

Talking It Over

By Kenneth Cmiel

Thomas Haskell. *Objectivity is not Neutrality: Explanatory Schemes in History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998. 300 pp. \$49.95.

Richard Wightman Fox and Robert B. Westbrook, eds. *In Face of the Facts: Moral Inquiry in American Scholarship*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998. 320 pp. \$39.95.

It's back. The revival of pragmatic social theory in the academy, a phenomenon beginning at least a decade ago, is now in full swing. For Richard Rorty and Jürgen Habermas, Cornel West and Drucilla Cornell, pragmatists have returned as important ballast for intellectual argument. In the past few years no less than three sympathetic intellectual biographies of John Dewey have been published, the best of them by Robert Westbrook, a co-editor of *In Face of the Facts*. The new interest in pragmatic social theory is fueling new interest within the academic disciplines. Barbara Maria Stafford in art history, Hillary Putnam in philosophy, James Kloppenberg, Joyce Appleby, Margaret Jacobs, and Lynn Hunt in history--all are among those suggesting that pragmatism is a useful guide for contemporary scholarship. No doubt Peirce, James, Dewey and Mead are looking on from the beyond and yelping à la George Castanza: "We're back in the game, baby!!"

Back in the game? The return of pragmatism? Was it ever really away? Pragmatism saturates so much twentieth-century American intellectual history that speaking of its "return" can appear odd. Yet, it is appropriate. Pragmatism has never been without its critics and certainly by the 1970s it had fallen out of favor in many disciplines. The neo-Kantian philosophy of John Rawls and the cultural relativism of the anthropologist Clifford Geertz were just two ways that academics distanced themselves from pragmatism. Early feminist scholarship and the neo-Marxism of the seventies were also often either indifferent or hostile to pragmatic theory. The two fine books under review here, both broadly part of the pragmatic revival, are indicators of how much has changed since then.

Objectivity is not Neutrality collects a number of essays Thomas Haskell has written since the late seventies. Such collections are often disappointments, [End Page 156] bringing together occasional pieces that do not add up. Nothing could be further from the truth here. These essays show Haskell gradually spelling out a distinct point of view. Haskell tackles huge subjects: modern professionalism, the end of slavery, how we talk about rights in the modern world. A number of these essays explore Haskell's defense of modern liberal capitalism. In his well-known exchanges with David Brion Davis, Haskell argues that the capitalist mind-set is a bridge to modern humanitarian sensibilities. In other essays Haskell defends modern professionalism against its critics, arguing that it was a check on capitalism rather than a prop.

If Haskell's defense of key pillars of modernity is one central theme of this book, another is his defense of a pragmatic sense of truth, what Haskell calls "moderate historicism" (p. 117). Objectivity, Haskell rightly points out, has been defined in a number of ways over the years. At

times it is used to mean disinterestedness, at other times hostility to subjectivity. Haskell reminds readers that pragmatists developed their own sense of objectivity based on the idea of collective deliberation. Objectivity happens because a group focused on a question can exchange information and debate. Such debate corrects false impressions and moves understanding closer to the "real" (even if it never completely gets there). Such discussion mixes fact and value although it should aim more for truth than edification, Haskell argues. Inquiry steps beyond mere whim or ideology via the corrective power of the group.

Of course, what the "group" is remains a relevant question. And here Haskell's epistemology folds into his defense of modernity. The relevant group for Haskell is Charles Sanders Peirce's "community of the competent." Autonomous professional communities remain the center of truth-finding. Professional discussion, in Haskell's view, can correct itself by constant interchange and the introduction of new evidence. This interchange is unsentimental and at times combative. Big fat egos often strut around. But what is important is that via the group wrong-headed notions (and big egos) will be filtered out. Properly run, professions head toward a consensus which approximates reality. Professional discussion is, Haskell says at one point, "convergence-oriented confrontation" (p. 197).

Haskell's project might be termed a defense of high modernity, the modernity of the mid-twentieth century. He is critical of postmodern sensibilities as well as critics of capitalism and professionalism. He correctly notes that in the late sixties and early seventies the dream of a world without professionals was voiced by segments of the New Left. And he is correct that this profession-bashing worked itself into academic scholarship in the 1970s. Responding to those debates, Haskell defends the old order, arguing that professionals do a necessary job pretty well, a "capitalist check on capitalism." [End Page 157]

I am uncomfortable with Haskell's claims about the ability of professionals to self-correct, although space limitations preclude an adequate discussion here. I will point out that this is not the only pragmatist position on the subject. In *The Public and Its Problems* (1927), after all, John Dewey explicitly argued that professional autonomy could be counterproductive. Experts, according to Dewey, could be as out of touch as any self-contained group. Democracy demanded a more active interchange with the greater public. More recently, Bruno Latour has made a similar argument in *We Have Never Been Modern*.

Haskell began writing these essays in the mid-1970s. Yet even the essays penned in the nineties reflect the same themes. This is, I think, unfortunate, for the situation has evolved. While the professions have been banged around a bit in the past generation, they have not collapsed. Doctors, scientists, even museum curators continue, without the same respect they might have enjoyed in the past, but still here nonetheless. They suffer from the same distrust that bubbles up against government and the press, institutions managed by the same upper middle class that populate the professions. It is further complicated by the lack of class unity among professionals: Historians routinely write critically of medicine while doctors tell their kids not to trust goofy humanities professors.¹ What all this means and how it works are questions not yet widely explored. I hope Haskell turns his critical acumen to this situation in the future instead of refighting the old 1970s wars between professionals and antiprofessionals. This will entail, in good pragmatic fashion, a new reckoning with new experience.

These essays are consistently of a high caliber. Haskell's discussion of the history of the word "responsibility," his very insightful comments on causation and freedom in the work of John Stuart Mill, and his discussion of the birth of the AAUP and academic freedom early in the century are well worth reading no matter what your politics. I disagree with perhaps every major conclusion Haskell comes to about modernity, including reservations I haven't mentioned here about his interpretation of capitalism. Still, his clarity, generosity toward opponents, and real effort to think through problems instead of recite clichés makes him the ideal debating opponent. The nuance is always impressive. I've already used his volume to help formulate my own views more carefully. I'm sure I will do the same in the future. If the tone of these pages are any indication, I can't imagine a better person to hash things out with.

The mix of fact and value in ongoing moral reflection is also a central theme of *In Face of the Facts*, although most of the authors here do not speak of "objectivity" in relation to pragmatism, preferring, for the most part, references to "moral conversation." *In Face of the Facts* is a harder book to [End Page 158] summarize than Haskell's. It collects papers presented at the Wilson Center a few years ago. The politics range from the center to the left. The authors differ on details of epistemology.

Still, there is a core to this book. Most authors sign on to the pragmatic mix of fact and value. Academic inquiry, they claim, should have an ethical base. The editors try to distinguish "moral inquiry," based on research, from "moralizing," which is bad, hectoring, and "untethered from responsible moral inquiry" (p. 8). In other words, a serious investigation of those quite distant from ourselves is a prerequisite to making moral claims. Several writers bring up the notion of "thick description," borrowed from Clifford Geertz. In moral inquiry, we must establish "thick" understandings of those we are confronting.

But while Geertz during the 1970s tried to distance himself from evaluation (not always successfully, of course) and defended moral relativism, these writers move in the opposite direction. We will not come to any final ethical reckoning, they claim, but we necessarily make provisional ones every day. Thick descriptions, combined with ongoing dialogue, can guide intellectual inquiry and establish the grounds for informed moral discussion.

There are a number very good essays in this book. Elizabeth Anderson lucidly explicates the pragmatist sense that ethical evaluation depends upon an understanding of experience while arguing about the ways that standard economic theory ignores the work of women in the third world. She also cogently states her objections to neo-Kantian and utilitarian alternatives to pragmatism. Nice variations on these themes are found in the essays of Marion Smiley and Owen Flanagan. Jane Kaminsky's is an insightful survey of Puritan attitudes toward linguistic practice. Alan Wolfe, more skeptical of the neo-pragmatism than the others, presents a lively summary of the issues involved. And Robert Orsi's essay on southern evangelical snake handlers is a thoughtful meditation on the different ways we might morally confront practices that will appear weird, distant, and deeply misogynistic to nearly anyone working in the academy.

The notion of moral conversation turns up in at least five of the ten essays. It is a term widely used today in the human sciences. And it has a distinct meaning. In the era of the culture wars,

conversation is a call to calm everyone down. It suggests replacing shouting with civility. It is striking how explicit this is in this volume. The calls for ethical conversation do not propose to get at "truth," or even "growth," as Dewey used to say. There is none of the teleology one finds in the first-wave pragmatists. No talk of "progress." Conversation is a way to make everyone feel listened to. It negotiates compromise amid deep difference.

Conversation is only one of a number of ways to think about communicative interchange and it is the most pacific of them all. Ancient dialectics were [End Page 159] far more macho, the goal of philosophical dialogue was to pummel an opponent. Athenian assemblies debated, a term also implying far more contention than "conversation."² "Argument" is another possibility (and the political theorist Marion Smiley, in her essay, does talk about "open argument" rather than conversation). Menippean satire, as Mikhail Bakhtin once observed, could be scatological, insulting, and dialogic at the same time.³ The same, of course, could be said of the African-American dozens.

Haskell, who wants pointed debate among professionals, is skeptical of such calls to conversation. He notes, correctly, that its present-day usage is largely therapeutic, a way to make people feel a part of the process (pp. 196-200). If Haskell's book is a defense of high modernity, claiming that we should let the professionals discuss issues by themselves because they are best situated to find some semblance of truth, *In Face of the Facts* is an expression of what might be called late modernity. It remains generally hostile to postmodernism yet it takes the inalterable plurality of the world for granted. Conversation does not lead to truth or consensus; it is simply the alternative to civil war. As Joan Williams observes in another of the thoughtful essays in this book, explicit moral conversation can "help us understand people whose assumptions and conclusions are very different from our own" (p. 265).

Comity is a fine goal but can "moral conversation" really deliver? The contributors to *In Face of the Facts* span a political range but the editors didn't do anything so "crazy" as to include a Republican. Several of the essays ritually flog the right, indicating who wasn't invited to the party. This is not to say that the staff at the American Enterprise Institute would have wanted to pop over to the Smithsonian to chat ethics. But it makes the goal of comity a harder one to inclusively implement. What if you hold a conversation and no one comes?

If the right wasn't invited, the left is skeptical. On the left, very different metaphors are now often used to describe political interchange. The interest by theorists like Chantal Mouffe and Jacques Derrida in Carl Schmitt's definition of politics as a fight between friends and enemies is one example. Current interest in Hannah Arendt's understanding of republican debate as essentially aesthetic and agonistic is another. Both posit a politics closer to confrontation than conversation. It should not be a surprise that one of the contributors furthest to the left in *In Face of the Facts*--Elizabeth Anderson--ends her article with an attack on deliberative theories of democracy and a call to listen to the testimony of those not usually included. Anderson is right to stress the differences between deliberation and testimony--one is about dialogic exchange whereas the other is about the telling of hard truths. Anderson waffles in her attack on deliberation. When challenged by Alan Wolfe, she retreats in a footnote to the deliberative model of the jury, thus [End Page 160] undercutting her earlier criticisms. Yet if this is not the best

worked out section of her essay, the fact that she even raises the issue is indicative of the left's current skepticism about conversational politics.

The contemporary revival of pragmatism is not one thing at all. There are, at least, two great divides inside it--one about how radical it might be, the other about ways of knowing. These divisions do not neatly map onto each other. Politically, it is a debate between people like Haskell and Anderson, one pushing to the political center, the other much more challenging of contemporary practice. This divide plays out in a variety of places today, with the particulars shifting but the general distinction in place. It marks the gap between the pragmatism of Richard Rorty and Cornel West, or of Richard Bernstein and Drucilla Cornell, or between Alan Ryan's reading of Dewey as a liberal and Robert Westbrook's sense that Dewey was a more radical participatory democrat.

A second great divide is over epistemology. For one group neo-pragmatism is somehow connected to modernity while the other sees it as a postmodern resource. *In Face of the Facts* and *Objectivity is not Neutrality* give us able presentations of the former. For while the two books differ in important ways, they also share a lot, not least of which is a basic distrust of postmodern thinking. Both books stress the interplay of fact and value. Both are sober and responsible. Both highlight the importance of "experience" and even, in Haskell's case, "common sense." Postmodern neo-pragmatism, on the other hand, stresses the creativity of pragmatism, the anti-foundationalism of the philosophy. It is more aesthetic than sober. What is important about this pragmatism is its anti-realism. What matters is not cumulative experience but poetry, the prophetic visions that gradually shift the metaphors that govern our worldviews. This neo-pragmatism takes off from Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* and can be seen in the work of James Livingston, Drucilla Cornell, and Stanley Cavell, among others.

But don't we need both pragmatisms? Both Haskell and the authors of *In Face of the Facts* want to pull moral reckoning back to lived experience. Certainly, given the culture wars of recent years, it appears that Westbrook and Fox are onto something. Stopping us from spinning into deeper discord is certainly a decent goal. Yet isn't it also limited? Don't new truths enter the world when we can imagine a new way of being, when we leap beyond what we've experienced? Rosa Parks didn't need thick descriptions to tell her what was wrong with Southern apartheid. She needed the imagination to envision a different form of life and the courage to start enacting it. The ongoing revolution in attitudes to homosexuality began not because so much evidence was piled up on the experience of lesbians and gays. Only after a new vision appeared did the supportive research begin. [End Page 161]

Cumulative experience is an important stabilizer. We know how to get on in the world because we have experience in it. To needlessly deprive people of the comforts of common sense is an act of cruelty. And since this, in general, is one of the worst traits of intellectuals, the authors of these fine essays deserve praise for combating one of the key ills of their ilk. Yet while these books point out something important and valuable, I still think we need to add another layer. When common sense fails us, and it will, we need other resources. To stick too close to "experience" unduly limits our vision.

Even if moral conversation somehow soothes our rancor it will not get us past our current predicament. It is a holding pattern. Perhaps this is the best we can do now. It is nonetheless an uninspirational ideal. To bring something new into the world requires more--leaps of imagination, flights of fancy. Poetry, song, great cinema, and even the wicked parry of satire matter more than thick descriptions. To dream is to be irreverent to daily experience. At these moments, we need Margaret Fuller more than John Dewey; Thoreau more than Peirce.

Kenneth Cmiel teaches at the University of Iowa. He is the author of "The Hidden Meaning of Blasphemy" forthcoming in the Intellectual History Newsletter and is working on a history of attitudes toward information and image.

Notes

1. Haskell is very good on the lack of class unity among professionals at the turn of the century.
2. On ancient dialectic and rhetoric, see Pierre Hadot, "Philosophie, dialectique, rhétorique dans l'Antiquité," in *Études de philosophie ancienne* (1998), esp. 161-62.
3. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1984), 112-22.