

## Liberalism's Weak Agency May Put Marriage Plans On Hold

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The kind of liberal discourse Smith articulates is attractive to me, especially because it helps shed light on complex, nuanced problems that radicals and/or democratic Marxists have not addressed often enough. Furthermore, because I see liberalism's historical attempt to come to terms with the Frankensteinian power of capitalism as at least related to the Marxist project, it is possible to view Smith as family -- albeit not necessarily a close relative. Bowles and Gintis have written,

progressive social change in the liberal democratic capitalist societies has followed the logic of collective opposition to oppression suggested by Marxian theory, while adopting the liberal language of rights and the goal of democratic empowerment...Though often turned effectively against popular movements, the discourse of rights has framed the hopes...of ordinary people for three centuries.<sup>1</sup>

Bowles and Gintis continue by asserting that political history in advanced capitalist societies can be characterized as a collision between property and personal rights. Relatedly,

one may bemoan the...hegemony of liberal discourse or one may celebrate it...[However,] it has...been part of the discursive landscape that political actors inhabit. We use it as we will and fashion it to our own ends if we can, but we seek to escape it only at the cost of becoming historically irrelevant.<sup>2</sup>

So let us enter into relevant conversation with Smith.

Smith correctly argues that liberalism as a philosophy and political practice must come to terms with multiculturalism and a politics of identity -- phenomena that are based upon group memberships and claims. She begins by discussing objections to liberal theory; however, contemporary liberal theorists are quickly brought to the rescue. The objection that liberalism falsely posits the existence of an abstract individual who is allegedly free of social context is contested by reference to Kymlicka and Rawls. Although there has been an impressive development (since J.S. Mill, T.H. Green, Dewey et al.) away from the negative definitions of freedom championed by the laissez-faire liberals, the success of this movement in terms of dealing with brute historical problems is not universally agreed upon. The interventionist record of political and even educational liberalism is mixed at best. Its advocates have intermittently succeeded in giving capitalism a more human face than would otherwise be the case; however, this occurred for the most part during comparatively good economic times. The liberal refusal to see the crucial relationship of social class to the political economy and capitalist power does not inspire confidence in its recent attempts to acknowledge a person's embeddedness in context.<sup>3</sup>

Let us turn to Smith's statement that "concerns that the liberty and equality of opportunity espoused by liberals have never been realized in American institutions." I agree that failure to achieve all of one's alleged goals is no reason to declare them unworthy; however, the inherent weakness of liberalism's politics and conception of agency must be considered here. "[Robert] Westbrook... speaks to Dewey's intellectual insight but lack of a politics of agency."<sup>4</sup> Dewey's inadequate political theory can be articulated as follows: after his having celebrated agency, praising intelligent problem solving and even championing democracy -- with emphasis upon the regime of capital as profoundly undemocratic -- there is no one to effectively forward his social and education project. "How will Deweyan actors be organized? Who will make up this collective agency that was and

continues to be necessary to contest capitalism.”<sup>5</sup> Contemporary liberals -- neoliberals -- such as Rorty, Rawls and Kymlicka certainly do not privilege social-class politics. The recognition that democrats and progressives must move beyond Marx’s proletariat is to be applauded; however, the various broad coalitions attempted in the U.S. and elsewhere have hardly turned back the most recent Rightist onslaught on past liberal-democratic accomplishments such as the welfare state.

Smith’s presentation of liberal theory’s attractiveness for multiculturalism is not altogether convincing. It is undoubtedly true that liberalism has recognized culture in reference to exercising individual rights; furthermore, it is well-known that this tradition recognizes different conceptions of the good; lastly, liberalism’s privileging of a neutral place for adjudicating justice claims has been rightfully applauded. However, the central question for this reviewer is: Has the recognition (from J.S. Mill through Kymlicka) of social contexts within which individuals make choices been equal to the scaffolding required by advocates of group claims in a multicultural context featuring a politics of identity? Such a politics is based on the assumption that those who are forced to labor within it have been denied voice in establishing conditions of their own lives and in determining their own identities. Identity politics is based on the assumption that *each* and *every member* of a particular group suffers similar if not exact marginalization/oppression simply because of being declared the “other.”

As we know, “otherness” has been attributed to various groups, e.g., members of social classes, racial minorities, women et al. Critics of social class and multicultural group demands have argued that multiple and voluntary memberships make group claims unnecessary and even unjust. Without repeating Marxist arguments for solidaristic collective action, it must be pointed out that they assumed that social justice could be achieved only through class action. If members of contemporary identity groups -- ones beyond social class -- can secure justice as individuals or even in small groups, then arguments for some forms of determinism attributed to social and physical contexts and structures would be weakened. Furthermore, if the tradition that Smith privileges takes cultural and social context seriously, then it must deal more adequately with the historic arguments of agency versus structure. How far do Kymlicka et al. want to take their recognition of culture’s importance? Have we arrived at Marx’s argument that, although human beings make their (our) own histories, they do not do so under conditions of their own choosing. Smith does suggest that “interrelationships between culture, socialized identities...and ascribed biological attributes are not always voluntary”; however, does Kymlicka’s assertion that “cultural membership has a more important status in liberal thought than is explicitly recognized” take us far enough to combat the brute injustices visited presently upon marginalized groups? Kymlicka’s realization that “it’s only through having a rich and secure cultural structure that people can become aware, in a vivid way, of the options available to them, and intelligently examine their value” does not seem like a profound accomplishment when one considers other intellectual-political discourses that have featured thinkers who have realized this fact earlier and a good deal more profoundly.<sup>6</sup>

Smith understands well that the liberal commitment to equal protection may not work well when translated into educational policy within societies that historically have featured unfair treatment for certain disadvantaged groups. Moreover, there has occurred a powerful reaction in the U.S. and elsewhere against supposed attempts by liberal governments to practice what Nathan Glazer has called “affirmative discrimination.” The failure of political liberals to adequately oppose the current reactionary attempts to roll back gains that made subaltern persons’ lives better, is not a hopeful sign with reference to interventionist policies vis-à-vis schools and society any time soon. It appears that most of the pressures on the K-12 schools in the U.S. are aimed at strengthening the reproductive function -- as it is influenced by race/ethnicity and gender.

Smith’s last section on potential problems with the proposed marriage between liberalism and multiculturalism makes me think she is a member of the extended family to which I belong. Her worry about liberals’ lack of emphasis on a *social* self seems right on target. Her reiteration of doubts over one’s ability or even desire to opt out of certain facets of cultural identity is supported

by many persons who have experienced and/or been involved in the study of cultural membership. Finally, she articulates honestly what I, and perhaps others, are worried about: “Are liberals still abstracting individual interests out of social contexts in ways that do not mesh with identity formation and social interaction?” There is much more to say in response to Smith’s fine paper; however, space limitation necessitates a quick conclusion. I rely on Robert Paul Wolff in order to express my concerns about the proposed marriage:

once men [sic] are persuaded of the *possibility* of aspiring beyond the liberal goals of distributive justice and the satisfaction of private interests, they will find themselves drawn to the ideals of community. It is shrewd of the philosophers of liberalism to insist that their world of private values is the only possible world. So long as they...maintain that fiction, dissatisfaction with the ideals of liberal society can be dismissed...Once the ideals of affective, productive, and rational community are defined, however, we see quite clearly that the dissatisfaction stems not from the poverty of human experience...but...from the poverty of liberalism.<sup>7</sup>

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1. Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *Democracy and Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1986), 25.
  2. Ibid., 62. For a radical, critical analysis of *Democracy and Capitalism* see, Richard A. Brosio, “Reconsiderations: Schooling in Capitalist America,” *Educational Studies* 23, no. 4 (Winter 1992): especially 433–36.
  3. See, Cameron McCarthy and Michael W. Apple, “Race, Class and Gender in American Educational Research: Toward a Nonsynchronous Parallelist Position,” in *Class, Race, and Gender in American Education*, ed. Lois Weis (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988). The authors explain their parallelist position as: “It holds that at least *three* dynamics are essential in understanding schools and other institutions. These dynamics are race, gender, and class. None are reducible to the others.” (23).
  4. Richard A. Brosio, *A Radical Democratic Critique of Capitalist Education* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1994), 514.
  5. Ibid., 509–10.
  6. The conservative sociologist, Robert A. Nisbet comes to mind. See his, *The Quest For Community* (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), *passim*, as a good example. One does not feel the thickness of community life in Kymlicka’s *Liberalism, Community and Culture* that one experiences in Michael Novak’s *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1971), or in Michael Cimino’s film, *Deer Hunter*.
  7. Robert Paul Wolff, *The Poverty of Liberalism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968) 194–95.
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