

THE PLURALISTIC RHETORIC OF A PLATONIC DEMOCRACY: A REPLY TO WEISBURD

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I taught ESL in a junior high school where during Black history month the principal would get on the loudspeaker and tell the school how Malcolm X was assassinated, *simpliciter*, but that Martin Luther King, Jr. was murdered by a white man. I objected to an African-American colleague. "Pay it no mind," he told me, "everybody knows Malcolm was murdered by Blacks. When the principal says 'assassinated' he means 'murdered by people of the same race.'" Sure, *you* know it, I protested, but what about the kids? "The kids?" he replied sardonically. "They don't pay attention to anything that comes over the loudspeaker!"

In her essay, "Discourses of Indifference: a Case Study of Representations of Civic Membership," Claudia Weisburd argues that rhetorical examination of certain English-as-a-Second-Language texts provides evidence of a diminished conception of "civic space and membership" uncongenial to a conception of a pluralistic democracy.

In this response I will make three points against her argument:

- 1) Her peculiar choice of texts limits the generality of her concern and the plausibility of her argument. Weisburd, in effect, examines a hanging side of beef and imagines she has discovered a new species of biped.
- 2) Her use of supporting discourse theory is inconsistent with the theoretical base she invokes. Despite her mention of Wittgenstein and Bakhtin, she consistently decontextualizes the objects of her study.
- 3) Her argument supports an agenda that is at best only apparently democratic. By assuming her conception of "pluralistic democracy" to be unproblematic, she undercuts her means of achieving it.

ESL Texts are Lacking? A Simpler Hypothesis

A primary cause of philosophical illness: a one-sided diet. One nourishes one's thinking with only one kind of example.¹

ESL texts are written for narrow purposes, often with restricted vocabulary, syntax and depth of discussion. Though they may contain short selections from various disciplines, for example civics, or geography, ESL teachers are not using them, primarily, to teach civics or geography. Weisburd's peculiar manner of footnoting her citations does not indicate which specific texts they came from. Are her citations part of a vocabulary development exercise? Or even a rewriting exercise in grammatical transformation? We cannot tell. (Azar's book is an English grammar. Should we expect it to provide a "discourse space" for civics? Why not for topology or eschatology?)

ESL texts are residues of what I would call, "constrained discourses." They are constrained not only by the interests of their writers and presumed users, by what their editors and publishers imagine to be "market considerations." Modern ESL texts must be "topical" — a marketing plus. Thus, they must incorporate aspects of that conceptual confusion that passes for discussion of social issues, for

example ethnic, racial and other related pop-scientific categories. To be appealing to teachers whose use of them, after all, is to teach English, they must be brief, and consequently superficial.

Most importantly, they must avoid the “marketing minus” of generating controversy. They must look “interesting” but be rather bland: Cream of Wheat with cinnamon on top. Weisburd starts off looking for some stick-to-your ribs Muesli and wonders where all the nuts and fruits have disappeared to.

Why the difference between ESL texts of yesteryear and today? ESL texts of yesteryear were used in programs with an unapologetic mission: the “Americanization” of an “inferior” populace. Rather than bemoan a loss in “conceptual space” from the strongly asserted civic position of her early twentieth century example to her recent counterpart, Weisburd would be more consistent by applauding the latter’s sensitivity to alternative life-style possibilities, its lack of hegemonic presumption, or its multicultural openness.

Love is Hate: in the Beginning was the Word

It is most important that the tales which the young first hear should be models of virtuous thoughts.²

George Orwell’s conceit in *1984* is that the social structures promulgating the written word or the decontextualized utterance are so central to human behavior that a *Newspeak* could be imposed upon people which would control them even in their thoughts. There is a fundamental inconsistency in thinking that a slogan such as “Love is Hate” could affect the meanings of “love” and “hate” and still retain its reconceptualizing force. Perhaps, in such a world, people might come to use, say, “Blerg,” in the manner in which they had formerly used *love*. Similarly, for, say, “Yuchh” and *hate*. What would be needed would be a not unusual poetical ability and experience in situations where “I blerg you,” or “My blerg is undying,” or, most important, “Big Brother, whom we yuchh, does not blerg us,” would be useful expressions. Then it would not matter that everyone agreed that “Love is Hate” because *love* and *hate* would have come to have little conceptual content except as a slogan of a yuchhful government.

A reasonable analysis of a text requires as much attention as possible to the social circumstances in which its production took place. Intellectual delusions about the potency of texts in and of themselves, mere discursive residues, are shared by ideologues of all stripes. There is little evidence, however, that any behavioral change apparently brought about through rhetorical means long persists without coercive supports. It is often the sword which supports the mightiness of the word. Otherwise publication could supplant preaching at far less cost.

There is a problem with the move from talking about “discourse,” a non-count (or mass) noun in the singular, to talking about “discourses” in the plural. It is much the same as the move from talking about “behavior” to that of talking about “behaviors.” It presumes some consensus on a taxonomy of discourse-types. Thus, a theory of discourse-types is surreptitiously introduced by Weisburd into an argument whose conclusions may depend sensitively upon a clear individuation of such types.

It is one thing to understand, in general, that discourse is embedded in interaction and situation, and that it is to some extent constituted by the gestures, postures, utterances and texts whose residues tend to be mistaken for the whole of discourse. It is quite another thing to imagine that talk of discourse-types at this point in history is any less metaphorical than the notion of “space,” as in “civic space.”

The Dictatorship of the Rhetorically Sensitive

Let the censors receive any tale of fiction which is good, and reject the bad; and we will desire mothers and nurses to tell their children the authorized ones only.³

Weisburd complains that her examples from ESL texts exhibit substantial use of nominalization and passive voice to suppress the identity of the agent or of the rival. Again, coming from ESL materials, this is easily accounted for, that is, it would raise controversy and suppress sales. Far more important is Weisburd's own use of nominalization and passive voice in her essay. It is extensive and obscures the problematic nature of her assumptions and discussion. Consider, for example, these quotes from her essay: Formerly dictatorial regimes *are now labeled* democratic." By whom? Why the terms "are labeled" rather than "are considered" or merely just "are?" A substantial controversy is suppressed here. Consider also, "*Deeply diverse peoples* within nations *dismantle and reconstruct* political identifications." Who are the agents here? How well and how often do they act? Do they constitute a people, rather than a political party, or a group merely sharing certain concerns? What criteria support Weisburd's conception of *people*? What is a political identification? What is it that it can be dismantled and reconstructed? How much of this is other than tenuous metaphor? Might it be little more than hyperbole that generates, as Wittgenstein might say, little "friction" with a world beyond that of conference discussion? Rather than *hermeneutic* analysis, Weisburd seems to pursue a *hermetic* encapsulation against possible challenge from those who pursue a wider consensus.

Weisburd's grand concept is "pluralistic democracy." She presumes that "pluralistic democracy" is unproblematic to the extent that uninformed conceptions of race and ethnicity are compatible with it. (Note her assumption that *Blacks, southern Blacks, unions, American Indians*, and the like — all ESL textbook and therefore casual language — are unproblematic categories. As "common language," however, they often function less to protect rights than to maintain leadership privilege.) Weisburd then adopts the role of censor to identify texts that by some less than obvious criteria, certainly not democratically chosen, offend against the grand concept.

Weisburd's undertaking as a philosopher does not remove her from the primary danger of using unexamined, highly politicized language: the delusion that its employment is somehow more universally, more democratically, determined than by the mere exercise of power.

1. Ludwig Wittgenstein, Cf. *Eine Hauptursache philosophischer Krankheiten — einseitige Diät: man nährt sein Denken mit nur einer Art von Beispielen*, trans. Edward Roycki §593 *Philosophische Untersuchungen* (Suhrkamp: Frankfurt a.Main, 1967), 189.

2. Plato, B.Jowett, trans., ed. Louise Ropes Loomis, *Plato: Five Great Dialogues* (New York: Van Nostrand, 1942), 281.

3. *Ibid.*, 279.