

The Philosopher in the Age of Noise: a Reading of Richard J. Bernstein's *Philosophical Profiles*

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Richard Bernstein has a unique gift of the hermeneutician in the purest sense of the word: 'he who maketh the unclear clear'. In this book, the tangled jungle of the current philosophical scene looks more like the gardens of Versailles. The paths, the crossroads, the blind ends are clearly visible. We are all grateful to him for this, and will remain so even if we find some of his signposts pointing in the wrong direction.

There are three positive (though not flawless) heroes in the drama Bernstein staged on this scene: Rorty, Gadamer, Habermas (in this order). And one many-headed dragon they challenged, fought and all but destroyed: the academic philosophy, the bodyguard of the 'Cartesian–Lockean–Kantian tradition', one which assigns to philosophy a 'foundational role' in relation to the totality of human knowledge, i.e. the role of judge, validator, and giver of legitimation. One which believes that to perform such a role is to discuss 'perennial, eternal problems — problems which arise as soon as one reflects'. One which gives special prominence among such problems to the task of making sure that we know well what we know, of separating true knowledge from mere opinions, of arguing away various relativisms which bar the way to a universally valid knowledge.

Now according to Rorty (and Bernstein follows him here without objection) the birth and the three-century long ascendancy of the Cartesian–Lockean–Kantian tradition was the effect of 'historical accidents, options and confusions' (for this read, unfortunate accidents, wrong options); its was a history without history, admitting only of such changes as could be prompted by other accidents, like the appearance of a new genius, or sheer boredom and sterility. Otherwise, the discussion of 'perennial, eternal

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problems' went on for three hundred years unabated, in a sort of splendid isolation from the twists of political or cultural history, so that philosophers could say in moments of self-reflection and with clear conscience that they kept supplying footnotes to Plato.

None of the three heroes of Bernstein's story is as outspoken as Rorty is in the dissecting, debunking and ridiculing of what they all see as jaded and moribund academic tradition. All three, however, come forward with suggestions of alternative ways of approaching philosophy. Rorty, with 'epistemological behaviourism' ('if we understand the rules of a language-game, we understand all that there is to understand about why the moves in that language-game are made'); Gadamer, through new hermeneutics ('to let what is alienated by the character of the written word or by the character of being distantiated by cultural or historical distances speak again', through 'argumentative validation by a community of interpreters who open themselves to tradition'); Habermas, with the theory of communicative action, exploring the conditions under which discourse could lead to a valid consensus. All three imply (as Bernstein (1985) brilliantly demonstrates in Chapter 2) that the alternatives they propose are not meant to provide better answers to the questions as phrased by the academic philosophy, but rather do away with such questions. At least one of them, again Rorty, says this in plain words: his alternative is one of an 'anti-foundational' philosophy, a strategy to prevent all invention of new foundations and the very concern with such invention; a 'post-philosophical philosophy'.

With all its genuine radicalism, Rorty's is an 'inside job'. The way he articulates his problem, the way he argues it through, the way he demonstrates the invalidity of extant approaches, are all validated and indeed 'made possible' by the very paradigm he declares in the end out of court. In the same way as the past blunders were the effects of unlucky accidents and wrong turns, the eye-opening operation of Rorty is a product of a particularly felicitous insight and means taking the right turn (or, rather, returning to the original crossroads to rectify the momentous mistake). Or so he sees the significance of his move.

We know what the hammer is (so Heidegger told us) when it has broken. We only need a theory of the hammer when the hammer breaks and disrupts the monotony of our innocent (untheoretical) routine.

What was the hammer here, what was its theory? What has been

broken? What was there before, which we did not have to ask questions about, because it just was, placidly and comfortably *zu Hand*, so that we could go on and on with our routine preoccupations? And what is it that has suddenly stopped 'just to be there' and by doing so made the old routine disconcerting? We may well start asking questions about it now.

I think the key question to be asked has been implied by Rorty. Bernstein repeats the crucial sentence; neither, however, pursues the question and seeks the answer. For a traditional philosopher, Rorty says, 'the possibility of *grounding* the European form of life — of showing it to be more than European, more than a contingent human project — seems to be a central task of philosophy'. Indeed. Here it is, the hammer that has been broken.

A hundred years ago the world was Europe's playground. There was no conquest on a similar scale in the whole of human history. Yet the most remarkable feature of this particular conquest was not its formidable scale, but the fact that — in Ernest Gellner's description — it 'was achieved without any total preoccupation with the process on the part of the conqueror nations. The point made about the English, that they acquired their Empire in a state of absence of mind, can to some extent be generalized' (*Nations and Nationalism*, 1983:42). Except for brief and uncharacteristic episodes of prestige-led competition between the colonizers, the subordination of mankind to the western tip of European peninsula has been reached as an almost natural process, without much thought, grand design, or particularly deeply felt need to account for what was going on. The hand which had done the job was truly invisible — it was too obvious, too evident, too smooth in its daily working, too *zu Hand*, to stir a commotion or to be fussed about. European domination over the rest of mankind was one of the equally natural dimensions in the harmonious organization of the universe, together with the superiority of 'more' over 'less', white over black, rich over poor, male over female, reason over passion, high culture over folk crudity and superstition.

Where are all these superiorities now? Politicians, journalists, sages join in the requiem and regret their passing — but none more poignantly than George Steiner: the state we are in now, the state in which we do not believe any more that the West is superior to the rest, steam to wind, whiteness to colour, men to women, rational to irrational, in which we do not hope that humanities will humanize, he calls — what else? — *post-culture*. Post-culture is, for Steiner, a

state of human society where values do not form a hierarchy, and the need for a hierarchy of values is rejected.

From Thomas Jefferson on, the politicians could, without further thought, appeal to the nature of man, all men, whenever they went about achieving their particular ends. Franklin Delano Roosevelt set to win his war under the banner of inalienable rights of men — and he knew well what that meant. But Ronald Reagan, under similar circumstances, may only speak, meekly, of ‘defending our way of life’. Perhaps the Soviet fortress is the only territory in the industrialized world which keeps the spectre of post-culture away; here the hierarchy of values appears unquestionable and so the politicians, again without another thought, may speak in the name of man and mankind.

So what has happened between then and now? Quite a lot, but two things seem to be of particular importance. First, the world ceased to be Europe’s playground. The limits of Europe’s military and political domination have been put to a practical test and proved to be confined, and hence visible and problematic. With them, all other aspects of the western glory to which the once unquestionable dominance used to lend authority, began to look much less impressive, and not at all ‘obviously’ superior. Second, in managing their own societies Europe and its offspring countries have found the way to reproduce by means other than ‘central value cluster’, ‘ideology’ or whatever other name the intellectuals wish to give to the rule of ideas and the men of ideas. With this, no powerful interests became available to rally behind the postulate of cultural unity. Somehow, preferences and choices between competing values have become less important.

If, therefore, the unquestioned certainties about the mission of philosophy do not look at all certain today, if the grandiose Cartesian–Lockean–Kantian design looks increasingly feeble and holds much less excitement for the most insightful among philosophical minds, if the very foundations and tacit assumptions of this design are now openly challenged not simply by solitary and marginal prophets but by thinkers so centrally placed in philosophical debate as Rorty, Gadamer, Habermas, if these foundations and tacit assumptions have become visible, have articulated into a problem for critical thought (another hammer has broken . . .) — it is not because philosophers have become wiser; not even because the old boosters of philosophical changes of fashion — boredom and sterility — came once again into operation:

and not because of a sudden bumper crop of philosophical geniuses. It is, rather, because the world in which philosophy operates has changed.

When Rorty writes that it was only a kind of philosophy which would 'pick out a given set of scientific or moral views as more "rational" than the alternatives by appeal to something which forms a permanent neutral matrix for all inquiry and all history', which denied that 'the True and the Right are matters of social practice' and made all reconciliation with relativity of thought systems into a punishable treason — he challenges the most sacred core of the western philosophical tradition. But the challenge is launched from the inside of man's protective shield of self-confidence, hubris, conviction of omnipotence, constructed over the three centuries of philosophy hiding behind the formidable might of the world it served. It was not philosophy which 'derationalized' alternative systems of thought; it was not philosophy who cast the beliefs of other races, nations, religions, classes as immature, substandard, primitive, in need of reshaping; it was not philosophy who transformed one particular (its own) relativity into the absolute. All this had been completed before the philosophy had developed. Philosophy did not establish the superiority of the western form of life; it only attempted to 'naturalize' this product of modern history.

What is happening now, and what lies behind the present crisis of the old philosophical paradigm; is the disappearance of precisely this 'evident' superiority which for the last three centuries European philosophy was 'naturalizing'. It is for this reason, rather than because of the weaknesses internal to philosophical argument, that the bustle around apodicticity of truth, slaying the dragon of relativity, discovering the rules which must be obeyed in the thoughts of everybody who thinks, seem to generate much less excitement than before, and that philosophers' promises that solutions to this long struggle are just round the corner begin to sound hollow. Thanks to the self-perpetuating ability of the academic establishment the war may well drag on, but who cares about the stakes? And who wants victory?

I have wisdom, what can I do? This is the question philosophers confront today. Accumulated over the long years, the exquisite art of elegant, precise reasoning, of civilized debate, of coherent argument — are suddenly left without an object, without a purpose. Are they just to be confined to the *Kunstkamera* of history, together with other products of human genius declared as curiosities and

aberrations in the past? Or do they retain some inherent merits (in addition to our own 'membership loyalty') which makes them worth preserving as a going concern, as a live action? If so, to what purpose all these splendid arts can be turned in our kind of world?

It has been said that the young Karl Marx selected Epicurus as the object of his doctoral dissertation, because he had to cope with the daunting task of doing philosophy after Aristotle; Marx himself faced the awesome challenge of doing philosophy after Hegel. Marx would not envy Gadamer, Habermas and Rorty: their fate is to do philosophy *after certainty*. No one tried it before. Not for a long time, at least.

So what do they propose to do? What can a wise man do in the age of uncertainty? Gadamer tells us that in order to clarify, expand, enrich our tradition, our home, the starting point and the horizon of our understanding, the site of our dialogical coexistence with the others, he can help us to preserve our tradition while opening it up to other traditions. It is in this 'opening up', in the on-going dialogue, that our tradition will become clear and transparent to itself. Rorty tells us that to guard our 'willingness to talk, to listen to the people, to weigh the consequences of our actions upon other people', he can continue the conversation which is 'merely our project, the European intellectual's way of life'. Alternatively, Habermas tells us the wise man can sustain this 'gentle but obstinate, a never silent although seldom redeemed claim to reason, a claim that must be recognised *de facto* whenever and wherever there is to be consensual action'. By so doing, he will help the 'determination to take up the struggle against the stabilisation of a nature-like social system *over* the heads of its citizens, that is, at the price of — so be it! — old European human dignity.'

This all sounds defensive, does it not? We want to save, to preserve, to sustain against odds. We still have formidable weapons for sale, but they are defensive weapons now. We have suddenly become poignantly conscious of being tradition-bound, but it is because the survival of this tradition is now at stake. It is this tradition which has been now 'relativized', has become one among many, has nothing to show as a proof of its dignity, but its own history. 'Our identification with our community — our society, our political tradition, our intellectual heritage', Rorty hopes against hope, 'is heightened when we see this community as *ours* rather than *nature's*, *shaped* rather than *found*, one among many which men have made'. Fifteen hundred years ago another empire laid in

ruins, another tradition was dethroned, another heritage vilified. Boethius responded with *De Consolatione Philosophiae*. He sought, and he found, his consolation in philosophy. The stern yet beautiful lady who came to his sickbed offered herself as the cure: 'I see no danger here', she said; 'He suffers of drowsiness, an affliction common to all disappointed minds. He forgot himself, but will easily discover himself again, once he recognizes me. To make this possible, let me first clear his eyes beclouded by mundane things. Having said that, she wiped up my tears.' The cure worked. Boethius found himself.

We live in an age of noise. In a world overflown with messages, messages with meanings which are in no way clear and carry no evidently preferable interpretation. Communication is difficult, as no authority is powerful enough to raise itself to the level of *common* sense and thus render one reading 'natural' and all other readings mistaken. In the absence of such authority the diversity of the forms of life does not present itself anymore as temporary and passing. Forms of life do not look like each other's stages or inferior steps, they do not offer much hope of reduction or subordination. They staunchly defend their autonomy, force to recognize their sovereignty and coexistence. In this turmoil, we need, as always, to find ourselves — only now it takes an effort. Philosophers wish to help.

In a world of noise communication is the main problem. How to maintain a dialogue when neither of the participants is willing, or is likely to be forced, to recognize the other's right to decide on the truth of the matter? Here, philosophers feel, their help is needed (*philosophers* feel, to be sure; perplexed as *we* may be, most of us seldom feel the need of a guide; we often experience noise as a freedom from decision, seek more noise, relish meaninglessness). They may serve now as well-trained and informed interpreters, making messages, phrased in unfamiliar languages, meaningful across the boundaries of linguistic communities. Language is now the prototype of forms of life; the profession of a simultaneous translator — the prototype of the role of philosopher. Rorty and Gadamer seem to be well satisfied with both prototypes, and with the assumption of real, or realistically plausible equivalence of languages they require. Habermas and Bernstein do not. They feel that the philosopher's job reaches problems the translators' work cannot, and need not, reach.

Having reconciled himself to the relativity of the rules which

guide separate 'forms of life', Bernstein would not renounce the need for (non-relative!) rules to guide the choice between the rules. And he wants philosophers to provide them (that is — to carry their authority on their own shoulders). 'How are we to decide who are the rational discussants and in what sense they are "rational"?' — he asks Rorty. 'But there are plenty of questions concerning justification, objectivity, the scope of disciplines, the proper way of distinguishing rational from irrational discussants, and *praxis* that are answerable and demand our attention', he insists. 'All criticism presupposes some principles, standards, or criteria of criticism', he reminds Gadamer. 'We need to gain some clarity about what are and what ought to be the standards for a "critical challenge" to tradition'. All his colourful and profound description of the postmodern world notwithstanding, Bernstein, somewhat mysteriously, stops short of accepting that it is not philosophy and not the philosophers who suddenly got cold feet and shirked their duty to legislate, to make rules and impose criteria. If they thought themselves in the past entitled to do such things, it was not for being more daring or courageous, but because they benefited from a borrowed authority — and because there was an authority from which to borrow. What Bernstein asks philosophers to do, is not just to continue their time-honoured preoccupation, but to commit a formidable feat: to patch together, out of their thoughts alone, this certainty which was once weaved out of political and military domination. It is naïve to expect philosophers' ideas to be ruling ideas once the philosophers have ceased to be spokesmen for the ruling form of life.

Like Bernstein, Habermas would not accept that the postmodern world rendered the difference between truth and falsity, right and wrong, irrelevant. He would not consign them to the museum of human errors. As a sociologist, however, he finds it equally difficult to believe that their outspoken denigration in the postmodern thought is another human error. Habermas takes the passing of the modern era more seriously than Bernstein; he remembers that the end of modernity means an end to a certain organization of the world society, certain structure of domination, and not just the passing of a philosophical fashion, however well entrenched. Again, postmodernity is not to Habermas just the ascendancy of a new mode of philosophizing, but a new figuration of human dependencies, which is likely to remain whatever philosophers do, and in which the old moral concerns cannot be tended to with the tools geared to the old social order. Old moral concerns are not outdated,

but they have not been satisfied either. At no time in the past, to be sure. Truth was ill served by the structure of domination from which it drew its apparent force.

The dense network of communication between ostensibly autonomous subjects now provides a new setting for the search of truth. If anything, the change has made the search of truth easier than before; the fact that consensus is the only authority one can invoke for beliefs held in the new setting, allows us to see much clearer than before why philosophical legislating, this metaphor of the stiff hierarchy of power, could not fulfil the promise of truth. By the same token we are alerted to where the obstacles to truth may be hidden in the new setting: in the concealed asymmetries of power, in the inner divisions of the 'consensual community', in inequality of its members, in the barring, or the withdrawal, from the discourse. The Utopian horizon of a discourse in which no one is deprived, no dice is loaded and preferential authority is removed (also, one would guess, preferential authority of philosophers) becomes the ideal of a communicative setting in which the *true* consensus may be attained. What follows is that the search for truth, in a postmodern society, is the matter for *sociology*: an inquiry aimed at the validation of consensus by reference to the social conditions under which it has been produced. In practice, the task consists in the *invalidation* of pseudo-consensus; a consensus reproduced under conditions of asymmetry of power — and hence one which does not satisfy the criteria of truth.

In the age of noise, it may help the philosopher to be a sociologist. If he wants to practise philosophy, that is.

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