

On Pragmatism and the Consequences of Multiculturalism

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Mindful of the scholastic adage that whenever you meet a contradiction you must make a distinction, I immediately sought and found one.

William James, *Pragmatism*

Multiculturalism, as a demographic fact, is not something one can be for or against; cultural differences exist (as do similarities) and they shape and are shaped by the contexts they inhabit. One could, on the other hand, be for or against theoretical multiculturalism — that is, one could be for or against the idea that demographic multiculturalism can (or should) be translated into a philosophical problem and considered from the perspective of principles and values. Pragmatists are not against theoretical multiculturalism *per se*, but we are against the idea that this kind of social knowledge has direct consequences for the practices that are its subject. Faith in theory's ability to have an unmediated impact on practices located elsewhere, or theory hope as Stanley Fish aptly calls it, belongs to philosophers who believe that theory exists prior to practice and that it enters practice from without to regulate behavior within.¹ To assume that academic theory has uninterrupted access to practices elsewhere is to assume that theory travels without the aide of interpretation. Pragmatists reject this idea because, in our view, all practices are interpretative. When and where an idea emigrates, therefore, its consequences will necessarily be indirect because it will be viewed through the evaluative lens of those who occupy its new community.

This argument will strike some educational philosophers as odd because they are accustomed to the idea that their recipes for change will produce desirable results regardless of context. Precedent for my interpretation, however, is well established in other areas of academic scholarship. There is, for example, a long tradition in the social sciences that critically examines the role that research and theory plays in social policy formation. While the approach in this body of literature varies, most draw the conclusion that Dietrich Rueschemeyer and Theda Skocpol do. As they put it “social knowledge is historically embedded and has mostly had more indirect reverberations in politics and policymaking.”² I will reach a similar conclusion about the consequences of multiculturalism, though what I have to say could be applied to any body of social theory. I begin with the premise that academic theory is a practice and as such it is indispensable, just not for the reasons that many think. Since meaning is always a function of circumstance, the circulation of any academic theory is characteristically limited to scholarly circles. When and where theoretical multiculturalism serves a wider purpose its influence will necessarily be oblique because it is too abstract, convoluted and complex to serve as a *direct* guide for practice in public schools. If theoretical multiculturalism touches practice external to itself, as I will conclude, it does so when its vocabulary leaks into other forms of practice where it will be translated by local concerns into something other than academic theory.

I

For the pragmatist in the pull of non-foundational assumptions, theoretical multiculturalism has no direct consequences for other social practices because those practices are necessarily governed by endogenous values (norms, principles), not endogenous ones. Indeed, this body of theory has no direct consequences for its own practice. Texts that advocate for multiculturalism, for example, are not shaped by the values of multiple cultures because no one can read, write, or think without the starting point that a specific set of values provides. The most multiculturalists can do is advocate for “boutique multiculturalism,” as Fish calls it; that is, they may ask their readers to “admire or appreciate or enjoy or sympathize with or (at very least) ‘recognize the legitimacy of’ the traditions of cultures other than their own.”³ This appreciation, however, can only go so far because all points of view are grounded in local commitments not global ones. What this means, as Fish says, is that “boutique multiculturalists will always stop short of approving other cultures at a point where some value at their center generates an act that offends against the canons of civilized decency as they have been either declared or assumed.”⁴

What pragmatism asserts, in short, is the impossibility of escaping our interpretative commitments even when we celebrate cultural differences. Differences may share a mutual regard, but they cannot fully embrace each other without losing the marks of distinction that make them different. We cannot, in other words, abandon our core assumptions, values, or beliefs in favor of a position outside of all assumptions because no such place exists. All knowledge is built upon suppositions and the pragmatist would add that all knowledge is nonrepresentational because the things our words describe are not constituted by an essential property that a “true” or “correct” description will reveal. Instead all things are constituted by their relationship to other things and, since relationships are endlessly varied, so are descriptions. “The crucial premise of this argument,” as Richard Rorty puts it, “is that we understand knowledge when we understand the social justification of belief, and thus have no need to view it as accuracy of representation.”⁵ Theoretical multiculturalism, in this view, cannot provide an accurate account of multiplicity as it really is; all it will ever do is provide context-specific descriptions and interpretations that are limited and biased (as opposed to timeless and universal). Multiculturalism, in this view, is nothing more or less than a conversation of and about social practice and its assertions can only be justified by reference to provincial commitments, not by reference to some higher or purer epistemic authority.

To acknowledge that beliefs are fully situated is to reject epistemology and the strong versions of theory hope that frequently accompanies multiculturalism. As Rorty puts it, “the desire for a theory of knowledge is a desire for constraint — a desire to find ‘foundations’ to which one might cling, frameworks beyond which one must not stray, objects which impose themselves, representations which cannot be gainsaid.”⁶ Epistemologists, in short, believe that they have discovered a set of underlying rules that, if closely followed, will eliminate our disagreements. Pragmatists who are in the draw of non-foundational assumptions — philosophers, that is, who reject the idea that a common ground exists — find the all-seeing attitude of

epistemologically driven accounts disagreeable. What is troubling about multiculturalism, for example, is the assumption that it is possible to perch above different cultures and offer accounts of how those cultures understand themselves and their practices. Multiculturalists cannot offer descriptions of how their interpretative-others know the world, they can only present an explanation of how *they* understand what it means to share the world with people whose core beliefs and practices are fundamentally different than their own (despite the things they share in common). We cannot escape the insularity of our beliefs, in other words, nor can we evaluate our interpretative-others in a neutral way. Instead, our interpretative commitments provide the terms of evaluation against which differences are measured. Without these terms of evaluation — without the terms that reflect local preferences, values, norms, and standards of practice — there would be no way to recognize cultural differences let alone comment on them.

Pragmatists not only reject the possibility of a multicultural transcendence, we also reject the idea that academic labor can be justified by reference to its ability to stand outside other forms of practice and judge their needs. To assume that academic theory can improve behavior elsewhere is to overlook theory's *only* possible justification. That rationale is social and hence will always be contextual and historical. Academic theory is a form of social practice and like all other forms of practice it is justified by provincial norms, values, and beliefs, albeit contingent and shifting ones. As Fish puts it, "The theory project is coherent only within the terms of its elaboration as an academic enterprise, one populated by people who like to pose and present solutions to philosophical puzzles."⁷ When theorists assume otherwise — when they insist that academic labor can be justified by theory's ability to regulate practices elsewhere — they are simply trying to raise the imperatives of their local and partisan interests to the status of a more generalized public interest.

To justify academic theory in any other way — to claim, for instance, that academics spin out educational theories in the name of school improvement — is to over-estimate theory's possibilities. Theory, as Fish says, "cannot guide practice because its rules and procedures are no more than generalizations from practice's history (and from only a small part of that history)."⁸ As Herbert J. Muller suggested, theory works by replacing "familiar particulars with increasingly unfamiliar abstractions — it explains the *known* in terms of the *unknown*."⁹ There is nothing wrong with the practice of abstracting generalities from the particularities of everyday life. Indeed, this practice is particularly well suited to colleges of education where we present the unfamiliar world of public school practice to pre-service teachers. Educational theory, in other words, has a pedagogic purpose; it enables us to teach some broad generalities derived from the history of practice (because we cannot teach about present particularities). The hope driving the practice of theory is the hope of creating a professional cadre of teachers with specialized knowledge. The measure of our success, however, should not be calculated in terms of theory's ability to govern practice elsewhere. Instead, it should be measured against the ability of our students to turn the unfamiliar abstractions of theory into the familiar particulars of their newly found practice — by their ability, that is, to turn theory into something it is not. The ability to transform theory into non-theory is vital,

moreover, because teachers will not be entering a practice that rewards them for doing the work of academic theory.

To think more pointedly about my assertions consider, by way of an example, Amy Gutmann's article called "Challenges of Multiculturalism in Democratic Education." The author begins her argument, as most philosophers do, by drawing a distinction in the face of a contradiction. As she puts it, "Many contemporary controversies about public schooling turn on the clash of two apparently competing educational aims: securing civic values and respecting cultural differences."¹⁰ These aims are in competition with each other because the first seeks unity while the second celebrates diversity. Her goal, as she states in her introduction, is "to capture the partial truth in each and integrate them into a democratic conception of a civic *and* multicultural education."¹¹ According to Gutmann, "Integrating these two aims, and coping with conflicts between them, is perhaps the most formidable challenge for the philosophy and practice of democratic education."¹²

I agree that some educational philosophers may be troubled by the contradiction that Gutmann hopes to solve, but it is difficult to imagine public school practitioners shouldering the burden of this "formidable challenge." Indeed, school practitioners have no compelling reason to see a troubling divide between the aims of multiculturalism and those of civic education because their practice does not oblige them to search for puzzling contradictions. Instead, their work is defined by a web of activities that enable them to integrate multiculturalism with civic education without fretting over their incompatibility. When school practitioners notice contradictions, in short, they are not inclined to greet them with philosophical distinctions. As Fish says "That kind of urgency — theoretical or philosophical urgency — is not what is felt by those persons confronting the real-life problems for which this general form of inquiry is supposed to provide solutions."¹³ Academic practice may reward its adherents for overcoming daunting theoretical contradictions, but public school practitioners have no time or use for the kind philosophical exhibitionism that academic work requires and compensates.

Academic practice also compensates educational theorists for organizing their philosophical distinctions with a gourmet vocabulary that many school practitioners find distasteful (if not tasteless). For example, when Gutmann says, "Public schools have a responsibility to teach and practice religious toleration as *part* of civic education" she immediately translates her conviction into a couple of philosophical "isms" (as do I). As she goes on to say, "Both a universalism that respects particular values and a particularism that respects civic values can recognize this responsibility."¹⁴ The minute a school practitioner grasps the significance of Gutmann's argument — that universalism can respect particularism and the other way around — they will be caught up in the warp and woof of conundrums that educational theory thrives on. Nothing found in this tangled practice, however, will be useful to public school practice, but it will benefit school practitioners who find themselves in a philosophical seminar. As students of academe they might be compelled to ask, "How is it possible for universalism and particularism to live in mutual respect"? If we take the value that Gutmann assumes to be universal — the value of tolerance and, in particular, tolerance for religious difference — then we cannot help but notice

that what lies at the core of some religious beliefs is their intolerance for those devoted to other certainties. Or, we could flip this around and notice that Liberalism — a political system of belief that holds tolerance at its core — is not orthodox unto the world (as John Locke and other Enlightenment philosophers hoped it would become). Liberalism is orthodox unto itself and what it cannot tolerate (and what Gutmann cannot tolerate) are those who practice intolerance.

While practitioners in colleges of education thrive on philosophical enigmas, in short, public school practitioners cannot. Or perhaps it would be better to say, that when school practitioners wrestle with philosophical puzzles in academic seminars what they learn in that context will not be *directly* useful for public school practice because public schools do not reward the work of doing theory. What practitioners get rewarded for instead, to borrow a phrase from Michel de Certeau, is the everyday practice of “making do” in public schools.¹⁵ None of this impugns the reputation of academic multiculturalists because that reputation is based on the noteworthy contributions they have made to the smorgasbord of principled debate that is the trademark of academic life. Academics will continue to teach theory moreover because, as I have already said, theory is pedagogically useful. While educational theory is a productive way to organize and interpret our past, it cannot be learned without the aide of interpretation, nor can it directly enter practices external to itself without adjusting to, and being altered by, the values and norms of that new context. When teachers and administrators exit academe to enter public schools, in other words, the academic knowledge they possess must be bent and reshaped to fit the parochial needs of a *non-academic* tradition.

No matter how polite educational theory is, in sum, it cannot shepherd public school practice because it assumes its distinctiveness by standing outside the ways of thinking that are the content of that practice. For the philosopher in the pull of non-foundational assumptions there is very little about academic theory, or the ways of knowing it organizes and privileges, that recommends it to indigenous thought elsewhere; when and where it is recommended, in college classrooms and academic journals for example, what is recommended is a regional way of thinking that is different (as opposed to superior) from ways of thinking in other regions.

II

Theory hope, as Fish argues — “the hope that our claims to knowledge can be ‘justified on the basis of some objective method of assessing those claims’ rather than on the basis of the individual beliefs that have been derived from the accidents of education and experience” — belongs to those who subscribe to a foundational view of the world.¹⁶ Foundational theorists in education — scholars who are inclined to believe that public school practice must be underwritten by something other than mere belief — will, with good reason, object to my thesis against educational theory. Some will argue, for example, that school practice divorced from theory will become chaotic; others will argue that school practice is oppressive and that only academics can liberate it. These are all good reasons for pre-service and in-service training but, as I have argued, they are not good reasons for thinking that academic theory, *in and of itself*, will change public schools. My claims are premised on the notion that

theory is mere belief and that its utility cannot be justified by its relationship to some antecedently existing authority because no such authority exists. What validates theory instead is the web of supporting beliefs in which any given theoretical assertion finds itself. That is what it means to be without foundations — to be without, that is, a final way of judging whether or not our assertions are true to the world as it is.

This insight, of course, is theoretical and it has no consequences for practices beyond itself. As Fish says, a non-foundational point of view will not make us more flexible as some pragmatists hope. Non-foundationalism says “nothing about what we can now do or not do; it is an account of what we have always been doing and cannot help but do...act in accordance with the standards and norms that are the content of our beliefs and therefore, the very structure of our consciousnesses.”¹⁷ Non-foundationalism offers a description of the world (and nothing more) that will either persuade its auditors or not. One will either think that knowledge can be validated by reference to universal laws and eternal verities, or one will think that there are no un-interpreted givens outside of thought and that truth, therefore, is always grounded in a local hermeneutics. Adopting either view, however, will have no consequence for how you do whatever it is you do. This is because the theoretical practice that drives home distinctions like foundationalism versus non-foundationalism is abstracted from the substantive considerations that are central to daily life. Theory cannot generate practical solutions because it cannot, in its search for generalities, embrace the disarray of everyday practice that is the subject of its avoidance.

This does not mean, however, that we should dispose of the theoretical enterprise. As Steven Mailloux says, “theory is a kind of practice, a peculiar kind because it claims to escape practice. But the impossibility of achieving this goal does not prevent theory from continuing, nor does it negate the effects it has *as persuasion*.” While theory “cannot do the work (of clarifying, ordering, illuminating) claimed for it,” as Fish says, “it can nevertheless do work.” That work is rhetorical and deeply political. As Fish puts it, “The incoherence of a line of thought is no bar to its political effectiveness; like any other rhetoric (and rhetoric is what theory always is), it can be used as a weapon with which to club one’s opponents.”¹⁸ While I prefer to avoid pugilistic metaphors, my point is the same: The power of educational theory is rhetorical and we know it has achieved a measure of peripheral success when its vocabulary of description has leaked into practices located elsewhere.

Wherever a new theoretical vocabulary draws in practitioners who are external to its production, however, that vocabulary will not have been purchased wholesale, nor carried away lock, stock, and barrel. Instead bits and pieces of it will trickle down to public school practice and when this happens there is no guarantee that theory’s everyday words (as opposed to its gourmet vocabulary) will be given the kind of admiration or appraisal that educational theorists prefer. This is the price of acceptance that all theorists must pay; when and where a way of thinking is persuasive, it will be retailed in multiple ways. Consider, for example, some of

Gutmann's favorite words. She wraps multiculturalism in the familiar vocabulary of liberalism and assumes that principles of toleration and mutual respect are universal unto the world (or should be). As she says,

Toleration is an essential democratic virtue....It expresses the equal standing of every person as an individual and citizen, and enables democratic citizens to discuss their political difference in a productive way by first understanding one another's perspective and then by trying to find fair ways of resolving their disagreements.¹⁹

The trouble with words like virtue, respect, equal, and fair is that they do not and cannot have a general existence; instead their meaning will always be derived from the political scenery in which they are placed. Her words, as a consequence, carry no warranty because what is fair to the educational Right will be unfair to the educational Left; people will cash in on the idea of fairness in different ways and those differences will be entirely dependent on their political affinities.

When a new theoretical vocabulary seeps into public school practice, therefore, the role that vocabulary plays in changing that practice will be determined by the web of beliefs of those who adopt it, not by the web of beliefs that were central to its construction. New educational words can and do dribble into other contexts, but they will never drown out local ways of thinking. When educational change happens it does so because school practitioners already hold beliefs that enable them to recognize those changes as worthwhile, not because they have thoughtlessly followed the rule of academic theory. School practitioners who are already persuaded by the tenets of liberalism, for example, will find the everyday vocabulary of multiculturalism (as opposed to its gourmet vocabulary) reasonable because their web of beliefs already gives tolerance a central place. They will, as a consequence, be more welcoming of the way multiculturalism figures in their texts and curriculum than those who hold other political convictions.

What makes boutique multiculturalism palatable for some, in sum, is the fact that it does not offend against the canons of their civic understanding or their assumed civilities. What this means, in turn, is that practitioners who believe in a multicultural curriculum do so without the aide of theory. They are able to incorporate the vocabulary of multiculturalism into the *stories* they tell about their practice without having to wax theoretically because the appreciation of cultural difference is already close to their understanding of democratic education. If school practitioners tell stories about their daily practices, as opposed to giving them theoretical explanations, they are not the only ones to do so; narrative hugs every day practices in a way that theory, with its standoffish attitude, never can.

III

I will end with the conclusion that this argument has already declared: Reasons are regional, and there are no reasons that can be given to those devoted to other reasons. Educational theorists offer reasons for believing as they do and they frequently hope that, in their vouching, they have supplied a common ground for public school practice. No matter how well tailored a particular theory is, however, it will never suit practices fully clad in other reasons. When theory is appealing, however — when practitioners find the vocabulary of a particular theory somewhat

familiar — they may borrow its terms to dress up the stories they tell about their practice. If those stories are attractive it will be because someone de-robed academic theory and refashioned, from its remnants, a garb more suited to the particularities of local bodies of thought (and not the other way around). The result, therefore, is not that of “theory guiding practice” because theory’s unfamiliar abstractions, when translated into the familiar particularities of practice, will have become something other than theory.

What the practice of educational theory shares with that of public schools is that each is guided and justified by native reasons. Where they part company is in the fact that each has a different origin and hence different ways to justify their existence. When educational theory abstracts from the particularities of public school practice some general principles those generalities, while bearing some similarity to the practices they address, are necessarily far removed from that practice. Being similar yet different is what makes educational theory metaphoric. This process of abstraction, in other words, produces a figurative discourse (as opposed to a literal one) that derives its distinctiveness by standing outside the practices that are its subject. Theoretical multiculturalism stands outside the practices that are its subject and the attitude implied by that stance — the attitude that allows one to stand above the fray of cultural differences and orchestrate a common way of understanding them — is a stylized feature of all philosophizing (including my own). As Rorty says, however, theorists can play the role of the “informed dilettante, the polypragmatic, Socratic intermediary between various discourses,” or they can play the role of the

cultural overseer who knows everyone’s common ground — the Platonic philosopher king who knows what everybody else is really doing whether *they* know it or not, because he knows about the ultimate context (the Forms, the Mind, Language) within which they are doing it.²⁰

Philosophers in the pull of non-foundationalism will try (but not always succeed) to emulate the milder forms of transcendentalism associated with the dilettante’s style as opposed the style adopted by philosopher kings and queens. That is why we are inclined to think that — since theoretical multiculturalism is a fully situated practice and since, as a product of its context, its reach is necessarily limited — we are better off acknowledging that the work of this (or any other) theory is more suitable to academic practice than to public school practice. When and where multiculturalism’s vocabulary touches practices outside itself, it will be deftly re-tailored by local hands to fit its new context. If that vocabulary enables school practitioners to tell new stories about their daily practices those stories will be non-theoretical and non-academic and hence perfectly suited to the context they inhabit.

1. Stanley E. Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1989).

2. Dietrich Rueschemeyer and Theda Skocpol, eds., *States, Social Knowledge, and The Origins of Modern Social Policies* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), 310.

3. Stanley E. Fish, *The Trouble with Principle* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 56.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979), 170.
6. Ibid., 315.
7. Fish, *The Trouble with Principle*, 289.
8. Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally*, 321.
9. Herbert J. Muller, "A Note on Methods of Analysis" in *The Limits of Language*, ed. Walker Gibson (New York: Hill and Wang, 1962), 32.
10. Amy Gutmann, "Challenges of Multiculturalism in Democratic Education," in *Foundational Perspectives in Multicultural Education*, ed. Eduardo M. Duarte and Stacey Smith (New York: Longman, 2000), 312.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid., Fish, *The Trouble with Principle*, 286.
14. Gutmann, "Challenges of Multiculturalism in Democratic Education," 319.
15. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).
16. Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally*, 322.
17. Ibid., 324-25.
18. Steven Mailoux, "Truth of Consequences: On Being Against Theory," in *Against Theory*, ed. W.J. Thomas Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 70-71 and Fish, *The Trouble with Principle*, 290-91.
19. Gutmann, "Challenges of Multiculturalism in Democratic Education," 314.
20. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 318-9.