

Considering Richard J. Bernstein's  
Considerations of 'Pluralism':  
Philosophy in a Pluralistic Spirit<sup>1</sup>

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**A**cross the years of his philosophizing, Richard “Dick” Bernstein had much to say about “pluralism,” in writings as well as in conversations and in lectures. In preparing for this conversation, I selected three of his published writings for consideration: “The Varieties of Pluralism,” the 1985 John Dewey Lecture presented at a meeting of the John Dewey Society<sup>2</sup>; “Pragmatism, Pluralism and the Healing of Wounds,” a Presidential Address to the Eighty-fourth Annual Eastern Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association (Washington, DC, December 29, 1988)<sup>3</sup>; and “Cultural Pluralism,” initially presented at the 2014 Reset-Dialogues Istanbul Seminars “The Sources of Pluralism—Metaphysics, Epistemology, Law and Politics” held at Istanbul Bilgi University 15-20 May.<sup>4</sup>

In his 1985 Dewey Lecture, Dick ‘returned to his intellectual roots’, sort of, declaring that “everything that I’ve written since the early 1950s has been infused and informed by the spirit of Dewey and, more generally, by what I take to be best and most enduring in the pragmatic tradition.”<sup>5</sup> Much of Dick’s effort in the essay is devoted to setting out “the best and most enduring” features and resources of a “pragmatic tradition” forged, primarily, by the articulations of William James, Charles S. Pierce, and John Dewey. Dick draws on these resources to diagnose a then prevailing condition in professionalized academic philosophy that featured the decline and spreading displacement from prominence of analytic philosophy resulting in “the almost chaotic babble of competing voices...characteristic of the range of cultural experiences, including education” more generally.<sup>6</sup> Dick distinguished three responses to the condition (characterized in various ways as “post..”): Some perceived the situation as “a sign of dangerous wave of irrationalism and nihilism”; others delighted “in the present disorder and [saw] it as liberating us from the exclusion, hierarchies, and blindness of inherited patterns of thought and language”; others, among whom he included himself, “who [thought] that, while we must confront penetrating critiques, nevertheless, we can see the present as an opportunity and challenge for reconstruction—the type of reconstruction that Dewey called for”<sup>7</sup> in his

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<sup>2</sup> Richard J. Bernstein, “The Varieties of Pluralism,” *American Journal of Education*, vol. 95, no. 4 (1987): 509-525.

<sup>3</sup> Bernstein, “Pragmatism, Pluralism and the Healing of Wounds,” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, vol. 63, no. 3 (1989): 5-18.

<sup>4</sup> Bernstein, “The Sources of Pluralism - Metaphysics, Epistemology, Law and Politics,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, vol. 41, no. 4-5 (2015): 347-356.

<sup>5</sup> Bernstein, “The Varieties of Pluralism,” 509.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 516.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 517.

*Reconstruction in Philosophy.*

For Dick the need for reconstruction, of philosophy in particular, was acute according to a penetrating, trenchant diagnosis, with much of which he sympathized, by his University of Chicago schoolmate and thereafter life-long very close philosophical friend Richard Rorty – since professional philosophy, in Rorty’s judgment, had become marginal to ‘the conversation of mankind’.<sup>8</sup> The pluralistic babble of voices made for a situation so grave that “the most ominous threat to our everyday-lifeworld is the breakdown and distortion of any form of recognizable community life.”<sup>9</sup>

But Dick was not dismayed. Rather, he was excited. For there were voices raised in affirmation of the value of shared communal life conditioned by human plurality: Hannah Arendt, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Jürgen Habermas, Alasdair MacIntyre, Rorty, Michael Sandel (who took note, Dick pointed out, of how “members of a society are bound by a sense of community in large part by conceiving of their identity as defined, to important extents, by the community of which they are a part.”<sup>10</sup> More later about this matter of “identity”).

All these thinkers of import, each of them important to Dick’s own philosophizing, endeavored to embrace some conception of *plurality*—of ideas, persons, peoples, cultures—as essential to understanding shared human life; as needing to be part of any notion of political life that would be viable for wide embrace by socio-culturally and philosophically varying persons and groupings; and for understanding a *pluralistic universe* (à la William James). *Democracy*—democratic *praxis*—was the best means, Dick was convinced (by Aristotle, Dewey, Gadamer, Arendt, and others), by which to forge and sustain unified political life shared by diverse persons and peoples. The ‘pragmatic’ recommendation for best contending with pluralism? To “break out of.. ‘wild pluralism’ [“a pluralism in which we are so enclosed in our own frameworks and our own points of view that we seem to be losing the civility, desire, and even the ability to communicate and share with others”]—to cultivate *phronesis* and reflective intelligence, to learn to listen, speak,

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 517.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 518.

<sup>10</sup> Sandel writes, “To say that the members of a society are bound by a sense of community is not simply to say that a great many of them profess communitarian sentiments and pursue communitarian aims, but rather that they conceive their identity - the subject and not just the object of their feelings and aspirations - as defined to some extent by the community of which they are a part.” Michael J. Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982) 150.

and act with others in mutual understanding, a mutual understanding that can recognize and honor genuine differences.”<sup>11</sup>

In his 1988 Presidential Address to the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Division of the American Philosophical Association, Dick drew on his convictions regarding a U.S. American “pragmatic tradition” of philosophical praxis in once again endeavoring to “understand and gain a critical perspective on our present situation in philosophy.”<sup>12</sup> In this effort Dick took care to make clear that “pragmatism” was not, for him, “a set of doctrines or even...a method,” but that what the philosophizings of what, in retrospect, the in many ways diverse key figures had in common were “dominant interrelated motifs characteristic of [their] style of thinking,” motifs that Dick characterized as a “pragmatic *ethos*”: anti-foundationalism; fallibilism; the social character of the self and the need for (the regulative ideal of) a critical community of inquirers; awareness of and sensitivity to radical contingency and chance affecting “the universe, our inquiries, our lives”; plurality.<sup>13</sup> Returning to his diagnosis of prevailing problematic conditions in professionalized academic philosophy in fuller fashion than in his 1985 Dewey Lecture, Dick concluded, once again, that the situation was ably characterized as “Babel, a confusion of tongues...a decentering of philosophy itself.”<sup>14</sup>

The confusion was not to be celebrated, Dick warned, by a simplistic, uncritical embrace of *pluralism*. “For pluralism itself is open to many interpretations and we need to make some important distinctions”: *fragmenting* pluralism (“where the centrifugal forces become so strong that we are only able to communicate with the small group that already shares our own biases, and no longer even experience the need to talk with others outside of this circle”; *flabby* pluralism (“where our borrowings from different orientations are little more than glib superficial poaching”); *polemical* pluralism (“where the appeal to pluralism doesn’t signify a genuine willingness to listen and learn from others, but becomes rather an ideological weapon to advance one’s own orientation”); and *defensive* pluralism (“a form of tokenism, where we pay lip service to others ‘doing their own thing’ but are already convinced that there is nothing important to be learned from them”).<sup>15</sup> Dick’s recommendation of “what is best in our pragmatic tradition”: *engaged fallibilistic*

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<sup>11</sup> Bernstein, “The Varieties of Pluralism,” 522.

<sup>12</sup> Bernstein, “Pragmatism, Pluralism and the Healing of Wounds,” 5.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-10.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

*pluralism:*

Such a pluralistic *ethos* places new responsibilities upon each of us. For it means taking our own fallibility seriously—resolving that however much we are committed to our own styles of thinking, we are willing to listen to others without denying or suppressing the otherness of the other. It means being vigilant against the dual temptations of simply dismissing what others are saying by falling back on one of those standard defensive ploys where we condemn it as obscure, woolly, or trivial, or thinking we can always easily translate what is alien into our own entrenched vocabularies.<sup>16</sup>

Dick went on to affirm the importance of the pragmatic regulative ideal of a “community of inquirers” as a normative or ethical ideal, best practiced democratically, as of particular importance for philosophical praxis where diversities of ideas, voices, etc., prevail. Contrary to what prominent proponents of analytic philosophy had asserted (and imposed on philosophizing), Dick asserted with a pragmatist’s confidence that “there are no uncontested decision procedures for adjudicating the claims of rival philosophic orientations..Conflict and disagreement are unavoidable in our pluralistic situation.”<sup>17</sup> While taking care to note that “understanding does not entail agreement,” Dick recommended dialogical balance between and among styles of philosophizing, a balance governed by respect and civility.<sup>18</sup>

In his 2015 essay “Cultural Pluralism,” Dick ventured beyond a historic confounding situation of plurality in professionalized academic philosophy to a no less historic confounding condition of plurality (of ideas, peoples, cultures) in the U.S. American polity (and other polities as well). His agenda was to explore appreciatively the arguments for recognizing and embracing the plurality of cultures constitutive of shared life in the U.S. American polity that had been advanced by Horace Kallen (“a student of William James and a close colleague of John Dewey”<sup>19</sup>) and, also, by Alain

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>19</sup> Richard J. Bernstein, “Cultural Pluralism,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, vol. 41, no. 4-5 (2015): 347-356, 347.

Locke, in opposition to the idea and ideal of the U.S. American polity becoming and remaining a ‘melting pot.’ As Dick recounts developments, in 1908 James gave a series of invited lectures “on the present situation in philosophy” at Oxford University that, a year later, were published as *A Pluralistic Universe*. In the audience for those lectures were “two former Harvard philosophy students...Horace Kallen [on a traveling scholarship awarded by Harvard] and Alain Locke [a Rhodes Scholar from Harvard, the very first Negro selected for the prestigious fellowship].”<sup>20</sup>

By Dick’s account, Kallen first made his mark as an advocate for recognizing respectfully and embracing the plurality of cultures and peoples with the 1915 publication of his “Democracy versus the Melting Pot” in *The Nation*. Years later (1956) Kallen, echoing his mentor William James, would elaborate his arguments regarding “the dynamic and changing quality of different cultures” in his book *Cultural Pluralism and the American Idea*.<sup>21</sup> Sharing in what Dick had characterized as the pragmatist *ethos*, Kallen, too, thought that shared political life ordered by ‘democratic’ ideals and practices would be enriched by cultural differences properly attended to. Kallen’s project, Dick recounts, was taken up and enriched with argumentative thoughtfulness by Randolph Bourne.

*However*, it is of particular importance to me that Dick took care to note that “the cultural pluralists were primarily concerned with the democratic integration of immigrants from Europe and Russia—not the integration of African-Americans. The prevailing prejudice in America during the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—even by some progressive thinkers—was that the descendants of slaves really had *no* distinctive culture.”<sup>22</sup> Refusing to be bound by this “prevailing prejudice,” Dick brought forth W.E.B. Dubois (*sic*) and Alain Locke, “two of America’s most significant Black intellectuals...,” to include in his account their extensions of the idea of cultural pluralism “to include African-Americans.”<sup>23</sup> Both men “studied philosophy at Harvard and were deeply influenced by William James’ pluralism. Both became forceful critics of racism in America. Both argued that Blacks should take pride in their African cultural heritage.”<sup>24</sup>

Still to be noted (and here is where serious conversation is called for that, I hope, will enlarge my understanding and appreciation of Dick’s following through in

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 349.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 351.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 354, emphasis in original.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 354.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 354.

his philosophizing on his commitments to pluralism) is that Dick does not *engage* with any of Du Bois's articulations! He mentions *The Soul [sic] of Black Folk* (rendering the title of Du Bois's book incorrectly while also rendering Du Bois's last name incorrectly), though he says of Du Bois, "All his life he was fully engaged in the political fight to achieve full equality, respect and dignity for African-Americans."<sup>25</sup> What Dick writes of Du Bois does not fill a complete paragraph.

What he writes of Alain Locke does, at some length, while he notes that Locke gave a set of lectures on "Race Contacts and Interracial Relations" that were published after his death, lectures that "show how advanced his thinking was about the concept of race...Drawing on the scientific work of Franz Boas...Locke argues that there are *no* fixed factors—biological, sociological, anthropological, or cultural—that determine race...The concept of *human plasticity* is fundamental for all the pragmatists. In effect, Locke was *deconstructing* the fixity of the concept of race."<sup>26</sup> Further, Locke "shared with W. E. B. Dubois [sic] the conviction that African-Americans need a positive idea of race in order to achieve a sense of self-esteem, self-respect and dignity."<sup>27</sup> Dick goes on to conclude his essay by affirming the importance of the ideal of a "cultural pluralistic cosmopolitan society," an ideal that "can guide our *praxis*...Today during the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the ideas and ideals of the cultural pluralists still have a freshness and contemporary relevance. They have an even more universal and urgent significance."<sup>28</sup>

All to the good, Dick. However, I am reminded of Dick's having shared with me what was clearly a most memorable and influential challenge directed at him by an important mentor at Yale, Paul Weiss, who said of both Richards, Bernstein and Rorty: "You Chicago boys like to swing the bat. When are you going to hit the ball?" Dick offered serious considerations of affirmative ideas, even ideals, of "pluralism," but, at least in the three essays I surveyed, he did not probe the challenging matters of just how diverse persons, peoples, cultures were to *live/be lived* such that a 'cosmopolitan' and 'democratic' polity might be made workable to the satisfaction, more or less, of all involved. What might be the terms, practically implemented, that might foster the achievement of a "cosmopolitan" 'unity in diversity'? And given Dick's seeming suspicion regarding what more than a few, even among his close colleagues, objected to as 'the politics of identity,' I am unsure of his regard for Sandel's seeming

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 354.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 355, emphasis in original.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 355.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 355.

endorsement of the idea that “members of a society are bound by a sense of community... [in large part by conceiving of] their identity... as defined, to some extent, by the community of which they are a part.”<sup>29</sup> Were identities anchored in pragmatist notions of raciality acceptable?

I don't know of Dick's ever wading into these vexing waters even though he was host of a late 1990s New School conference on race (with contributions by Berel Lang, K. Anthony Appiah, Robert Bernasconi, and myself). My worry, too, is that when it came to appreciation of thinkers of significance who were not White, it seems as though their significance for Dick had to be by way of their proximity to canonical figures in what he took to be ‘the tradition’ of pragmatism, or to other compelling traditions of thought regarding matters of concern to him that were forged by folks European and Euro-American. I appeal to those who knew Dick well and know more of his philosophizing than I do to “rescue me if I'm wrong” (in the words of Maulana Karenga).

And let me hasten to add, forcefully, that my concern, my disappointment, is complicated by my first-order experience of nearly two decades of collegial relations and serious friendship with Dick that remain of abiding significance for me, my wife Freida, and our three sons. It is painful, in retrospect, that across the years of our friendship Dick never engaged me regarding the hard work I had taken up of engaging with notions, and valorizations, of raciality to contribute to the work he highlighted that was a life-long quest for Du Bois as well as for Alain Locke. I think, too, that Dick would have benefitted from serious engagements with some of the articulations of Du Bois, including: “The Conservation of Races” (1897)<sup>30</sup>; “The Study of the Negro Problems” (1898)<sup>31</sup>; “The Development of a People”(1904)<sup>32</sup>; “Sociology Hesitant” (1905)<sup>33</sup>; “The Souls of White Folk” (1920)<sup>34</sup>; “Whither Now and Why.”<sup>35</sup> My worry, of which I hope to be relieved by hearing from colleagues who knew Dick and his writings much better than I, is that Dick did not follow through on motivations from his pragmatist *ethos* to listen deeply to “others”—very thoughtful Black others—the

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<sup>29</sup> Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 150.

<sup>30</sup> In *W.E.B. Du Bois: Writings*, edited by Nathan Huggins (New York: The Library of America, 1986) 815-826.

<sup>31</sup> *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 11 (1898) 292-311.

<sup>32</sup> *International Journal of Ethics*, vol. 14, no. 3 (1904)1-23.

<sup>33</sup> *boundary 2*, vol. 27, no. 3 (2000) 37-44.

<sup>34</sup> In *W.E.B. Du Bois: Writings*, 923-938.

<sup>35</sup> In *Du Bois: The Education of Black People: Ten Critiques, 1906-1960*, ed. Herbert Aptheker (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1973) 149-158.



better to challenge and inform his own thinking. He swung a bat well in philosophizing *about* 'pluralism.' When and where did he 'hit the ball,' as it were, in following the urging of his friend Richard Rorty to take up the articulations of 'struggles for recognition'—and for much, much more—by various groupings that continue to make for challenges of plurality?

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