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A Pragmatic Party

On Richard Bernstein's *The Pragmatic Turn*

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

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- 1 Bernstein's last book is one of the most eloquent reconstructions of old and new pragmatism. As always, Bernstein combines scholarship and accessibility, technical issues and open debates. This brilliant book is an introduction available to any *amateur*, but it will also offer to *connoisseurs* a new opportunity to rack their brains.
- 2 The prologue is both a declaration of principles and an extraordinary map, a balance of a personal journey and a guide for new routes. Chapters 1, 2, and 3 are dedicated to the three forefathers (Peirce, James and Dewey). Chapters 7, 8 and 9 to three contemporary voices: Putnam, Habermas, Rorty. Besides, the plot of the book continuously interweaves ideas of old and new thinkers, along with a variety of spheres of epistemological, ethical and political discussions. Central chapters, 4, 5 and 6, through their thematic titles, do contribute even more to the round trip and the multidimensional approach. Peirce's legacy, for example, is interestingly connected with McDowell's philosophy in chapter 2. James's pluralism is connected with Horace Kallen and Alain Locke in chapter 3. In chapter 4 Hegel operates as a sort of immense wave that agitates the whole pragmatic sea from past to present, from Peirce and Dewey to Brandon and McDowell, passing through Sellars. Chapters 5 and 6, using some keywords ("truth," "objectivity" and "experience") also combines in a synoptic view old and new names and perspectives. Many other names incidentally appear: Misak, Stout, Wellmer, Honneth. Personally I would appreciate that some names would have appeared more frequently (Emerson and Santayana). There is no

reference to Sydney Hook and Morton White, although I guess they were very important milestones between old and new pragmatism. Hans Joas and Axel Honneth could have had a little bit more showing, particularly after writing a magisterial chapter on Habermas. The existentialist pragmatism of John McDermott and the prophetic one of Cornell West are also absent.¹ However, to suggest Richard Bernstein to introduce more voices would be like asking him to write a bigger but too heavy encyclopaedic book, or a historic novel full of characters but much less provocative and useful than this one.

- 3 One more time, he idiosyncratically arranges a chronicle of an intense polyphonic style, creating a choral book that could be seen as a new chapter of the “conflict of interpretations” which he himself diagnosed some years ago.² He articulates with an inspirational conversational style not only a retrospective view of the three major waves of pragmatism but also a singular prospective of the upcoming sea change in contemporary philosophy. And both views, backward and forward, are not exempt of conflict. Reading Bernstein’s book as an invitation to philosophical ecumenism would be like taking William James as a quiet soul or to think of John Dewey as a candid educator. Since the very idea of conversation is open to debate, since there are diverse and even antagonist interpretations about how a *philosophical* conversation should be practiced, the first thing that one should try to make clear is what idea of conversation Bernstein has exactly in mind. In the prologue to his book (31) he says something very instructive:

[...] it is best to think of the discourse about pragmatism as an open-ended conversation with many loose ends and tangents. I don’t mean an “idealized” conversation or dialogue, so frequently described and praised by philosophers. Rather, it is a conversation more like the type that occurs at New York dinner parties where there are misunderstandings, speaking at cross-purposes, conflicts, and contradictions, with personalized voices stressing different points of view (and sometimes talking at the same time). It can seem chaotic, yet somehow the entire conversation is more vital and illuminating than any of the individual voices demanding to be heard. This is what the conversation of pragmatism has been like.

- 4 Of course, conversations in New York parties are different from conversations in other places in the USA. And conversations in Italy, Germany and Spain are quite different from conversations in any place from the USA. But independently of geographical considerations and local variations, the main point seems clear: the pragmatist conversation can produce happy encounters but never a happy end. Or in other words: the pragmatist conversation is open to agreements, shared opinion, and common ends-in-view, but it carries on without the consolatory ideal of a final agreement. The story of pragmatism is neither a grand narrative of the progress of the philosophical involvement nor a quest for the last word on some philosophical topic or problem.
- 5 A conversation is *not* a research, yet it can actually improve knowledge. It can result into a better understanding of problems, although the sort of insight that it provides is not organized according to a “research program.” Since its very origins, the pragmatic philosophers did reach agreements and accepted compromises, but they also manifested open discrepancies at the same time. Contemporary pragmatism is not different: it is a tumultuous discussion, rather than a philosophical corporation. After reading Bernstein, one could think that truly pragmatic characters have more skill organizing good parties than putting together philosophical conventions.
- 6 When I say that the pragmatic movement is not like a “party” I do not mean that pragmatic minds could not be partisan in many circumstances. On the contrary, after reading Bernstein one can also think that a true and good conversation (at New York, and

also in many other places) is not a quiet and peaceful dialogue. A real conversation does not exclude *agon*, engagement, conflict and radical differences. What it does actually exclude is that sort of acquiescence than the word “dialogue” sometimes seems to inspire.

³ For Bernstein, indeed, any conversation is ineluctably pluralistic, but in the most radical sense, that is, in William James’s sense of “pluralism.” As he also says:

If James was right (as I think he was), it is unrealistic and undesirable to think that we will ever escape from some form of the clash of intuitions and temperaments. This pluralistic clash energizes philosophical speculation and enlivens philosophical debate. Sometimes it is just the slings and arrows that we feel from those who oppose us that drive us to a more subtle articulation of a philosophical orientation. This is the way in which I think it is best to view the development of pragmatism from Peirce to Brandom and Habermas. And as any good pragmatist knows, nobody has the final word. (124)⁴

- 7 But if the conversation is passionate and tense, it is also a school and a laboratory, a place where one learns to speak a language and where everybody will always have the need to find and elaborate better arguments. This point is important: for Bernstein a real conversation is an inquiry, taking “inquiry” in the sense that Dewey gave to the term, that is, inquiry as an educative and intellectual activity, inquiry as a social task and agency, and not as this sort of detached research that many post-analytic philosophers are still vindicating.
- 8 In *The Pragmatic Turn* Bernstein converses fluidly with authors like Brandom, McDowell and Putnam, and his efforts to convoke different philosophical voices in the same conversation are laudable and desirable. Bernstein’s reconstruction is both sympathetic and critical: “Brandom – he says – opens up one of the most promising ways [...] and shows how one can develop a robust pragmatic understanding of justification, truth, intersubjectivity and objectivity” (122-3). But, he also says: “I strongly disagree with Brandom’s assessment of the American Pragmatic tradition. He fails to recognize that Peirce’s pragmatism is a normative pragmatism [...] we also find in Peirce an anticipation of Brandom’s inferential semantics, and his all-important distinction between what it is implicit and what it is explicit in social practices” (104). Peirce’s model of grades of control, Bernstein adds in other passage, could question Brandom’s distinction between a theory that gives priority to reasoning in understanding what is to say or to do something (a rationalist pragmatism) and an approach where the “emphasis is placed on the continuities between discursive and nondiscursive creatures” (*ibid.*, not. 12, 227). But then, we could go further: if Brandom would have taken much more seriously not only Peirce, but Dewey, he could see much more seriously challenged his rationalist pragmatism.⁵
- 9 The problem, I would suggest, is not only a problem with the assessment of pragmatism. Maybe the matter is not how much attention Brandom had paid to the legacy of pragmatism, but rather that his entire philosophical model is radically oriented by a program research. If I don’t remember badly, James, Dewey, Rorty and Bernstein had talked extensively about logic, epistemology, politics, education, good and evil, life and death, body and soul. And probably such an open philosophical agenda has been the most permanent trait of the pragmatic conversation. Brandom, on the contrary, is oriented by a guiding theory of rationality whose social dimension, contrary to Rorty’s own predictions and sincere hopes, contributes *neither* to a radical transformation of the self-image of human beings, *nor* to the transformation of philosophy into a less professionalized activity.

- 10 The case of McDowell would require further commentaries, but it is also very interesting that Bernstein make use of Peirce's philosophy to understand essential categories by McDowell. One would think that he is more comfortable with McDowell's style and method than with Brandom's, but a detailed discussion of this point exceeds the scope of this review. In the case of Putnam, things could sound very well, since Putnam opened gradually his theory to political and social issues since the 80s. Bernstein's rewriting of Putnam's philosophy is accurate and generous, rich and sensitive. But even if there have been good conversations between Rorty, Bernstein, Putnam and Habermas on ethics and democracy, I would tend to think that he is still mainly oriented by a robust idea of what a *philosophical* argument is⁶. In consequences, I have some doubts if Putnam would put Bernstein's own model of philosophical investigation at the same level that his own idea of a thick philosophical research, no matter if both of them could enjoy some parties.⁷
- 11 Habermas and Rorty are the last two main voices in Bernstein's choral narrative. And I think that this fact is very relevant. Habermas represents a European turn of Social Philosophy that, since the 60s, found in American pragmatism a motif of inspiration and of debate. Rorty, on his part, represents one of the most unclassifiable voices of the American philosophical scene since the same years, a voice that his friend Bernstein supported with loyalty and criticized exhaustively at one.
- 12 Chapter 8 on Habermas, I would say, is one of the most exhaustive and ambitious chapters of *The Pragmatic Turn*: it reconstructs the evolution of Habermas's thought, at the same time that it rises questions about the consistence of what Bernstein called "Kantian Pragmatism." Many of Bernstein's criticisms of Habermas's "dichotomies" in this chapter "are in the spirit of Hegel" (199), but Bernstein does not support his Hegelian critique of Habermas in arguments by German thinkers of a Hegelian air.⁸ Bernstein's critique of Habermas, on the contrary, derives from an immanent critique of Habermas's theory. It is clear that, since Bernstein's spirit is both critical and edifying, he omits in his reconstruction of Habermas a good deal of his own ideas about "thin" democratic virtues with which he had criticized Habermas in other occasions.⁹
- 13 A last chapter on Rorty remarkably ends Bernstein's chronicle, but it would be a mistake to take Rorty as the last character of the chronicle. Rorty is rather the main counter-voice *through* Bernstein's whole book, from the beginning to the end, in the rich prologue (13, 16, 19, 20-1), in many chapters, and specially in the one dedicated to the linguistic turn (126, 133-4-5, 141, 144, 148), as well as in turning points of the chapter dedicated to Habermas (191). Rorty is not the last character, but probably the always close and distant voice of the book, a permanent but nowadays absent companion of a conversation. As I have said, Bernstein's model of philosophical investigation is not an analogue to scientific research (or at least it is not analogue to the way in which some *philosophers* portrait scientific research). However, Bernstein's model of philosopher is not the *poetic* one. Rorty once said: "I envy the poets, just analytic philosophers like Quine envy natural scientist. One of the differences between analytics and non-analytic philosophy had to do with the object of the philosopher's envy. I cannot imagine being envious of a physicist or a mathematician, any more than of an accountant or a lawyer – no matter how talented or how socially useful. I am not sure that Quine could have imaged being envious of a Blake or a Rilke."¹⁰ Bernstein's magisterial chapter on Rorty makes us understand much better why Bernstein's own philosophical journey never was articulated on such a dichotomy between scientists and poets. The whole chapter is an amazing reconstruction of a friendship and of an opposition, but pages 213-6 should be considered with particular

attention. Ending a book saying that “no other philosopher of the past half-century has stimulated as much lively conversation as Rorty,” is a proof that, Bernstein’s essays are probably another version of what Hannah Arendt considered “essays of understanding.” Bernstein’s reconstruction of Rorty’s gaps, illusions and disillusion, insights and contradictions does not make of him a stronger poet able to redescribe his antagonist in his own terms, *pace* Bloom. It is rather an evidence of a type of understanding in which the interpreter tries to see things from the other’s perspective, at the same time that he perceives the limits of his own empathy.¹¹

- 14 I’m not sure if – as Bernstein says – “Rorty lost his patience with careful argumentations” after *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (a book to which apparition, by the way, Bernstein contributes personally). Being true that in some books Rorty “sounded more like a speechwriter for a presidential candidate than a serious social reformer” (214) and that “redescription, no matter how imaginative, is not enough” (*ibid.*), I think, however, that Rorty made careful argumentations *after* his most famous book, and that his emphasis on redescription was in many occasions a reasonable *campaign* against an over-professionalized style of political thinking. Bernstein is right when he claims “that for a pragmatist who prides himself on paying attention to those practical differences that make a difference, Rorty doesn’t provide us with the foggiest idea of how to achieve (or even approximate) the goals and hopes that he cherishes” (*ibid.*), but I would like to know if many other styles of political philosophy more systematic and architectonic provide us better receipts that make a real difference. Rorty’s dualism between argument *versus* redescription, explanation and invention, then, could be seen more as an instrument than as a description about two separate realms of human agency (in any case, a detail discussion on the differences between Bernstein and Rorty would require almost a whole book by its own right).¹²
- 15 I will finish this review with a confession: I have some doubts about the communication between different shores of philosophy, and about the coexistence between proses and poses of contemporary philosophers associated with the pragmatic turn. Bernstein’s own narrative is neither optimistic nor pessimistic. His chronicle reconstructs as no one else turning points in the history of pragmatism and it helps us to understand much better a heterogeneous tradition from the perspective of somebody who has judiciously evolved between two generations and travelled intellectually between several continents. His narrative makes us reevaluate the consequences of a turn, but at the same time it implicitly insinuates that, after all, the pragmatic turn is still a task before us.

NOTES

1. Susan Haack is also out of the plot. I ignore Bernstein’ opinion on her particular way of describing the evolution of pragmatism. I criticized her position in “Pragmatismo reformista, pragmatismo radical” (Respuesta a “Viejo y Nuevo pragmatismo” de Susan Haack), *Diánoia*, XLVIII (50), mayo 2003, FCE-UNAM, México, 2003, 145-80.

2. To understand the background of *The Pragmatic Turn* it is very useful to keep in mind earlier Bernstein's chronicles about the history of pragmatism: "The Resurgence of American Pragmatism," *Social Research* 59 (1992), 813-40; "American Pragmatism: The Conflict of Narratives," in H. J. Saatkamp Jr (ed.), *Rorty and Pragmatism*, Nashville, Vanderbilt University Press, 1995; and specially "The New Pragmatists," *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 28 (2007), 3-35. Bernstein had always given credibility to William James's distinction between "tender-minded" and "tough-minded" philosophical characters, but he has also introduced a *synchronic* perspective into James's typology. Old pragmatists, for example, seemed too tough in comparison with the Genteel tradition, but "by the late 1930s [...] and increasingly among professional academic philosophers, pragmatism was viewed as excessively 'tender-minded' – vague, diffuse, fuzzy, and soft at the center. A patronizing attitude toward pragmatism developed. The pragmatists may have had their hearts in the right place but not their heads. Their fuzziness and lack of rigor simply did not meet the high standards of precision and clarity required for 'serious' philosophic investigation." "The New Pragmatists," *op. cit.*, 6. It would be interesting to speculate if some neopragmatists have developed a patronizing attitude toward sympathizers of pragmatism using it as a new pretext to consolidate an over-professionalized philosophical style. I analyzed Rorty's scepticism about "dialogue" between *techies* and *fuzzies* in "¿Adiós a la filosofía?: Recuerdos de Rorty," in *La filosofía de Richard Rorty*, Biblioteca Nueva, Madrid, 2010, 197-224.

3. If we read the footnote in which Bernstein quotes a passage by Kenneth Burkes that Elisabeth Goodstein revealed to him, we can appreciate much more some properties of the sort of conversation that Bernstein has in mind: As Burke said, we always come to parties when many others voices have long preceded us and are already engaged in a too heated discussion. There is no pause, nor would anybody explain to us exactly what it is about. In fact, nobody could retrace exactly for us all the steps that had gone before, since to some extent, any discussion has already begun before any of the participants where there. However, after listen for a while we will put in our oar and we will try to catch the tenor of the argument [...] "Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defence; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hours grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress" (Burke Kenneth, *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1941, quoted in Bernstein, 221). As a model of philosophical investigation, one could say that this sort of conversation resembles some traits of Gadamer's idea of dialogue. However, the way of conceiving the influence of the past in the present is different. Re-appropriations of hermeneutics motives, by the way, have been a characteristic mark of Bernstein's style since the 80s. See my "Derivas pragmatistas," introduction to Bernstein, *Filosofía y Democracia*. John Dewey, Madrid, Herder, 2009.

4. See what Bernstein says on "engaged pluralism" in p. 62. In some occasions Bernstein has also mentioned James's description of philosophical conflict in "A World of Pure Experience" (1904): "It is difficult not to notice a curious unrest in the philosophic atmosphere of the time" [...]. The passage, by the way, follows [...]: "always loosening of old landmarks, a softening of oppositions, a mutual borrowing from one another reflecting on the part of systems anciently closed, and an interest in new suggestions, however vague, as if the one thing sure were the inadequacy of the extant school-solutions. The dissatisfaction with these seems due for the most part to a feeling that they are too abstract and academic. Life is confused and superabundant, and what the younger generation appears to crave is more of the temperament of life in its philosophy, even thought it were at some cost of logical rigor and of formal purity." Saving some distances, I think that Bernstein subscribes a great deal of James's diagnosis, except probably the last sentence. *Pragmatic Turn* is a vindication of a change in which philosophy losses its purity, but not its rigor.

5. I don't think that thanks to the work of Brandom readers become more reflective about the Hegelian dimension in a pragmatic tradition. European thinkers as K. O. Apel and J. Habermas since the 70's, or more recently Axel Honneth and Hans Joas have contributed decisively to reconnect Hegel with pragmatism much more than Brandom. Interpreters of Dewey as R. Westbrook, J. Ryan, N. Cougahn, J. Good, and J. Shook have also provide new routes of study. Pitkin's reading of Dewey in "Was Pragmatism the Successor to Idealism?" (Misak Ch., *The New Pragmatists*, Oxford, 2007) however, it does not make the most of Dewey's legacy and prefers to demonstrate that Brandom is not really a Hegelian but a Fichtean.

6. To some extent, Putnam's readings of William James's radical empiricism and of John Dewey's theory of democracy mostly consist in a re-description of their theories in Putnam's own words. See Putnam's references to Dewey in *Ethics Without Ontology*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004, but also in "Dewey's Central Insight," Hickman L. & Spadafora G. (eds), *John Dewey's Educational Philosophy in International Perspective*, Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 2009, 7-21. If one compares Putnam's reading of Dewey with Bernstein's one in chapter 3, one could understand much better what I'm suggesting.

7. Bernstein's comprehensive criticism of Putnam in *Pragmatic Turn* (162, 164, 165, 166-7) could be used to justify these doubts. An important difference is that, in spite of all his criticism, Bernstein admits more or less Putnam's approach to the entanglement of facts and values. I think he grants Putnam too much. It could be possible to challenge some of Putnam's presuppositions from Deweyan premises. See on Faerna A., "Moral Disagreements and the 'Fact/value Entanglement'," in *Following Putnam's Trail*, M. Uxía Rivas, C. Cancela & C. Martínez, Rodopi, 2008.

8. Honneth does *not* appear in this chapter, probably the one where one should expect just to find it more properly.

9. See on this debate: Bernstein R.: "The Retrieval of Democratic *Ethos*," *Cardoza Law Review* 17/4-5, March 1996, 1127-46. Reprinted in *Habermas on Law and Democracy: Critical Exchanges*, M. Rosenfeld & A. Arato (ed.), California, University of California Press, 1998. See also Habermas's reply to Bernstein in this volume and also "The Moral and the Ethical: A Reconsideration of the Issue of the Priority of the Right over the Good," in S. Benhabib & N. Fraser (eds.), *Pragmatism, Critique, Judgment. Essays for Richard Bernstein*, Cambridge, The MIT Press, 2004, 29-44. I have tried to explain this debate in relation with Dewey's legacy in "Habits and Norms: Bernstein and Habermas on Democratic *Ethos*" (forthcoming). See also my "John Dewey and the Ethics of Recognition," in Hickman L., Flamm M. & Skowronski C. (eds), *The Philosophy of John Dewey*, Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2009.

10. "Persuasion is a Good Thing," interview with Wolfgang Ullrich and Helut Mayer in Munich, 1998, chapter 7 of *Take Care of Freedom. Interviews with Richard Rorty*, edited and introduced by E. Medietta, Stanford, p. 71. In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty have said: "Edifying philosophers want to keep space open for the sense of wonder which poets can sometimes cause [...]" (370).

11. I guess that James's works and character also inspired in Bernstein this model of knowledge.

12. See *Confines of Democracy*, Faerna A. & Del Castillo R. (eds.), forthcoming.

AUTHOR

RAMÓN DEL CASTILLO

Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia
rcastillo[at]fsof.uned.es