Ramón DEL CASTILLO, Ángel M. FAERNA, & Larry A.
HICKMAN (eds.), *Confines of Democracy. Essays on the
Philosophy of Richard J. Bernstein*

Leiden-Boston, Brill Rodopi, 2015, 260 pages

Michela Bella

Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejpap/1049>

DOI: 10.4000/ejpap.1049

ISSN: 2036-4091

Publisher

Associazione Pragma

Electronic reference

Michela Bella, « Ramón DEL CASTILLO, Ángel M. FAERNA, & Larry A. HICKMAN (eds.), *Confines of Democracy. Essays on the Philosophy of Richard J. Bernstein* », *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* [Online], IX-2 | 2017, Online since 22 January 2018, connection on 24 September 2020.

URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ejpap/1049> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejpap.1049>

This text was automatically generated on 24 September 2020.

Author retains copyright and grants the *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* right of first publication with the work simultaneously licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

Ramón DEL CASTILLO, Ángel M. FAERNA, & Larry A. HICKMAN (eds.), *Confines of Democracy. Essays on the Philosophy of Richard J. Bernstein*

Leiden-Boston, Brill Rodopi, 2015, 260 pages

Michela Bella

REFERENCES

Ramón DEL CASTILLO, Ángel M. FAERNA, & Larry A. HICKMAN (eds.), *Confines of Democracy. Essays on the Philosophy of Richard J. Bernstein*, Leiden-Boston, Brill Rodopi, 2015, 260 pages

- 1 This significant book is the main outcome of an international research program on “Public Sphere, Value-Conflict, and Social Experience: A Pragmatist Approach,” conducted in 2008-11 by Ramón del Castillo. Within this framework, the editors of the book organized, in 2010, an international conference on the philosophy of Richard J. Bernstein. The conference became the highlight of the program as far as the American philosopher not only represents a key-figure of the American philosophical tradition, but he also embodies the core intuition of the program. His philosophical style is a paradigm, and a source of inspiration, for contemporary philosophical reflections on ethical, social, and political “confines” issues.
- 2 The book is a collection of fifteen essays by international scholars accompanied by separate replies from Bernstein. It is subdivided into four sections; each one is focused on a specific aspect of his work or a confrontation with a particular author. The topics are chosen among the plurilateral and multifaceted reflections of Bernstein on democracy. The first section addresses the relationship between “Bernstein and American Pragmatism,” particularly focusing on his association with Richard Rorty.

Robert Westbrook tells an affectionate tale of these two philosophers (“A Tale of Two Dicks”). His close examination of their biographical and intellectual background arrives at pointing out shared convictions and significant disagreements. In particular, considering Rorty’s and Bernstein’s presidential addresses, respectively given in 1979 and 1988 to the Eastern Division of the American Philosophical Association, Westbrook argues that the essential components of their views can be gathered under the label of a “pragmatic ethos” (6). They both subscribed *anti-foundationalism*, as a way to deny that knowledge can be founded upon fix basements and that we have a special faculty to intuit these foundations; *fallibilism* as a constitutive element of inquiry that enables us to correct and enhance our “beliefs and thesis” through a continuous process of interpretation and criticism. Then, *sociality*, as a constitutive aspect of the self as well as a necessary requisite for scientific inquiries; and the pragmatist attention toward the radical *contingency* and *pluralism* that mark our lives and universe. As to the persistent differences that ‘make the difference’ between Bernstein’s and Rorty’s perspectives, Westbrook includes the aversion of Bernstein for Rorty’s insistent critiques against representationalist view of knowledge and traditional epistemology. This was only the *pars destruens* of the task indicated by Dewey to reconstruct philosophy. But in Westbrook’s view, the words of Bernstein hide both a more profound agreement and a more profound disagreement with Rorty’s claim for the abandonment of the concept of “experience.” Bernstein not only believed that Rorty had to move on to a constructive phase, but he was also worried by his friend’s too unkind treatment of the “realist intuitions” (7). In fact, Rorty was deeply concerned by the possible revive of foundationalist claims through pragmatism concepts. Bernstein and others worried that Rorty fell easy prey to the accusation of “bad relativism” by pressing pragmatism in the direction of a radical linguistic constructionism, or “linguistic idealism” (8). Relying upon Davidson, James, and Dewey’s conceptions of the relationship between causal pressures from non-human world and beliefs, Westbrook considers Rorty’s position as neither naïve nor at odds with Bernstein’s criticism of the misleading confusion between *brute constraint* and *epistemic authority*. The more profound disagreement was more general than the measure in which independent-world plays a constraint role in the formation of beliefs. Rorty’s insistence on epistemological concerns, in Bernstein and Westbrook’s reading, went hand in hand with “a misleading conception of human being-in-the-world as ubiquitously a knowledge-affair” (9). Bernstein claimed for an “enriched pragmatism” in the line of James, Dewey, and Mead, thus sharing the classic pragmatists’ insistence on the priority of conduct upon knowing.

- 3 The second main disagreement focused by Westbrook between Rorty and Bernstein regards their views of politics. As known, Rorty’s liberalism was at odds with Bernstein’s democratic stance. In his review of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Bernstein even went so far to assimilate Rorty’s irony to Mussolini’s cynism. Quite apart from inexact exaggerations, as he explains in his reply to Westbrook, anti-authoritarianism and creative private self-fulfillment were fundamental aspects of Rorty’s thinking. Bernstein instead confirms the description of himself made by Westbrook as an egalitarian democrat in the first instance. Unlike Rorty, his temperament and his engagement in Civil Rights movement, anti-Vietnam war movement, etc. testimony his faith in “creative participatory democracy.” Bernstein suggests that his commitment to democracy goes back not only to Dewey’s understanding of democracy as “primarily an individual way of life in a dialogical

community” (43) but in a way also to his liberal Jewish background. In his essay, Gregory Pappas sharply criticizes Bernstein’s recently more conciliatory stance toward the neopragmatism of Rorty and Brandom. The desirable possibility to recollect classic and neo-pragmatism under the same umbrella is complicated, as aforementioned, for the radical stance of the latter against the notion of experience. Pappas sees two parties confronting on hardly reconcilable positions so that his opinion about the possibility of fostering a constructive conversation is less optimistic. In this respect, Bernstein reaffirms his pragmatist anti-dichotomist stance. He agrees with Pappas on the necessity of the concept of experience to pragmatism but does not abandon the contention he made in *The Pragmatic Turn* (2010). The task of the young scholars is now to look for creative ways to rethink and overcome theoretical conflicts internal to pragmatism. Integration, not division is the real challenge in the next future.

- 4 In the second section, on *Epistemology and Hermeneutics*, Núria Sara Miras Boronat recovers Bernstein’s diagnosis of the Cartesian pathology affecting modern epistemology. In his masterpiece, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* (1983), Bernstein warned against the paralyzing effects on philosophical practices of a dichotomist interpretation of these terms. He uses Adorno’s metaphor of constellation and that of conversation as therapy to the single approach to philosophical issues adopted by modern thinkers. The individualistic examination of traditions, opinions, and prejudices affecting our perspectives is only apparently dissolved in the “linguistic turn” of the Twentieth Century. The “Cartesian anxiety” to reach foundational certainties through solipsistic investigation risks to be merely replaced by what may be called a “cultural solipsism” in the linguistic turn epistemology. Boronat introduces here her original argument about the negative and positive connotations of the “ontology of community.” On the one hand, she uses Alexander’s label to criticize the “theoretical reification of a communal identity” (126) for it makes impossible to overcome the confines of our culture. On the other, she offers positive examples of philosophical hermeneutics’ use of this label that moves in the opposite direction. This direction is that of a pluralistic and dynamic transformation of communities according to Bernstein’s invitation to a philosophical pragmatic turn, and to Dewey’s precedent claim for a creative reconstruction of democracy. Following Bernstein’s encouragement to elaborate a “new conception of practical reason, more fallible and praxis-rooted” (130), Boronat’s anti-Cartesian strategy is to put in conversation theoretical conceptions useful to outline creative, pluralistic, and dynamic reconstructions of democracy. In particular, she uses Wittgenstein’s conception of “form of life” to reduce knowledge to a human practice among other human practices and to show our ease with the ordinary paradox to “act *exercising* reason without possessing ultimate reasons” (128). Against the claim of traditional epistemology, Gadamer denied the essential identification of truth and method (1960). His notion of “tradition” as something fluid and dialogical is another important notion of bearing in mind to avoid negative reification of communities. The last theoretical tool considered is Bernstein’s pluralism. As Boronat concludes, the lesson that Bernstein learned from pragmatism, and also from Arendt is crucial and adds personal responsibility and commitment. An “engaged fallibilistic pluralism” is the way to escape ideological pluralism as well as to cope with the irreducibility of human conditions.
- 5 The issue of the Cartesian anxiety is also addressed in Heidi Salaverría’s essay on “Critical Common Sense, Exemplary Doubting, and Reflective Judgment.” This essay is part of the third section of the book: “Good, Evil and Judgment.” Moving from

Bernstein's claim that uncertainty and fallibility are respectively requirements of a coherent epistemology and a responsible action, Salaverría proposes to investigate, from a pragmatist perspective, the relationship between uncertainty and responsible action. To this extent, she shows significant interconnections existing between the three subjects mentioned in the title as elaborated by the pragmatist tradition, Hanna Arendt, and Kant. The dynamic tension between common sense beliefs and doubting – what Peirce called *critical commonsensism* – is a powerful antidote against any form of dogmatic thinking, but leave us in the ordinary paradoxical situation of establishing criteria for judgment within our contingent and fallible common sense view. Salaverría explores through pragmatist glasses the state of uncertainty, “best described as exemplary doubting,” as investigated by Bernstein, Arendt, and Kant. She aims to develop the “enabling dimensions” (158) of uncertainty by showing its profound connection with common sense and reflective judgment. In this regard, the tension between action and contemplation that Bernstein detected in Arendt's analysis of judgment results in an “ethical punchline” (159). Arendt's hermeneutic interpretation of Kant's *sensus communis* is relevant, and it might have been interesting to compare her view with Meads's notion of “generalized other.” However, like Dewey, Arendt extends Kant's aesthetic judgment to other fields of human life. Salaverría points out similarities and differences of Kant's description of reflective judgment in uncertain situations concerning Dewey's practical judgment and Peirce's abduction. In particular, she stresses the enjoyment of the uncertain situation, and the function of *exemplarity* of the reflective judgment taken as a “whole situation, including the self” (163). Within the concrete context of the *sensus communis*, the experience of exemplarity brings in personal responsibility towards others as well as the connected problem of the identification of the self with a common sense view. Bernstein's pragmatic interpretation of Arendt opened the way for a closer reading of Kant's *Third Critique* by pragmatist scholars. Salaverría reaffirms the need to use Kant's *Third Critique*, and Arendt's reading of *sensus communis*, to deepen the enjoyable dimension of doubting as a way to change commonsense.

- 6 In his reply, Bernstein agrees with Salaverría that Kant's *Criticism of Judgment* is too often overlooked by pragmatism scholars. As known, the quarrel about if and how Kantianism is compatible with pragmatism fundamental statements is a matter of current debate. Their common suggestion is to look for more consistent connections in another direction.
- 7 In the fourth and last part, on *Democratic Vistas*, Alicia García Ruiz opens her essay “Reconstruction of Democratic Experience” with a core question: “What does it mean to call oneself a democrat?” (199). According to Wendy Brown, democracy is now “an empty signifier to which one and all can attach their dreams and hopes.” This harsh conviction is the starting point of García Ruiz's attempt to put Bernstein and Lefort in a dialogue. She points out three main features of Bernstein's political view that seem to meet Lefort's view. Democracy, for Bernstein, is “antifoundationalist, radical and creative” (202). By developing these characters, García Ruiz specifies that Bernstein's abandonment of the quest for certainty is different from Rorty's antifoundationalist view of democracy. The nature of radicalism deals instead with the kind of liberalism that a democrat should endorse. In this regard, Bernstein and Lefort's analysis of the contemporary connection between democracy and a degenerated form of liberalism tackle a crucial point of current debate. At last, for Bernstein, the Deweyan aspect of creativity claims for personal ethical engagement in democracy. Institutions are not

divinities, and our responsibility is an unavoidable factor if we take democracy as a praxis to endorse.

- 8 The book is included in the *Value Inquiry Book Series* (VIBS), published by Brill Rodopi. This series collected some titles that explore contemporary problems of values and valuation in their embeddedness within particular fields and contexts. The editorial intention of the book is not merely to pay tribute to a great American philosopher. From the passionate style of the contributors' essays, that is conveyed by the careful attention with which they confronted Bernstein's works, as well as from Bernstein's intense and honest replies, it is evident that a serious philosophical conversation continues to advance. The typical forward-looking attitude of Bernstein on democracy and social and political issues is in the line of Dewey. He envisioned democracy as a "task" to accomplish in creative ways and to pursue looking at its possible future steps. This classic American philosophical tradition finds a most convenient application in this book. A famous title of James's works returns to my mind. What if to consider this book as *Essays in Democracy* or *Essays in the Philosophy of Bernstein*? According to a genuine Deweyan style – one that Bernstein declares to be most affectionate to as having influenced his reflections since he was writing his thesis – democracy is a "life style" and therefore a narrative, social, and dialogical style of dealing with human problems, precisely as Bernstein keeps doing in his life and work. His reflections on the confines of social and political terms as the public sphere, the role of knowledge and technology, the relationship between identity and community all go in the direction of anti-dichotomist pragmatism approach. As shown in this book, his lifelong efforts to bridge different continents of tradition, with a critical look, encourage younger scholars to walk his ways in favor of always more concrete, engaged, and passionate confrontation with different contextual aspects of the human life from an unavoidable, and fallible, pluralism of perspectives.

AUTHORS

MICHELA BELLA

Università degli Studi di Roma Tre
mica_mb[at]hotmail.it