

Richard J. Bernstein's Two Great Sources:
John Dewey and Hannah Arendt

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Volume 7 · Number 1 · 2023 · Pages 304 - 314

Richard Bernstein wrote his doctoral dissertation on John Dewey in 1958. Pragmatism was not in fashion then, nor was it considered an altogether worthy philosophical topic. But it resonated with his intellectual interests and gave him a broad critical opportunity to question the conventional way of doing philosophy. The theorists whom he discussed extensively in many previous academic works—and who showed up decades later in his book, *The Pragmatic Turn*¹—usually avoided dichotomies between the mind and the body, the subject and the object, the separation between the external world and the internal world, the idea of representations versus reality, as well as the need for indubitable theoretical foundations and a long string of *etceteras*. Many of the mid-century pragmatists were looking for ways of getting around these problems, and some of them produced original ways of doing just that. Throughout his long career Bernstein explored many of their traces, becoming interested in experience, naturalism, the not-yet-coined concept of falsifiability, and the other intellectual approaches that were yet to come.

As he was already studying the works of Quine and Sellars, Bernstein noticed that there was some sense of a “*continuity* between the classical American pragmatists and much of the best work done by analytic philosophers [...].”² Years later, when he published *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, he was again using the pragmatist orientation that had helped him get past the “*sterile* opposition (and oscillation) between objectivism and relativism.”³

Bernstein had come to Dewey’s work through the writings of John E. Smith, a young professor at Yale, who had organized a small reading group focused on Dewey’s book *Experience and Nature*. “This was a revelation to me,” Bernstein wrote. Dewey “was a far more interesting thinker than I had been led to believe.”⁴ Around this time Bernstein had become a close friend of Richard Rorty, another young scholar whom he had met a few years earlier at the University of Chicago. Like Bernstein, Rorty was drawn to the pragmatists. It’s not a coincidence that both men were working hard to rescue the pragmatist legacy or that Bernstein would be the person who eventually defended Rorty’s efforts as being a revolutionary philosopher. Rorty’s critics generally misunderstood his work and questioned why he had abandoned the basic ideas of a tradition where he had become a well-known representative. Because

¹ Richard J. Bernstein, *The Pragmatic Turn* (Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 2010).

² *Ibid.*, X.

³ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁴ He replied in the “Interview with Richard J. Bernstein” (Roberto Frega, Giovanni Maddalena, and Richard J. Bernstein, “Interview with Richard J. Bernstein” in *European Journal of Pragmatism* vol. VI, no. 1 (2014) 1.

Rorty's perspective was radical and critical in a similar extent to Bernstein's position, he understood exactly what his friend was trying to do philosophically, and he fiercely defended him.⁵ In his book *The Pragmatic Turn*,⁶ he cites a line written by William James that, "Philosophers are, after all, like poets,"⁷ and he notes how Rorty would have loved to be described by this particular description. Inspired, Bernstein added: "They are pathfinders who blaze new trails in the forest." It is precisely why discovering these hidden byways of philosopher-poets that Bernstein—one of the greatest hermeneutic partners of both American Philosophy and Continental Philosophy—would find his vocation as the most cosmopolitan of the American philosophers. In my estimation there is still a debt in the philosophical world on both sides of the Atlantic on how to describe the legacy of Richard J. Bernstein. Now after his death, we must take care to reflect on his life and work and carefully see all that he has left us. Even if Rorty was the philosopher who eventually made the most consistent effort to bring back the pragmatist legacy, Bernstein was the decisive figure in rescuing Dewey's work, particularly his more mature writings. Moreover, after Rorty's premature death sixteen years ago, Bernstein was also the one philosopher who recognized Rorty's importance in the pragmatic turn in American philosophy as well as his revolutionary efforts of changing the American philosophical landscape. As he demonstrates in his own book about his friend, *Ironic Life*, he demonstrated that he understood his friend's work sometimes even better than Rorty himself.⁸

Bernstein was not just the most cosmopolitan of all the American philosophers—a proud pragmatist and one of the greatest hermeneutic partners on both sides of the Atlantic. He was all those things and much more: a critical interlocutor who found the core of his own concerns not just by making connections between theorists with seemingly antagonistic theories but also by forging deep and long-lasting friendships with many of the greatest thinkers of our time: not just with Rorty, but with Jürgen Habermas, Jacques Derrida, and Hans Georg Gadamer. He also found affinity, inspiration and diamond-sharp brilliance in the work of Hannah Arendt. As we will see, even if she didn't see herself as a philosopher,⁹ Bernstein knew

⁵ See Richard J. Bernstein, *Ironic Life* (Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 2016).

⁶ Bernstein, op. cit.

⁷ Bernstein, *The Pragmatic Turn*, 2.

⁸ Bernstein, *Ironic Life*.

⁹ In reply to Günter Gaus, Arendt says: "I am afraid I have to protest [...] My profession, if one can speak of it at all, is political theory. I neither feel like a philosopher, nor do I believe that I have been accepted in the circle of philosophers, as you so kindly suppose." Republished in Hannah Arendt,

that she was more than a political theorist.

Bernstein met Arendt in 1972, and he became seriously interested in her intellectual and political ideas when he was invited to participate in a conference on her work in 1977.¹⁰ Once he started reading her books and essays, he couldn't stop. He wrote that he was convinced that she "provides us with one of the most perceptive, eloquent, and phenomenologically sensitive descriptions of action, politics, and public freedom." He added that, "She is certainly no pragmatist, but her description of the equality (isonomy) of citizens, the public spaces of tangible freedom, and the 'revolutionary spirit' beautifully complements Dewey's understanding of the democratic ethos."¹¹

Yes, but what did Arendt really have to do with Dewey or the pragmatists Dick was so drawn to? The answer to this question might help us understand why he never stopped going back to the pragmatists—or to Arendt herself. Dick was not a religious person, but he understood the importance of religious traditions in American life. For him, the Jewish religion was his tradition.¹² He could see how Arendt had used religious figures like Jesus to convey new conceptual categories for politics.¹³ He always respected the Jewish holidays and had in his mind the tragic history of Jews. That might be the reason why he wanted to share this concern for this tradition with friends and family. As he said to his interviewers, "I am a Jew and I am proud of it. I grew up in a second-generation Jewish immigrant family in New York. I have never been in conflict between being a Jew and an American (and a

"What Remains? The Language Remains: A Conversation with Günter Gaus," in *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954: Formation, Exile and Totalitarianism* (New York: Schocken Books, 2005) 1.

¹⁰ She had died two years earlier, on December 4, 1975.

¹¹ Bernstein, *The Pragmatic Turn*, 28.

¹² See Bernstein, *Freud and the Legacy of Moses* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998) and *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1996).

¹³ She argues in *The Human Condition* that: "The discoverer of the role of forgiveness in the realm of human affairs was Jesus of Nazareth. The fact that he made this discovery in a religious context and articulated it in religious language is no reason to take it any less seriously in a strictly secular sense." And later on: "Forgiving, in other words, is the only reaction which does not merely re-act but acts anew and unexpectedly, unconditioned by the act which provoked it and therefore freeing from its consequences both the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven." And again later, "Action is, in fact, the one miracle-working faculty of man, as Jesus of Nazareth, whose insights into this faculty can be compared in their originality and unprecedentedness with Socrates' insights." Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958) 238, 241, 247.

philosopher).¹⁴ He wrote a book on Arendt and the Jewish tradition,¹⁵ on Moses and Freud,¹⁶ and lastly on Spinoza and naturalism.¹⁷

“Frankly, I have never considered myself to be any kind of ‘ist’,” he claimed, “although, of course, I have been greatly influenced by the pragmatic thinkers.”¹⁸ Nor did he refer in any other way to his own work. Still, he was well aware that he had to defend his deep conversations with the individuals he wrote about because these helped him to define his own core beliefs.¹⁹ Arendt was not a guide, but she was a partner in dialogue. He always had her on his mind. Sometimes, he wanted to review her mistakes;²⁰ at other moments, he wanted to claim that her views still mattered to us today.²¹ He regretted that her colleagues misunderstood her brave stand on polemical subjects as her coinage of the term “banal” for her description of Eichmann as a being banal because of not knowing how moral judgements were not Eichmann’s source of the actions that led him to orchestrate the “final solution.”²²

¹⁴ See “Interview with Richard J. Bernstein,” op. cit., 6.

¹⁵ See Bernstein, *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question*.

¹⁶ See Bernstein, *Freud and the Legacy of Moses* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

¹⁷ See Bernstein, *The Vicissitudes of Nature* (Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 2023).

¹⁸ Bernstein said this to Frega and Maddalena (Frega, Maddalena, and Bernstein, “Interview with Richard J. Bernstein).

¹⁹ Two citations are important in this regard: “It is not the murder of Moses that is the essential point, but Freud’s claim that this was a *traumatic* experience for the Jews. It is distinctly the understanding of trauma, and his claim that it was the reaction to the murder of Moses, that is the ‘essential point.’ This understanding of the centrality of trauma is the very basis for the analogy that Freud draws between the history of the Jewish religion and the ‘genesis of human neuroses’,” (Bernstein, *Freud and the Legacy of Moses*, 98) and then later, he claims: “And it is humbling, because Freud is claiming that we should not forget that ‘the beginning of morality and justice’ is intimately related to violence —indeed murder. (In this respect, there are affinities with Nietzsche, Benjamin, Derrida, and Arendt),” (ibid., 101).

²⁰ He said, “I also believe that the reason why Arendt’s report is so troubling is because it compels us to face the painful questions about the meaning of evil in the contemporary world, the moral collapse of respectable society, the ease with which mass killing becomes ‘normal,’ acceptable behavior, the feebleness of the so-called voice of conscience, the subtle forms of complicity and cooperation that ‘go along’ with murderous deeds. These, unfortunately, are not issues restricted to Nazi horrors. They are still with us, and demand that we struggle with them over and over again,” (Bernstein, *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question*, 159).

²¹ Ibid., 151.

²² See Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem. A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994).

Bernstein declared that both Arendt and Dewey were preoccupied with the same two subjects: democracy and pluralism.²³ They also had in common the idea that the United States should be thought of as an experiment on the idea of “republicanism” in democracy. Both Arendt and Dewey were mavericks in their own way. Bernstein once confessed that he found Dewey “appealing” [his word] because of “his commitment to a radical democracy that involves the active participation of all citizens.”

As for Arendt: When the German journalist Günther Gaus interviewed her on television, describing her as a philosopher, she said: “I am afraid I have to protest [...] My profession, if one can speak of it at all, is political theory. I neither feel like a philosopher, nor do I believe that I have been accepted in the circle of philosophers, as you so kindly suppose.”²⁴ Politics and history were her deepest interests, and she thought that there was a “vital tension”—by which she seemed to imply some essential friction—“between philosophy and politics.”²⁵ Arendt tended to avoid the traditional philosophical way of framing problems and was concerned with the historical contingencies that are inevitable consequences of our political decisions. She had a deep understanding of the European past and her present, and she had always been involved in discussions with friends and colleagues about the important aspects of American life. I point out that Bernstein acknowledged often she was not always right.

Bernstein combined his interest in Hannah Arendt’s writings with his work on the pragmatist philosophers, in particular, John Dewey. Certainly, Arendt herself had some familiarity with Dewey’s work, as Bernstein explicitly made this point in the speech he gave at my University in Mexico City in March 2018, when he received a *Doctorate Honoris Causa* degree.²⁶ Like Bernstein’s attachment to the Jewish tradition, Arendt wanted to rescue the historical traditions that were dearest to her—the Roman and the Greek—without nostalgia but with originality and care. Her ideas about how politics should be about speech and action came from the Greek way of conceptualizing democracy.

In an interview published in the *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy*, Bernstein pointed out that he was attracted to Dewey because he had “rich

²³ Bernstein, *Pragmatic Encounters* (New York and London: Routledge, 2016) 6.

²⁴ Arendt, *Essays in Understanding*, op. cit., 3.

²⁵ As she corrected a German journalist who interviewed her on television: Arendt, “What Remains? The Language Remains: A Conversation with Günther Gaus” in *Essays in Understanding*, ibid.

²⁶ See his published speech: Richard J. Bernstein, “Acceptance Speech. Doctorate *Honoris Causa*. Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana. Marzo 12, 2018,” *Signos filosóficos*, vol. XX, no. 40 (July-December 2018): 30-33.

conception of experience.”²⁷ “Experience” was also important to Arendt, as she claimed that the Greeks—mainly Plato—were wrong to think that the concept of authority could be traced to the notion of truth, as a result of which the “Philosopher” became their ultimate authoritative figure. Arendt thought that Aristotle was also wrong because his conservative traditionalism led him to privilege the figure of the “Teacher” as a hierarchical way of understanding authority. Arendt argued that, for the political experience of the Romans, the founding of their city was the true source of authority, with new versions or new perspectives—that is, new beginnings—shared by all citizens.²⁸

For Bernstein, democracy was possible only if it could articulate on an institutional level the practices that enabled speech with action as its permanent feature. Like Dewey, he understood democracy as being more than a form of government. He loved to quote Dewey as saying that democracy was also a “way of life,” and he claimed that, “The Founding Fathers of the United States did not think of themselves as creating a democracy, but rather a new *republic*.”²⁹ The practices and institutions of the republic—the “American experiment,” as it is often called—were Arendt’s political obsessions.³⁰ When she argued in favor of politics, she explained how collective action can become a form of shared power. When she praised Montesquieu for articulating the notion of “republican equality,” it was because, “the experience upon which the body politic of a republic rests in being-together with those who are equal in strength, and its virtue, which rules its public life, is the joy not to be alone in the world.”³¹

Bernstein defended Arendt’s “radical” conception of politics. “Equality is essential for politics,” she wrote; “we debate and act among our peers.”³² Moreover, for her, “The plurality of men, indicated in the words of Genesis—which tells us not that God created man, but [that He created *them*] male and female”—constitutes the political realm. It does so, in the sense that no human being ever *exists* in the singular, which gives action and speech their specific political significance, since they are the

²⁷ Frega, Maddalena, and Bernstein, “Interview with Richard J. Bernstein,” 3.

²⁸ “It is in this context that word and concept of authority originally appeared. The [Latin] word *auctoritas* derives from the verb *augere*, ‘to augment,’ and what authority or those in authority constantly augment is the foundation” (Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 121-122).

²⁹ Bernstein, *The Pragmatic Turn*, 70-88 (especially 70).

³⁰ See Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin Books, 1965).

³¹ Arendt, “Montesquieu’s Revision of Its Tradition,” in *The Promise of Politics*, ed. and with an introduction by Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books 2005) 67.

³² Bernstein, *Why Read Hannah Arendt Now*, 90.

only activities which not only are affected by the fact of plurality, as are all human activities, but are altogether unimaginable apart from it.”³³

Dewey envisaged conflict as a part of politics. He thought that conflict is not only ineliminable, “it is *essential* for the achievement of social reform and justice.”³⁴ Arendt, on her part, defined agonistic politics not as a way of competing, but as a way of inserting oneself into public life—and not with *heroic actions* but as a way of entering into a realm with others.³⁵ Yet *courage* is needed when the whole of society and its institutions are in crisis. In making this point, she explains that when the French court condemned the Jewish officer Alfred Dreyfus for treason, the writer Emile Zola reacted with “the resolute and dauntless courage [...] [and] stood up to challenge, combat, and finally conquer the masses.”³⁶ In her view, a feeling of conflict emerges in those individuals—including Zola and the military prosecutor that revised the case first, George Picquart, and then became his defense attorney. Both of them were convinced of Dreyfus’s innocence and the writer protested his conviction in the paper; but Picquart proved Dreyfus was not the traitor as his case was constructed because he was a Jew. Arendt said that Picquart was “not a hero and certainly not a martyr. He was simply that common type of citizen with an average interest in public affairs, who, in the hour of danger (though not a minute later), stands and defends his country in the same unquestioning way as he discharges his daily duties.”³⁷

Duties were in the mind of Dewey when he agreed to be chairman of the Commission of Inquiry into the charges made against Leon Trotsky in the Moscow trials in the late 1930s.³⁸ Dewey was not sympathetic with Trotsky’s ideology, but he thought it was his duty to “defend Trotsky’s right to public hearing.”³⁹ According to the story Bernstein told me many times, Trotsky was 78 years old when he “chaired the hearings in Coyoacán, [Mexico], which consisted of thirteen sessions held between April 10 and 17, 1937.”⁴⁰ Dewey rejected Trotsky’s explanation that any means are necessary to achieve a desirable end. Dewey understood that the ends and the means are interdependent, so he ended up claiming that “*democratic means are*

³³ Arendt, “The Tradition of Political Thought,” in *The Promise of Politics*, 61.

³⁴ Bernstein, “Dewey’s Vision of Radical Democracy,” in *The Pragmatic Turn*, 84.

³⁵ See Arendt, *The Human Condition*.

³⁶ Arendt, “The Dreyfus Affair,” in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York, San Diego, and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich 1975) 113.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 109.

³⁸ See Bernstein, “John Dewey’s Encounter with Leon Trotsky,” in *Pragmatic Encounters*, 50-60.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*.

constitutive of democratic ends.”⁴¹ Bernstein defended Dewey’s fallibilistic pragmatism against the way that the then-Marxist Trotsky thought of violence as the means to attain their revolutionary goals, and he concluded that, “Dewey knew that in times of crisis, there is an enormous temptation to abandon democratic means, to resort to violence, to use any means possible to achieve one’s ends.”⁴² In sum, Dewey understood “democratic ethical life” as an outcome of experience.⁴³

In remembering the work of Arendt, Bernstein tells us in his Introduction to *Pragmatic Encounters* that, “Darkness spreads when light is extinguished by credibility gaps and public lies, and [he invokes Arendt] ‘by speech that does not disclose what is but sweeps it under the carpet, by exhortations, moral and otherwise, that, under pretext of upholding old truths, degrade all truth to meaningless activity.’ In this sense, [Dick concluded] “we are living through dark times.”⁴⁴ Dick saw the Trumpian times coming, and Arendt’s words were the ones that reminded him how necessary it was to insist that giving up on the experiment of American democracy can easily lead to destroying it if we leave this project only to others whose goals are exclusionary. Quite the contrary, the only way out was to insist that intellectuals like him and others have duties to alert, to educate, to convince others to resist and by appropriating the political project and critically renewing it. It is in these dark periods that we should be thinking together and examining why institutions matter the most and we should embody them as we renew our promises to one another. If hope seems to have abandoned us then we must reawaken our commitments to the difficult experiment of making democracy a way of life.

⁴¹ Ibid., 55.

⁴² Ibid., 58.

⁴³ Bernstein, “Dewey’s Vision of Radical Democracy,” in *The Pragmatic Turn*, 86.

⁴⁴ Bernstein, “Introduction” to *Pragmatic Encounters*, 1-9.

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