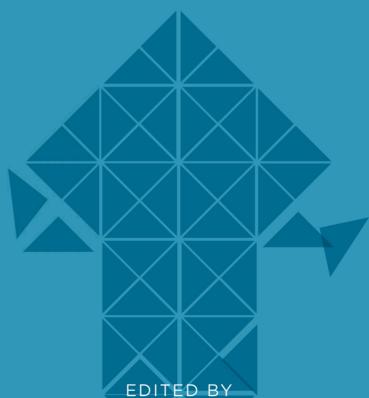# RADICAL INTELLECTUALS AND THE SUBVERSION OF PROGRESSIVE POLITICS

THE BETRAYAL OF POLITICS

EDITED BY
GREGORY SMULEWICZ-ZUCKER
AND MICHAEL J. THOMPSON

Radical Intellectuals and
the Subversion of Progressive Politics

Political Philosophy and Public Purpose

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Acknowledgments

INTRODUCTION

Radical politics in contemporary Western democracies finds itself in a state of crisis. When viewed from the vantage point of social change, a progressive transformation of the social order, political radicalism is found wanting. This would seem to go against the grain of perceived wisdom. As an academic enterprise, radical theory has blossomed. Figures such as Slavoj Žižek openly discuss Marxism in popular documentaries, new journals have emerged touting a radical "anti-capitalism," and whole conferences and subfields are dominated by questions posed by obscure theoretical texts. Despite this, there is a profound lack in substantive, meaningful political, social, and cultural criticism of the kind that once made progressive and rational left political discourse relevant to the machinations of real politics and the broader culture. Today, leftist political theory in the academy has fallen under the spell of ideas so far removed from actual political issues that the question can be posed whether the traditions of left critique that gave intellectual support to the great movements of modernity—from the workers' movement to the civil rights movement—possess a critical mass to sustain future struggles. Quite to the contrary, social movements have lost political momentum; they are generally focused on questions of culture and shallow discussions of class and obsessed with issues of identity—racial, sexual, and so on—rather than on the great "social question" of unequal economic power, which once served as the driving impulse for political, social, and cultural transformation. As these new radical mandarins spill ink on futile debates over "desire," "identity," and illusory visions of anarchic democracy, economic inequality has ballooned into oligarchic proportions, working people have been increasingly marginalized, and ethnic minority groups turned into a coolie labor force.

This has been the result, we contend, of a lack of concern with real politics in contemporary radical theory. Further, we believe that this is the result of a transformation of ideas, that contemporary political theory

on the Left has witnessed a decisive shift in focus in recent decades—a shift that has produced nothing less than the incoherence of the tradition of progressive politics in our age. At a time when the Left is struggling to redefine itself and respond to current political and economic crises, a series of trends in contemporary theory has reshaped the ways that politics is understood and practiced. Older thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, and Jacques Derrida, and newer voices like Alain Badiou, Jacques Rancière, David Graeber, and Judith Butler, among others, have risen to the status of academic and cultural icons while their ideas have become embedded in the "logics" of new social movements. As some aspects of the recent Occupy Wall Street demonstrations have shown, political discourse has become increasingly dominated by the impulses of neo-anarchism, identity politics, postcolonialism, and other intellectual fads. This new radicalism has made itself so irrelevant with respect to real politics that it ends up serving as a kind of cathartic space for the justifiable anxieties wrought by late capitalism, further stabilizing its systemic and integrative power rather than disrupting it. These trends are the products as well as unwitting allies of that which they oppose.

The transformation of radical and progressive politics throughout the latter half of the twentieth and the early decades of the twenty-first centuries is characterized by both a sociological shift as well as an intellectual one. A core thesis has been that the shift from industrial to postindustrial society has led to the weakening of class politics. But this is unsatisfying. There is no reason why class cannot be seen in the divisions of mental and service labor as it was with an industrial proletariat. There is no reason why political power rooted in unequal property and control over resources, in the capacity for some to command and to control the labor of others as well as the consumption of others ought not to be a basic political imperative. To this end, what we would call a *rational radical politics* should seek not the utopian end of a "post-statist" politics, but rather to enrich common goods, erode the great divisions of wealth and class, democratize all aspects of society and economy, and seek to orient the powers of individuals and the community toward common ends. Indeed, only by widening the struggles of labor and rethinking the ends of the labor movement—connecting the struggles of labor to issues beyond the workplace, to education, the environment, public life, issues of racial and gender equality, culture, and the nature of the social order more broadly—can we envision a revitalization of a workers' movement, one that would have no need of the alienated theory of the new radicals.[1]

Once grounded in the Enlightenment impulse for progress, equality, rationalism, and the critical confrontation with asymmetrical power relations, the dominant trends of radical political thought now evade the concrete nature of these concerns. The battles that raged in the 1980s and 1990s between postmodernists and defenders of modernity—while serving as a harbinger of the contemporary split between the radical theorists divorced from reality and those who seek to establish antifoundationalist conceptions of democratic discourse—were attached to a strong sense that the future of rationalism and radical politics hung in the balance. Today's radical intellectuals do not feel compelled to defend their arguments or respond to their critics. Their purported radicalism becomes all the more opaque when the coherence of their claims is called into question. A concern for an exaggerated subjectivity, identity politics, antiempirical theories of power, an obsession with "difference"—all serve to deplete the radical tradition of its potency. Radical intellectuals now formulate new vocabularies, invent new forms of "subjectivity," and concoct new languages of discourse that only serve to splinter forms of political resistance, consigning radicalism to the depths of incoherence and (academic success notwithstanding) political irrelevance. Indeed, the disintegration of the great movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—from the labor movement to the civil rights movement—has detached philosophical thinking from the mechanisms of power and political reality more broadly. The result has been—despite the ironic new turn toward "antiphilosophy"—the conquest of politics by poorly constructed philosophy. Abstraction has been the result, as well as a panoply of shibboleths that have only served to sever "radical" thought from its relevance to contemporary politics and society. It seems to us that the survival of the tradition of rational, radical political and social criticism pivots on a confrontation with these new academic trends and fads.

The rise of this new radicalism is largely due to the success of liberalism on the one hand and the collapse of Marxism on the other. Liberalism has been highly successful at incorporating many of the social movements that have emerged throughout the twentieth century: the rights of women and minorities, a basic social security and welfare state scheme for the poor, and the recognition of different sexual identities and preferences—all have found their place to some degree within the modern liberal state. As a result, these movements, which, in their earlier, more radical phase of development, saw their struggles in connection with the struggles of working class interests, were cleaved off and given

pieces of the political pie. This resulted, as Theodore Lowi has argued,[2] in a conservatism of these interest groups as they protect their interests. The collapse of Marxism not only weakened labor movement radicalism, it caused a more general intellectual breakdown on the Left. With its emphasis on science and knowledge of objective social processes, Marxism's disintegration left a theoretical vacuum that was now to be filled by the very cultural concerns produced by capitalist economic life itself. The post-Fordist, flexible accumulation of late capitalism, and its emphasis on ephemeral fashion, personalized technology, and mass consumption, has led to an anomic self-absorption where objective political concerns have become abstract.[3] As consumerism and mass culture continues to weaken class consciousness the social order becomes increasingly legitimized forcing radical politics into the domain of the mind and the realm of spectacle. The personal now morphs into the political, and class drops out as a category of power-analysis and as an organizing variable of society. Theory now follows the superstructural stream of consciousness and politics becomes, for the new radical mandarins, a sphere of self-promotional platitudes. What is left over from these two intellectual–political shifts is the context within which the new radicalism begins.

What we are calling here a "betrayal of politics" can be seen to consist of several impulses that have had a deep and debilitating effect on progressive politics. First has been a shift toward a radical "non-foundational" or even "anti-foundational" thought. According to this philosophical view, in its more radical forms, the social world (and even the natural world) is constructed by subjects no longer possessing any kind of foundations for knowledge. The "myth of the given," or the proposition that the social world is essentially constructed by subjects and discourse, is a basic starting point. There is no longer a need to rely on foundations for knowledge nor need we possess universal or rational justifications for political or ethical propositions and ideas. Political reality is the product not of concrete mechanisms of resource control and the organization of social structure but of discourse.[4] On this view, the site of politics becomes the struggle between and over the discursive narratives of the political and social. Now, political subjectivity is to be created, indeed, even "invented" and pushed against the state. The constructivist epistemology adopted by these thinkers is seen as liberating politics from the "realities" of class and social structure. As one advocate of this thesis argues, political subject-formation "cannot be articulated in relation to a pre-given socio-economic identity like that of the proletarian, but

has to be invented or aggregated from the various social struggles of the present."[5] These discourses and subjectivities are particularist in nature, even as they assert themselves as universals. This kind of thinking "is bound to discourse, literally narratives about the world that are admittedly partial."[6] The politics that follows from this necessarily eschews formal political institutions, even as it becomes an increasingly abstract affair for academics only. Even more, it no longer sees exploitation and domination in concrete, material terms. As Robert Meister has insightfully argued, "As soon as the paradigm of language supplants the model of production, exploitation appears as merely another way of being misunderstood."[7] The result is not political resistance in any meaningful sense of the term, but the "spectacle" of political demonstrations or some puerile display of public "art."[8] In the meantime, more politically mature and reactionary forces have been able to roll back the welfare state, consolidate economic and political power, and help craft a neoliberal social order.[9]

A second feature of alienated theory is its emphasis on antirational, anti-Enlightenment, and antiscience as an epistemological and political stance. Knowledge, now seen as inherently braided with power, is recast as an interpretive activity; impartiality is a myth of scientific rationality, one premised on the power of exclusion. The perspective of the marginalized now becomes the central focus of how knowledge ought to be constructed. Dispensing with objectivity, theorists are now able to transform theory, properly understood as the search for the explanation of facts, into a kind of aesthetic enterprise where the boundaries between politics and culture blur.[10] New theoretical languages and vocabularies have been invented, where the aim is not the explanation of reality or the construction of rational argument but the exploration of some alternative perspective that has been repressed. Universalist principles and categories are anathema, on this view, to radical politics because of their tendency to crush difference and privilege exclusion. Now, we are told to privilege experience, the phenomenological dimensions of power not its structural causes. This results in a collapse of politics into culture. It displaces politics in its "dirty hands" manifestation where realizable ends are sought and fought for and instead insists on the "utopian" as an impossible goal. As Stanley Aronowitz argues, "Utopian thought seeks to transform the present by articulating an alternative future, its power lies in its lack of respect for politics as the art of the possible, in its insistence that realism consists in the demand for the impossible."[11] Power is now to be grasped

through the elusive terrain of culture, the nonempirical sources of which can no longer be located and are hence "overdetermined."[12] No longer can we look to class, to the power of privilege, but rather to the ways that power and knowledge are entwined. All objective points of reference have been abandoned. With the academic victory privileging the discourse of identity, the "unreal" has taken precedence over the real.[13]

A third salient feature of this *nouveau* radicalism is its emphasis on spontaneous, disruptive, and localized struggle as the means of politics. Taking their cues from the legacy of anarchism and third-world indigenous struggles such as the Zapatistas, these tactics are seen as the essence of a democratic politics of resistance. The basis for new movements is now seen to be the emergence of new identities, themselves created from the exaggerated subjectivity of the modern, narcissistic self.[14] Rejecting the state and conceiving of a post-state politics is now a central dogma of the new "radical" theorists. Since the state is seen to be inherently despotic, only the spontaneous, autonomous collection of groups who act against the state and outside of it are viewed as vehicles of political change. The absence of domination is now cast as the freedom to explore narcissistic lifestyles as well as expand an already exaggerated subjectivity where participatory and direct democracy become the political ideal. In the end, they valorize the individual's resistance to the state and the power of localism. Here left and right touch in their extremes—it is precisely a libertarian ethos of freedom that dominates their vision, as David Harvey has insightfully pointed out: "This is the world that libertarian Republicans construct. It is also the view of individual liberty and freedom embraced by much of the anarchist and autonomist left, even as the capitalist version of the free market is roundly condemned."[15] Now, it is a "multitude," a disruptive *demos*, that commands the political imaginary of the new radicals. Instead of a rational radical position that seeks to democratize the state and its powers and to transform it in order to enhance and protect public goods, the new interpretation of radical democracy "is only intelligible once it is thought as being *against* the state—and once the term 'democratic State,' which appeared so naturally from Tocqueville's pen, is by the same stroke rejected."[16] In turn, claims like these have been used to legitimize the use of violence; to pit the violence of the state against "emancipatory violence."[17] Further, it has been used as a pretext for reviving left-wing totalitarian traditions, such as Jacobinism, Leninism, and Maoism, and reconsidering their significance for the modern Left.[18] Of course, these claims are made cautiously and a

modern Maoist like Alain Badiou easily slips into patent misapplication of mathematics to obscure his politics.[19]

Finally, in opposition to the universal and the concrete, the new radical politics and its advocates in the academy have come to celebrate the uncertain and unstable as a principle both for conducting politics and for pursuing research. Hence, for example, the history of feminist thought has "only paradoxes to offer."[20] The effort to understand mechanisms of domination and oppression is itself a manifestation of ideology.[21] Any recourse to normative judgments or empirical claims is hopeless. "In vain do we try to break out of the ideological dream by 'opening our eyes and trying to see reality as it is,' by throwing away the ideological spectacles: as the subjects of such a post-ideological, objective, sober look, free of so-called ideological prejudices, as the subjects of a look which views the facts as they are, we remain throughout 'the consciousness of our ideological dream.'"[22] Ultimately, for the new radical intellectual, everything is a form of ideology. This does not mean that critique should become more rigorous, but, rather, that we should celebrate indeterminacy. *Au courant* theories of emancipation start with the premise that there is no "real." We become free when we are disabused of the notion that critique can reveal truths that are obfuscated by social relations. We are liberated from definitions and categorizations. Such thinking has had its strongest effect among radical theorists discussing race and gender. Racial and gendered oppression is supposedly combated when we recognize these categories as ideological constructions. However, the consequence of such thinking leaves the systemic and institutionalized forces that perpetuate oppression unaddressed. Both society and individual are constructed by incommensurables. This means that any political struggle that would seek to establish a freer, more just society would fall prey to merely creating new ideologies.

These four elements of the new radical intellectuals and the movements they have influenced are in direct contradiction to the *rational radicalism* that we implicitly espouse here. On our reading, there is not only a theoretical but also a deeply political difference between what these theorists search for and the Enlightenment-inspired radical view of a social order marked by solidarity around common goods, civic virtue oriented toward the defense of the public welfare, well-ordered political institutions with public purpose as their aim, constitutionalism that secures individual rights, and the democratization of economic life as the criterion of social justice. The alternative move, marked by

identity politics, antistatism, direct and participatory democracy, and neo-anarchism has succeeded in fragmenting and marginalizing left movements and politics. Perhaps even worse, these "new movements" lack any real constituency, have scarcely any concrete political demands, and are purposefully self-alienated from the levers of real power and policy.[23] Indeed, as a result, a real, politically consequential Left has withered. The political culture of Western democracies is marked more by a general value-consensus around liberal-capitalism than at any time since the late 1950s. Movements that once saw the true mechanisms of politics—the need to influence parties, to push for legislative reform, to insist on the expansion of the democratization of economic and political institutions, to forge ideologies that were rooted in national culture—have simply disappeared. Nietzsche's insistence that aesthetics replace the political has now become manifest in this new radicalism. Now, so-called academic radicals can be seen to have betrayed politics: They dismiss the reality of the political process and instead call for an obscure and abstract "resistance." Perhaps the basic thesis can be laid out that where there is no strong labor movement, there can be no robust left politics, and even less relevant left political theory.

But whatever the explanation for the increased irrationalism of current left theory, we believe that these intellectuals should be held accountable for the ideas they promulgate. Staggering is the extent to which these radical mandarins self-confidently strut their stuff, even as political defeats mount for leftist politics with the increasing victory of "right to work" legislation, the dismantling of environmental protections, the increased power of corporate interests, and an expanding wealth and income divide. We take seriously the notion that there is a responsibility for intellectuals to debate and critique ideas that have public consequence; the effect of these thinkers and their ideas on the Left we see as a primary concern. As Christopher Lasch once remarked, "Cultural radicalism has become so fashionable, and so pernicious in the support it unwittingly provides for the status quo, that any criticism of contemporary society that hopes to get beneath the surface has to criticize, at the same time, much of what currently goes under the name of radicalism."[24] With this in mind, the basic proposition that drives this book is that the tradition of rational progressive politics can be saved only once these new thinkers and approaches have been interrogated and critiqued. Confronting the fashionable nonsense of the present requires that these thinkers, their ideas, and their implications be scrutinized against the more rationalist

claims that have given shape to radical and critical thought since the Enlightenment, not to mention the common sense that the thinkers we address have sought to evade. We believe that the success of these thinkers and ideas marks a real and disturbing departure from the more rationalist, more realist understanding of progressive and radical politics that marked the more successful movements of the nineteenth century and much of the twentieth century.

The basic thesis that organizes the essays that follow is that these thinkers and their ideas have had a disintegrating effect on the nature of progressive politics, and each chapter in this book shows how this has taken place and, of equal importance, contrasts this with a more lucid, more compelling account of what progressive political and social criticism ought to be able to achieve. Our purpose is to indict a style of theory and thinking that has become so esoteric and self-referential that it has divorced itself from the historic concerns of progressive politics: from remedying inequality, confronting forces eroding our public goods, or challenging the entrenched power of political and economic elites. Whether it is a rampant irrationalism, a rejection of any sense of realism in politics, naive antistatism, theories of power and oppression that have no empirical basis, or simply an incoherent, confused set of texts upon which one can project and read whatever one wants, these thinkers have been able to seduce a generation into an understanding of politics that privileges an abstract, self-regarding "politics" over the concrete analysis of power and a politics based on the public good.

We believe that the appeal of these thinkers and ideas is symptomatic of a crisis in progressive politics—a crisis that cannot be simply solved. The essays collected here make no pretense to a comprehensive and systemic critique of the various trends in contemporary radical political theory. Nor do they seek to construct a *new* radicalism. What they do, however, seek to accomplish is to point to critical problems within the impulses of this new radical theory and to provide this from the point of view of a more rationally informed, more realistic account of the nature and import of real politics. Our fear is that the proliferation of these theories and the ideas that they make common will penetrate so deeply that an effective, politically relevant Left will all but collapse. To renew radical political theory along rational lines will require much work, but we believe it begins with critique. With this in mind, these essays are offered in the hope that those who encounter these new radical mandarins will reflect more critically on the false self-confidence of their ideas and political prescriptions

and realize that another, more satisfying and productive, tradition of radicalism once existed and is once again possible.

Notes

1. For a discussion of this kind of renewed and expanded conception of the labor movement, see Stanley Aronowitz, *The Death and Life of American Labor: Toward a New Workers' Movement* (London: Verso, 2014), 135ff.
2. See Theodore J. Lowi, *The End of Liberalism: Ideology, Policy and the Crisis of Public Authority* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1969).
3. For a discussion of the relation between the new, late capitalist form of economics and culture and consciousness, see Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism: Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992); David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 284ff.; as well as Ernest Mandel, *Late Capitalism* (London: New Left Books, 1975), 500ff.
4. This is particulary true of the so-called "radical democratic" theorists such as Chantal Mouffe and others. For them, the political is a realm of essential agonism that is fundamentally separate from other realms of social reality. Lois McNay has recently called this approach "socially weightless" since this kind of theorizing detaches itself from the social structures of power that shape politics. "Social relations of power are granted little specificity or significance other than as watered-down, empirical manifestations of foundational political dynamics, which produces the socially weightless thinking of radical democrats." *The Misguided Search for the Political: Social Weightlessness in Radical Democratic Theory*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), 15.
5. Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (London: Verso, 2007), 91.
6. Stanley Aronowitz, "Postmodernism and Politics," in Andrew Ross (ed.) *Universal Abandon? The Politics of Postmodernism* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 51.
7. Robert Meister, *Political Identity: Thinking through Marx* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 21.
8. Lauren Langman has shown that this can be seen as a "carnivalization" of politics where meaningful political action is displaced by escapism. See his "Alienation, Entrapment and Inauthenticity: Carnival to the Rescue," in Jerome Braun and Lauren Langman (eds.) *Alienation and the Carnivalization of Society* (New York: Routledge, 2012): 53–75.
9. For an excellent discussion of this problem, see Joseph M. Schwartz, "A Peculiar Blind Spot: Why Did Radical Political Theory Ignore the Rampant Rise

in Inequality Over the Past Thirty Years?" *New Political Science*, 35(3) (2013): 389–402.

10. For an important critique of this tendency to collapse politics into culture, and its roots in the politics of the 1960s, see Stephen Eric Bronner, *Moments of Decision: Political History and the Crises of Radicalism* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 101ff. Also see the important discussion by Jeffrey C. Goldfarb, *The Cynical Society: The Culture of Politics and the Politics of Culture in American Life* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 82ff.

11. Aronowitz, "Postmodernism and Politics," 55.

12. Daniel T. Rodgers has recently assessed this movement of ideas as one where "notions of power moved out of structures and into culture. Identities became intersectional and elective. Concepts of society fragmented. Time became penetrable. Even the slogans of the culture war's conservatives were caught up in the swirl of choice." *Age of Fracture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 12 as well as 77ff.

13. See the important discussion by Joseph M. Schwartz, *The Future of Democratic Equality: Rebuilding Social Solidarity in a Fragmented America* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 47ff.

14. Richard Wolin remarks on this theme that "identities shorn of substantive ethical and cultural attachments would conceivably set a new standard of immateriality. It is unlikely that fragmented selves and Bataille-inspired ecstatic communities could mobilize the requisite social cohesion to resist political evil. Here, too, the hazards and dangers of supplanting the autonomous, moral self with an 'aesthetic' self are readily apparent." *The Seduction of Unreason: The Intellectual Romance with Fascism from Nietzsche to Postmodernism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 312.

15. David Harvey, *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 206.

16. Miguel Abensour, *Democracy against the State: Marx and the Machiavellian Moment* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), 2. Critchley similarly argues on this point that "democracy as democratization is the movement of *disincarnation* that challenges the borders and questions the legitimacy of the state. Democratization is a dissensual praxis that works against the consensual horizon of the state." *Infinitely Demanding,* 119. These authors, as well as many other fellow travelers, misconstrue Marx's critique of the state, which was actually the critique of the *bourgeois incarnation of the state* expressing capitalist interests. As Terry Eagleton correctly points out: "The state as an administrative body would live on. It is the state as an instrument of violence that Marx hopes to see the back of. As he puts it in the *Communist Manifesto*, public power under Communism would lose its political character. Against the anarchists of his day, Marx insists that only in this sense would the state

vanish from view. What had to go was a particular kind of power, one that underpinned the rule of a dominant social class over the rest of society. National parks and driving test centers would remain." *Why Marx Was Right* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 197.

17. This view of violence has an old pedigree. It appears in the writings of revolutionaries ranging from Robespierre to Trotsky. Contemporary defenders of "left-wing" violence, such as, Žižek, Badiou, and Susan Buck-Morss often turn to Walter Benjamin's essay "Critique of Violence," in his *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings* (New York: Shocken Books, 1986), 277–300.

18. Note, for example, the two volumes seeking to revive the idea of Communism, Costas Douzinas and Slavoj Žižek (eds.) *The Idea of Communism* (London: Verso, 2010) and Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou (eds.) *The Idea of Communism 2: The New York Conference* (London: Verso, 2013) as well as volumes published in Verso's *Pocket Communism* and *Revolutionaries* book series.

19. Badiou's recourse to mathematics has been the subject of an insightful attack: "Alain Badiou calls himself a Platonist and proclaims the revolutionary political power of his philosophy of numbers. But insofar as his mathematical ontology disguises the contingent in robes of necessity, it can only diminish our freedom. We can embrace the politics if we so wish. But we should not confuse this choice with mathematics, nor can we call it philosophy." Ricardo L. Nirenberg and David Nirenberg, "Badiou's Number: A Critique of Mathematics as Ontology." *Critical Inquiry*, 37 (2011): 583–614, 612.

20. This is the title of a work by the influential historian Joan Wallach Scott. See: Joan Wallach Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996). The notion that history only reveals contradictions, paradoxes, incoherencies, etc. has had a powerful impact on historians, particularly working on issues of gender, race, and decolonization. Three historians have noted, "The implication is that the historian does not in fact capture the past in faithful fashion but rather, like the novelist, gives the appearance of doing so. Were this version of postmodernism applied to history, the search for truths about the past would be displaced by the self-reflexive analysis of historians' ways of fictively producing convincing 'truth-effects.'" Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1994), 227.

21. This conception of ideology has nothing to do with the traditional Marxist theory of ideology.

22. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso Books, 1989), 48.

23. Robert Meister correctly notes about these new movements that each "conspicuously lacks either an epistemological vision, a political majority, structural leverage, or a historical trajectory—and often it lacks one or another combination of these." *Political Identity*, 25.
24. Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979), xv–xvi.

CHAPTER 1

The Postmodern Face of American Exceptionalism

Shadia Drury

Postmodernism has rightly been viewed as delivering the death knell to Western chauvinism vis à vis all other cultures by undermining the idea that the West has access to a universal moral standard representing truth, freedom, and justice for all humanity. So, in so far as American Exceptionalism is the ultimate manifestation of Western confidence in its superiority, it would seem to be incongruous with postmodernism. But this is not necessarily the case. Richard Rorty defends an American Exceptionalism dressed in the garb of postmodernity. In what follows, I will argue that even though Rorty rejects postmodernism as a meaningless term, and repudiates relativism as absurd, his political philosophy displays all the vices of relativism and postmodernism without the saving graces of these modes of thought. What is even worse, Rorty imbues his postmodern nationalism with the worst vices of moral absolutism.

Rorty and Relativism

Rorty denies that he is a "relativist" because he associates the latter term with the absurd claim that all cultural norms, regardless of their nature, are equal. Accordingly, he assumes that "relativism" is a pejorative term, so he prefers to describe his position as "constructivist," in the hope that the latter does not carry the same pejorative implications. I have no intention of using "relativism" in its pejorative sense, because I do not think that it involves the absurd claim that Rorty attributes to it. No sophisticated

cultural relativist has ever made the claim that all cultural norms are morally equal. Cultural relativists tend to be descriptive or empirical rather than normative. Ruth Benedict, the famous anthropologist, is a classic example. She illustrates by a plethora of examples that what passes for morality in any given society is what is accepted as normal.[1] Her claim is that morality is a social construct or a set of accepted practices that differ dramatically from one society to another. Relativism provides no moral compass. Relativists make no evaluative claims because they deny that there are any universal moral principles by which different cultural norms can be evaluated. Postmodernism is arguably the most fashionable and most seductive version of cultural relativism to appear in the history of thought. It is more evocative of the terrifying capacity of social and political power to shape reality, to the point of extending its tentacles to the deepest recesses of the human psyche.

Despite his repudiation of the terms, Rorty shares the relativist and postmodern claim that moral norms are a matter of social construction, agreement, consensus, or practice. Like the relativists and postmodernists, Rorty rejects the idea of universal moral truths independent of human volition or construction. Like the postmodernists, Rorty rejects the correspondence theory of truth according to which true beliefs or practices are a matter of conformity with a preexisting reality such as the moral law, the rights of nature, or the will of God.[2] Like the postmodernists, Rorty thinks of truth, including moral truth, as a construction of society. Like the postmodernists, he replaces objectivity with intersubjectivity.

Rorty is a self-described pragmatist, following in the footsteps of John Dewey and William James. He claims that pragmatists are "partisans of solidarity" as opposed to objectivity.[3] This means that they are committed to the ethos of their community. Indeed, there is no avoiding the fact that truth is "ethnocentric" because we cannot avoid working with "our own lights" and not because we are close-minded and do not wish to listen to representatives of other communities. Rorty tells us that truth is what a community "finds good to believe."[4] This does not mean that we decide arbitrarily to believe anything we want to believe. What is "good to believe" is what will make our society a better reflection of "civilized values." For Rorty that means a society with less inequality and less cruelty (both physical and psychological). Perhaps no one has captured what Rorty means better than Kurt Vonnegut in the epigraph of his novel *Cat's Cradle*: "Believe whatever makes you kind, brave, and generous." The trouble is that different groups, not to mention different individuals,

might disagree about what is good to believe. In fact John Dewy and William James, both American pragmatists, disagreed about whether religion is something that is "good to believe." So, it is not clear how the shift from disputes about objectivity to disputes about "what is good to believe" solves anything.

Nevertheless, Rorty maintains that the concept of objectivity needs to be replaced by the concept of "unforced agreement."[5] What Rorty means by "unforced agreement" is a set of ideas, beliefs, and practices that are endorsed freely and without coercion under conditions of free inquiry.[6] For Rorty, truth is what wins in a free and open encounter. The scientific community, as understood by Thomas Kuhn, is his model, whereby the ideas that succeed are the ones that fit the dominant paradigm accepted by the scientific community at the time, until a revolution in ideas results in a paradigm shift.[7]

The trouble is that social norms are not the product of free inquiry. They are not the result of agreement on "what is good to believe." Social norms are never free from coercion. The latter can be anywhere from severe legal punishment to social disapprobation. The transgression of these social norms is never without cost. No one is born free. As individuals, we are born into some society or other that demands conformity. Rorty writes as if the liberal principles he cherishes have triumphed because they were found intellectually more compelling under conditions of free inquiry. He writes as if liberal principles—individual rights, limited government, rule of law, and the celebration of individuality and diversity—have triumphed without the English Civil War, the American War of Independence, the French Revolution, and the American Civil War.

Let us assume for the sake of argument, that moral norms are products of agreement under conditions of free inquiry. Rorty is not suggesting that the agreement in question is agreement among Nazis, Stalinists, or anyone who is not committed to "civilized values." What constitutes "civilized values" is not open to debate. For Rorty, there are two inviolable goals of politics that are indisputable: less suffering and more diversity. These goals cannot be questioned. To those who reject these goals, nothing can be said. Reason can only tackle means, not ends. So, those who reject these goals cannot be part of the conversation. Rorty tells us that it is impossible to win an argument with Nazis or advocates of slavery. In these cases, the resolution of discord must be violent—as it was in 1861.[8]

The triumph over slavery in the American Civil War and the triumph over the Nazis in World War II are examples that serve Rorty's "narrative

of progress."[9] Unfortunately, war is unpredictable; progressive values need not have triumphed; slavery and Nazism may have succeeded. The norms that triumph, no matter how civilized we think they are, are nevertheless products of violence. This is why it is impossible to define social norms as the products of "consensus" under conditions of "free inquiry," no matter how much we approve of what has triumphed.

So, if those who reject "civilized values" must be excluded from the discourse, then, who is to be included in this free and open inquiry? Rorty says the community in question is "us," but he is willing to "enlarge the scope of 'us' by regarding other people, or cultures, as members of the same community of inquiry . . . part of the group among whom unforced agreement is to be sought."[10] However, he adds "beliefs suggested by another culture must be tested by trying to weave them together with beliefs we already have."[11] In other words, beliefs of other cultures would be acceptable only in so far as they fit coherently with the beliefs of our own culture, because we can do nothing other than work with "our own lights."[12]

The conviction that it is impossible to escape ethnocentrisms is strange for someone who loves literature as much as Rorty does. Is literature not precisely what helps us escape our ethnocentrism? Does it not allow us to live temporarily in someone else's skin and see the world through their eyes? Of course, it does. So, why does Rorty insist on being ethnocentric? The answer is that he is looking for the sort of agreement based on the coherence of ideas that one finds in science. For him, scientists around the world are a community, whose solidarity is based on agreement informed by coherence of ideas under conditions of free inquiry. Rorty follows Kuhn in thinking that "truth is dynamic" and that yesterday's truths are today's falsehoods, just as today's truths will be tomorrow's falsehoods. Euclidean geometry and the Ptolemaic system are cases in point. In my view, the scientific model, even when interpreted by Kuhn, is inadequate for describing political communities. Agreement among people from diverse cultures is neither necessary nor desirable. Coherence of ideas between diverse cultures is neither necessary nor possible.

In the domain of international affairs, there is no consensus. The international community, unlike the scientific community, is held together by very thin strands, which are always on the verge of rupturing. These strands can be enhanced by empathy for the plight of other human beings, which presupposes recognition of the given human condition that we all share. But Rorty is eager to sweep all the facts regarding the

human condition out of the way. In his "Feminism and Pragmatism," he tells us that women have been impeded in their development because of all sorts of beliefs about the given nature of womanhood and its supposed limitations. If we sweep all these away, then women can be free to develop themselves.[13] It is admirable to encourage self-actualization in women as much as in men. However, in doing so, it is not pragmatic to ignore conditions that are not a function of choice.

Rorty makes the same mistake made by social constructivists— relativists as well as postmodernists. He writes as if social norms are created by society out of whole cloth. His conception of human choice is modeled after the Biblical god, who creates the worlds out of nothing—as if there was no preexisting primordial stuff that sets limits to creativity. Rorty writes as if all "nonhuman" truths, truths uncreated by mankind, were metaphysical monstrosities that set arbitrary limits on human development and creativity. But not all nonhuman truths are products of the meta-theological imagination. Most "nonhuman" truths are quite mundane. For example, some nonhuman facts regarding climate, geography, food supply, and our own limitations would be relevant in deciding what ideals we choose to strive for. It is not pragmatic to aim for unattainable goals—although I admit that what is and is not attainable is open to debate; but it is a debate worth having—a debate that is relevant to the choices we make. A great deal of human suffering in the twentieth century could have been averted if Marx's communist ideal had been recognized as a pipe dream.

By the same token, it is unpractical, even cruel, to tell women that more of them should develop their talents in the domains of business, engineering, science, music, art, or any other thing, regardless of the conditions in which they find themselves—conditions that are not a function of choice. For example, conditions in which no effective birth control methods have been invented, or where the population has been decimated and a gargantuan effort to repopulate the society is necessary. It is a "nonhuman truth" that nature has given women the lion's share in reproduction; and this is a fact that cannot be totally ignored in judging their achievements in the domains of art and science. I am not suggesting that women have a given function by nature, and those women who occupy themselves with other things are somehow perverse, unnatural, or not real women. I am simply saying that the paucity of female achievements in the domains of science and art cannot be explained simply by either social repression (even though that is real enough) or inferiority. The circumstances in

which women live must be taken into account. These circumstances are not always given by nature, but also by human history. The invention of effective methods of birth control, the dramatic reduction in infant mortality, and the astronomic rise in human population, makes it reckless and irrational to insist, as so many conservatives do, that women should devote their lives to the project of bearing and raising children.

What is true for women is true for all humanity. We cannot set our minds to ideals and aspirations regardless of our circumstances as given by nature or history. Indeed, when we aspire to visions of what we "ought to be" that are divorced from the given conditions that are not of our choosing, we are likely to cause ourselves and others heartache, misery, and great suffering. There is a case to be made that Marx's communist utopia was a disastrous source of human misery because it convinced so many people that such a utopia was not only possible, but worth every sacrifice, every massacre, and every brutality—so magnificent did it seem. The question is: does Rorty, the consummate anti-Communist and Cold War liberal, fall into the same trap as Marx?[14] Does his utopian nationalism lead him astray? Does it lead him to aspire to ideals that are unattainable? I will argue that it does. Rorty abandons the absolutism of Marx and the Enlightenment while retaining its vices.

Postmodern Nationalism

Rorty shares with John Dewey and Walt Whitman the American patriotism that goes by the name of American Exceptionalism. But, instead of justifying that Exceptionalism with reference to a national destiny, rooted in the will of God, or the natural rights of man, Rorty argues that the ideals of the nation are rooted in experience, which has revealed these principles and practices to be constitutive of human happiness and well-being. In other words, the principles on which the nation is founded do not have their origin in the natural rights granted by nature or nature's God in the Declaration of Independence. Rorty follows Dewey and Whitman in insisting on a thorough secularization of the principles of the American founding.[15] In this light, the principles of the nation are the principles that a group of people chooses to live by at a given time and place, because these principles represent their aspirations, their dreams, or their collective vision. It follows that these principles are not eternal, immutable, or unchanging. So, understood, America is a finite project conceived in time.

It would seem that this secularization of the declaration would have the effect of moderating the excesses of American Exceptionalism—because, nothing makes people as radical and extreme as believing that they are fulfilling a divine mission. Unhappily, this secularization of the American self-understanding does not inject a modicum of moderation or sobriety into American politics. As we shall see, for Rorty, as for Dewey and Whitman, America is even more exceptional without God.

Whitman and Dewey were inspired by Hegel into thinking that even though America is a finite, human, historical project, it is nevertheless a project the likes of which has never been seen in the history of humanity.[16] It is the country of the future, where wonders that have never been seen before might be realized.[17] Following Hegel, Dewey and Whitman thought that history is the growth of freedom; therefore, they surmised that human history is the story of America.[18] But even more than freedom, they thought that America was "the first country founded in the hope of a new kind of human fraternity," where a religion of love would finally take root. It would be the "place where the promise of the ages would first be realized." In this way, America would be the "vanguard of human history." It would replace the "Kingdom of God"; indeed, it would replace God as the unconditional object of desire.[19] Rorty describes it as a "temporalization of ultimate significance, and of awe."[20] So understood, America is not only "above suspicion," it is also "beyond reproach."[21] It is not even "intelligible" within any "previous frames of reference."[22] Indeed, it must "create the taste by which it will be judged." It must make the world see that it is "the final authority."[23] This sounds like the death knell of international law and international cooperation. But in fairness to Rorty, it is important to recognize that the America to which he is loyal is not the real country that is mired in history, but a "dream country."[24] As he puts it: "You have to be loyal to a dream country rather than to the one to which you wake up every morning."[25]

Needless to say, loyalty to the real country unites a people and makes them willing to sacrifice themselves for their country. But loyalty to a dream country is a different matter, since there is bound to be more than one dream country. Rorty's loyalty to his dream country is bound to come into conflict with Sarah Palin's loyalty to her "real America." These alternative, and mutually exclusive visions of the country account for the strident, implacable conflict and dysfunction of current American politics. When elected representatives are more loyal to their dream country than to the real country, the latter suffers. The tea party loyalists in the Republican

Party are a clear illustration of the willingness to sacrifice the interests of the real country for the sake of the dream one.

The dream country is something akin to the Catholic Church—transcendent, ethereal, and untarnished by all her historical crimes. Fellow citizens who are not devoted to the dream country, become "enemies" of the nation. This toxic nationalism transforms the democratic competition for power into a struggle to the death against the enemies of the nation, properly understood. It is a recipe for discord, if not civil war. But Rorty insists that in the absence of a dream country, it is impossible to improve one's real country, or "achieve our country" as he puts it.

So, what does Rorty's dream country look like? What kind of America is he hoping to achieve? Rorty tells us that his dream country is an egalitarian, classless, and casteless society. It is a "paradigmatic democracy" where there is less suffering, and where there is the most splendid outpouring of the most diverse forms of happiness.[26] To his credit, Rorty's magnificent flowering of diversity will not be modeled on multiculturalism. The latter involves a "live and let live" attitude. But Rorty is interested in Whitman's vision of "poetic argon" in which "dialectical discords" are "resolved in previously unheard harmonies."[27] The idea is to have "variety in unity."[28] As a result, a single, unified "tapestry" will be woven. However, the tapestry must be constantly torn to shreds so that it will not "obstruct the future" and hamper the flowering of ever new, yet unknown and unanticipated, individualities, which will adorn the world with novel forms of human happiness.[29]

For Rorty and the pragmatists, history does not have an inevitable trajectory. America is a purely human project that may well go astray. Things may not necessarily go well for America. Rorty tells us that the "vanguard of humanity may lose its way, and perhaps lead our species over a cliff."[30] It seems to many leftists that America has done just that. It has indeed taken the world over a cliff. Not surprisingly, they have lost hope in the promise of America.

Rorty rightly reproaches the American Left for succumbing to the impotence of postmodernism. The latter has become so mired in abstractions about identity and difference that it is incapable of articulating a program, forwarding a policy, suggesting new legislation, or coming up with practical proposals that would reduce the rapacity of capitalism. Rorty is disgusted with this "resigned pessimism," nihilism, hopelessness, and despair. He laments that the American Left has lost faith in the goodness of the country, especially since the horrors of the Vietnam War.[31] He