of many-sided personalities and the flourishing of more democracy and freedom" (4).

Although I wish all this was true, I find myself incapable of working up such abstract aspirations, at least not now. West seems to me to take too little account of what his fellow pragmatist Richard Bernstein has described as the near-intractable dilemma of those who would venture today beyond Rorty's modest hope for a greater measure of social democracy to West's immodest hope for an expansive participatory democracy. As Bernstein says, "the coming into

being of a type of public life that can strengthen solidarity, public freedom, a willingness to talk and to listen, mutual debate, and a commitment to rational persuasion presupposes the incipient forms of such communal life." But what can one do in a situation such as our own "in which there is a breakdown of such communities, and where the very conditions of social life have the consequences of furthering such a breakdown?" Not much, Bernstein concludes, and I find myself sadly agreeing with him. This eclipse of democratic publics was a difficulty that began to plague Dewey in the 1920s when he tried to deflect Lippmann's attack on self-government, and since that time things have only gotten worse. At best, as Bernstein says, Deweyan democrats can only "seize upon those experiences and struggles in which there are still the glimmerings of solidarity and the promise of dialogical communities in which there can be genuine participation and where reciprocal wooing and persuasion can prevail."²⁴

²⁴Richard J. Bernstein, Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), pp. 226, 228. More recently, West has himself eloquently stated Bernstein's point. "We have," he writes in a postmortem on the Los Angeles riots, "created a rootless, dangling people with little link to the supportive networks--family, friends, school--that sustain some sense of purpose in life. We have witnessed the collapse of the spiritual communities that help us face despair, disease and death and that transmit through the generations dignity and decency, excellence, and elegance" ("Learning to Talk of Race," New York Times Magazine [2 August 1992]: 26).

Perhaps West's optimism about democratic reform and about the potential potency of his neo-pragmatism grows in part out of his entrenchment as an "organic intellectual" in the "prophetic wing of the black church," one of the few incipient dialogical communities that continues to afford some resistance to the constriction of democratic life. This after all, as West says, was the community that produced Martin Luther King, "the best of what the political dimension of prophetic pragmatism is all about" (234). Yet even here there is cause for concern, as West well knows. Few have equaled his unsparing portrait of the afflictions of African-American communities, afflictions against which black Christians (and others) are bravely waging a losing battle. Moreover, it seems to me a sign of deep trouble that again and again we find ourselves having to reach back a generation to the civil rights movement for a model of the sort of democratic politics we hope to cultivate.²⁵

I do not myself mean to join Rorty's club of downbeat Alexandrians. But I do find myself responding less to West's prophecy than to the recommendations to intellectuals offered by C. Wright Mills in 1959 in an essay tellingly titled "The Decline of the Left," which West quotes at length but without comment:

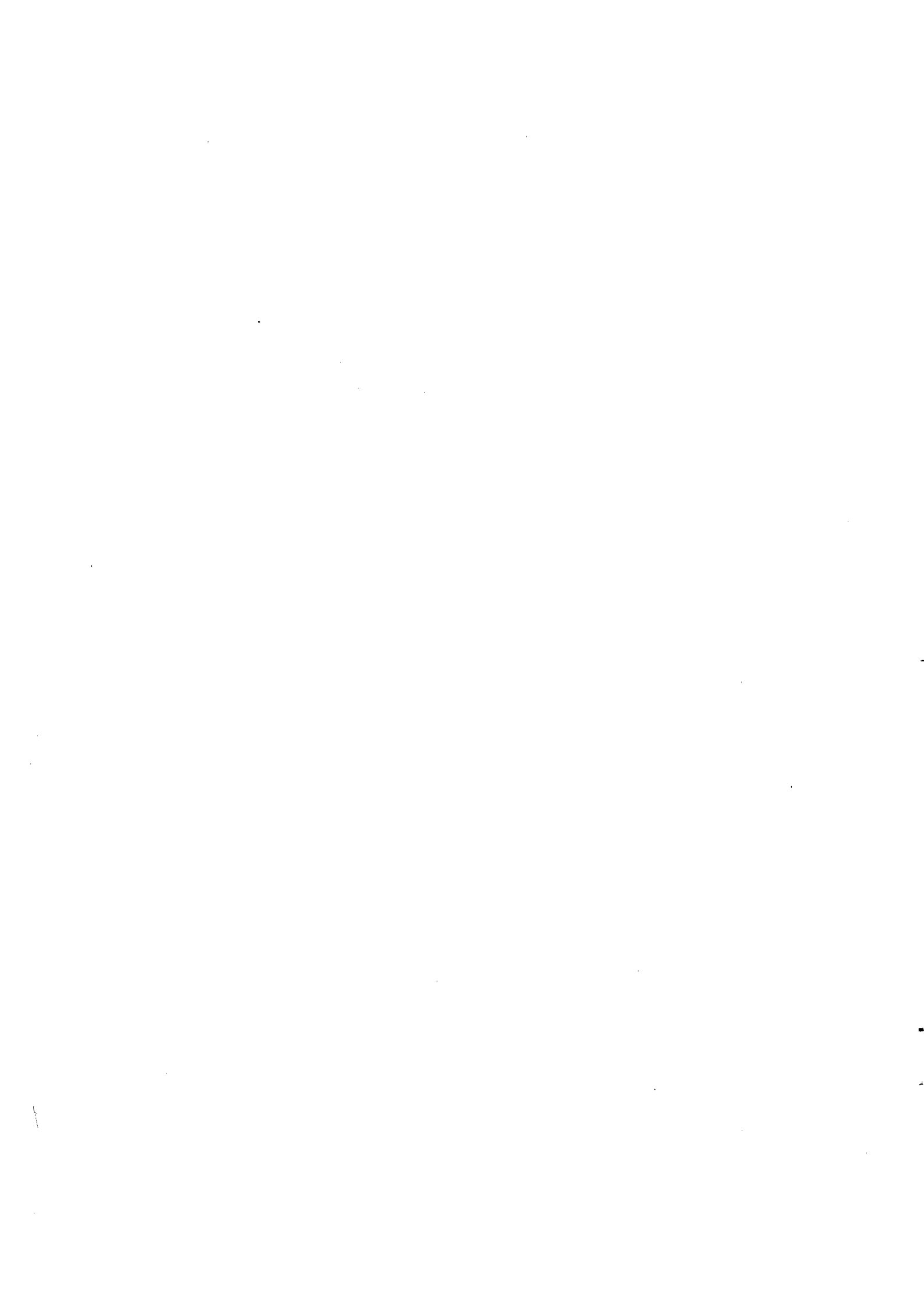
²⁵See Cornel West, "Nihilism in Black America," Dissent (Spring 1991): 221-226.

In summary, what we must do is to define reality of the human condition and to make our definitions public; to confront the new facts of history-making in our time, and their meanings for the problem of political responsibility; to release the human imagination by transcending the mere exhortation of grand principle and opportunist reaction in order to explore all the alternatives now open to the human community.

If this--the politics of truth--is merely a holding action, so be it. If it is also a politics of desperation, so be it. But in this time and in America, it is the only realistic politics of possible consequence that is readily open to intellectuals. It is the guide line and the next step. It is an affirmation of one's self as moral and intellectual center of responsible decision; the act of a free man who rejects "fate"; for it reveals his resolution to take his own fate, at least, into his own hands.²⁶

²⁶C. Wright Mills, "The Decline of the Left," in Mills, Power, Politics, and People (New York: Oxford, 1963), p. 235. West quotes this passage on p. 138 of American Evasion.

This sort of pragmatic politics would, to be sure, address but half of West's agenda. It would help revitalize "a sane, sober, and sophisticated intellectual life in America," but it would not--at least directly or in the short run--promise much by way of regenerating "the social forces empowering the disadvantaged, degraded, and dejected" (239). But it is not to be sneezed at. If American intellectuals could be taught to speak once again without embarrassment or apology of a politics of truth, we might at least begin to recover the integrity of our own dialogical community and put ourselves in a better position to contribute something to the reconstruction of the larger society when the opportunities to do so present themselves.



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