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Review Of "Beyond Objectivism And Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, And Praxis" By R. J. Bernstein

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Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis (review)

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metaphysical dialectics of Marcuse, Adorno, and Sartre, and by using it to undermine Lacan's "phalocentrism" and "semiocentrism," and Habermas's ideal speech/communication theory. In this Marxist/deconstructionist light, Ryan interprets Capital: he insists on the interpenetration ("differentiality") of politics and economics, and rejects necessary ("decidable") historical laws. Ryan also examines Lenin's systematic misreading of Marx, where decentralized communism becomes the basis for statism, oppression, and transcendent truths.

Ryan applies this Marxist/deconstructionist theory to many contemporary issues. He considers ideological elements in everyday views of terrorism, feminism, liberalism, human rights, social planning, credit, and foreign policy. He criticizes traditional views of academic freedom, disciplinary study, and the relation of American education to business, and offers suggestions for "radical teachers." Finally, he explores common directions in Marxism/deconstruction, (Rowbotham's) socialist feminism, and (Negri's) autonomy theory in terms of human needs, agency, and social categories and organization.

Ryan writes with exceptional clarity, and raises indisputably important issues. However, his project suffers from four fundamental weaknesses. (1) Deconstruction, as critique of metaphysics, may be alloyed with Marxism (minus metaphysics — or any "ism" minus metaphysics) but it is not clear that this strengthens Marxism. Many have understood Marx's Capital, dialectics, and relation to Leninism much as Ryan does without reference to deconstruction. Ryan says people die for being Marxists but not for being deconstructionists; we may lament this injustice, but calling Marx a "proto-deconstructionist" while claiming deconstruction lacks a social theory seems unilluminating. (2) Ryan's arguments are weak, self-referentially naive, and cry for "deconstruction." His dichotomies — metaphysical/non-metaphysical, ideological/non-ideological, theoretical/practical — constitute a "metaphysical system of priorities and oppositions." Ryan never subjects his views to his own criticisms. (3) Ryan gives no argument for his leftist/radical political goals. Whatever one's sympathies, argument is needed (especially for sweeping proclamations that, e.g., connect Searle's philosophy to torture in Chile). While he claims that "revolution is not a party" matter (vie la différence!), Ryan appears a party man. He attempts to base his politics on deconstruction, but deconstruction is incompatible with this notion of basis, and all political issues are "undecidable" within deconstruction. (4) Ryan claims practical rather than scholarly goals. Granting this dualism, does the book succeed? I see no evidence to answer affirmatively, but perhaps Ryan does "keep open the question of revolution." This in itself is important.

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Beyond Objectivism and Relativism is a survey of recent thinking about knowledge and justification. Focusing on Kuhn, Winch, and Gadamer, Bernstein traces the emergence of historicist theories of justification in both the natural and human sciences. What
justifies a theory in physics, anthropology, or literary criticism is not, as Kuhn, Winch, and Gadamer have shown, its having been formulated in accordance with a philosophically established decision procedure or scientific method. Descartes and his logical positivist successors were wrong to think there is an ahistorical scientific method (p. 128). Any methods of justification which have ever been employed or which we can imagine necessarily depend upon at least some tacit unargued traditional presuppositions.

To many of their immediate readers, Kuhn, Winch, and Gadamer seemed to be urging a variety of relativism, arguing that all scientific methods and standards of rational justification are local and arbitrary. In fact, however, it has become clear (partly through the work of such later figures as Feyerabend, Lakatos, Rorty, Geertz, and Habermas) that the epistemological views of Kuhn, Winch, and Gadamer were not intended to support relativism and, moreover, do not. Instead, a theory can be justified historically if it can be shown to satisfy criteria of theory choice which have been (in a phrase Bernstein borrows from Rorty) "hammered out" in the course of past inquiry (p. 67). What this seems to mean is that criteria of theory choice evolve historically along with actual theories. The task of an inquirer, in seeking to justify a theory at a historical moment, is to discern which parts of his tradition — perhaps its art, its physics, its epistemology, or its sociology — are most plausible and worth preserving and to modify either his theories or criteria of theory choice in light of a judgment about what in his tradition is sound. The ability to judge or discern what in a tradition is sound is not governed by formalizable rules. Rationality has a "judgmental" or "practical" character (p. 74). It is more like practical wisdom, the ability to respond appropriately in various situations in which one is called upon to act, than it is the ability to prove theorems. Knowledge of what in a tradition is sound is more like knowledge of a person, in resting on long acquaintance and sympathy, than it is like knowledge of a fact. Finally, practical wisdom can be developed and exercised only under certain specific social conditions, as Habermas and Arendt in particular have emphasized (p. 169). Historical consciousness must be valued and encouraged, not systematically inhibited as it is in modern technological society, if practical wisdom is to flourish and justifiable theory choices are to be made.

Bernstein's summaries of both post-Kuhnian philosophy of science and Gadamerian hermeneutics are masterful: lucid, non-technical, and sound. Philosophers of both analytic and Continental temperament, social theorists, anthropologists, and literary scholars will all find work in fields they may have thought foreign to them made both accessible and interesting.

Yet Bernstein's positive account of the criteria of rational theory choice is thin and unconvincing. He discusses no concrete cases of theory choice which are rationally justifiable by his lights, and in the absence of any such discussion it is hard to see what his criteria come to. Vague talk about the historical "hammering out" of criteria of theory choice is empty unless concretely illustrated.

Bernstein's construal of objectivism as the thesis that "there is or must be some permanent, ahistorical matrix or framework to which we can ultimately appeal in determining the nature of rationality, knowledge, truth, reality, goodness or rightness" (p. 8) is both idiosyncratic and fuzzy. It is not clear that Bernstein actually wishes to reject and move beyond objectivism, given his view that we must appeal to historical facts in seeking justifications because of the very nature of rationality, not merely because of historical contingencies.