**Practices of Political Theory**

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It may be ironic that Clayton Chin concludes his first introductory chapter by adopting the persona that Richard Rorty characterised as that of ‘the “first-rate critic”’, one who examines ‘an optimal version of the philosopher’s position – one in which the holes in the argument are plugged or politely ignored, and the unfortunate side-effects of his work, or the side-issues she discussed, are trimmed away.’ (p. 21) Rorty introduces this figure in characterising Jürgen Habermas in a somewhat fawning review of that author’s *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, a book that exhibits none of virtues of charitable philosophical interpretation, but rather ‘readings’ driven by Habermas’ own philosophical and political agenda. At least with respect to the treatment of Rorty, no such complaint can be made of Chin’s book, which offers a detailed and highly sophisticated account of the development, strengths and weaknesses of Rorty’s philosophical project, even as it notes a feature of Rorty’s thought that he has in common with Habermas, namely, an instrumental or strategic relation to other philosophers and social or political theorists in which they read simply in terms of, and as resources for, the author’s own philosophical project. Rorty’s question is what is living (useful) and what is dead (not useful) in a thinker’s work for his own agenda. This feature – let us call it ‘self-assertion’ – of Rorty’s work is one to which Chin averts at numerous times throughout this book – and there is an open question here whether Rorty, like Habermas, offers highly partial or distorted readings of thinkers such as Hegel, Dewey, Heidegger and Foucault, and, if so, what hangs on this.

Chin’s focus is, first, on offering a ‘first rate’ critical reconstruction of Rorty’s own developed philosophical position and, second, on arguing for the attractiveness of this position for the practice of socio-political criticism. In respect of the first aim, he succeeds triumphantly. In respect of the second, I am more sceptical because here the question of Rorty’s readings of other theorists and Chin’s relation to these readings becomes more critical. However, for what I take to be Chin’s main aims, this concern may be less disabling than one might think.

Chin’s argument is developed in three stages. The first addresses Rorty’s meta-philosophical focus on the problem of justification, his critique of epistemology and his adoption via Sellars, Quine and Davidson of an account of normativity and justification in terms of social practices. From Sellars, Rorty draws the attack on the myth of the given and the distinction between the spaces of causes and the space of reasons, from Quine a holistic view of justification and from Davidson an anti-representational conception of language as a tool for coping with our environment. This set of moves not only makes the traditional form of epistemology redundant, but allows Rorty to introduce a linguistically articulated version of perspectivism through the concept of vocabularies conceived as relatively discrete (but not incommensurable) ensembles of linguistic behaviour characterised by a set of (alterable) conventions – distinctions, concepts, assumptions, inferences and assertability warrants – that enable and constrain practices of reasoning. It also leads him, as Chin stresses, to an antiauthoritarian picture of (normative) authority in which no vocabulary can claim final authority. In the second part of his reconstruction, Chin draws out the salience of, and forms in which, Rorty embraces a rejection of strong ontology, naturalism, and historicism as methodological commitments. This is accomplished through the construction of a quasi-dialogue with the work of William Connolly whom Chin represents as offering a counter-position to Rorty in which engagement with ontology remains central to the field of social and political thought. The point of this engagement is to draw out what is distinctive – and, Chin proposes, attractive – in Rorty’s view through a series of detailed arguments designed to show that this view has decisive advantages over Connolly’s position. In the third and final part of his reconstruction, Chin turns to what he takes to be the form of critical and normative thinking that follows from the theoretical framework, vocabulary and method that Rorty has proposed.

We can begin to engage with Chin’s reading by noting that the general meta-philosophical position that Rorty articulates in which there are no external guarantors of values or norms against which our social practices can be judged is hardly a novel position. The understanding of modernity as required to generate authority without such guarantors, to articulate normativity without foundations, has been a feature of modern thought at the very least since Hegel and Nietzsche and structures the projects of philosophers as diverse as Cavell and Habermas. It is notable that Chin comments:

Elsewhere Rorty criticized the broad continental tendency to treat modernity as ‘philosophical problem.’ For him there are no privileged criteria that can transcend the epoch in the manner this assumes, nor is there a deeper essence behind it. (p. 136)

This is revealing because, as Chin notes in a footnote, Rorty is referring to Robert Pippin’s classic text *Modernity as a Philosophical Problem* but the very issue that Pippin’s text is focused on is the problem of how modernity requires that authority be constituted without any external guarantors and how philosophers from Hegel onwards have attempted to address this problem. This need not assume any ‘privileged criteria that can transcend the epoch’ nor any ‘deeper essence’, rather it argues that modernity is partially constituted by the challenge of addressing the problem of justification (authority) in a context of pluralism but without recourse to foundations. Since this is precisely the view that Chin rightly ascribes to Rorty, it is both telling that Rorty fails to recognize the point and also that Chin simply assumes that Rorty is entitled to do so. This matters, first, because it situates Rorty within a broader philosophical terrain in which his project is only one of many that are seeking to address this issue and, second, because a range of important approaches to socio-political criticism are compatible with this general meta-philosophical view.

This makes Chin’s engagement with Rorty’s critical relation to Habermas and Foucault much more important than it might otherwise seem – and these are disappointing. Chin provides an acute description of Rorty’s criticism of Habermas’ project (the quasi-transcendental reconstruction of the idealizing presuppositions of communicative action as a way of addressing the problem of justification), but more or less no actual argument as to why Rorty should be seen as justified in these criticisms. Here Chin seems simply to follow and explicate Rorty’s claim. So, for example, he comments:

the claim that there are neutral, transcultural and transhistorical standards for validity within all language use that serve as the normative foundation of the cosmopolitan project is both unconvincing and authoritarian. … Conceiving it as a necessary condition repeats the problematic assumption of an appearance-reality divide in assuming that within all vocabularies there is a hidden core, a universal normative structure linking linguistic practice. (p. 174)

This substitutes assertion for any actual engagement with the philosophical character of Habermas’ argument. It fails to take seriously Habermas’ acknowledgment of the fallibilistic reconstructive form of his argument or, for that matter, the way in which Habermas draws on the pragmatist tradition in developing his view. The situation in relation to Foucault is not much better in simply adopting Rorty’s view of a figure we might describe as ‘Foucault’ who is a mishmash of Foucault and some of his American interpreters. What is problematic here is that Chin does not seriously engage with the question of whether Rorty’s criticisms are justified either by addressing Foucault’s work in more depth or in considering more recent defences of Foucault’s form of socio-political criticism. In a revealing footnote, Chin comments:

My concern here is not with the accuracy of Rorty’s account, though this is a persistent background question, but the role of this account in Rorty’s larger political thinking, his relation to continental thought, and its insights for contemporary uses of Foucault. (p. 256, n. 25)

If we take such a caveat also to apply to the consideration of Habermas, does this disarm my concern? It could be argued that insofar as one is concerned simply to offer a reconstruction of a given thinker’s development and the forms that their views take that this need not entail assessing whether their accounts of other positions are justifiable – and if this was all that Chin was concerned to do, we could perhaps acknowledge that it would be reasonable not to become bogged down in arguments about exactly how bowdlerizing Rorty’s accounts of Habermas and Foucault are, and what, if anything, remains of the critical force of Rorty’s claims when more plausible and more charitable interpretations are brought into play. However, if one is also seeking to persuade one’s audience that Rorty offers a model of the practice of socio-political criticism that deserves to be widely taken up, then I think that something more is required, namely, a comparative assessment of the distinct critical practices that philosophically addresses the justifiability of Rorty’s criticisms and of potential counter-criticisms. In the absence of such consideration, it is hard to see why one should regard Rorty’s practice as a superior alternative to these other practices.

At the start of the opening chapter of the third part of this book, Chin remarks: ‘While the preceding chapters established the frame of Rorty’s positive theoretical framework, vocabulary and method, this chapter outlines the critical and normative thinking that follows from those.’ (p. 155) But ‘follows’ can be given strong or weak senses. In the strong sense, it implies ‘entailed by’; whereas in the weak sense, it implies ‘compatible with’. Only the weak sense is plausible and we have no reason to suppose that the practice of criticism that Rorty develops himself has any privileged position in relation to those background commitments. What is clear, however, is that there are practices of socio-political criticism that Chin can take not to be compatible with these commitments – and it is this which defines his primary critical agenda: to reconstruct Rorty’s approach as an effective counter to ‘the ontological turn’ in political theory exemplified by the work of Connolly, and it is to make Rorty’s position attractive against that type of theorizing that drives his reconstruction. In this respect, Habermas and Foucault are simply not central figures for his purposes – and the ‘continental philosophy’ referenced in the subtitle of this book stands in for ‘ontologizing approaches’ to philosophy and political theory. Certainly, the level of argument and care at stake in relation to Chin’s construction of a Rorty-Connolly debate is in marked contrast to that on view in the consideration of Habermas and Foucault. For Chin, the contest between deontologizing and ontologizing approaches to political theorizingis where the action is – and it is this focus that makes this book a distinctive and significant intervention in the contemporary field of political theory. This view is reinforced by the final chapter of the book in which Chin concludes his study by returning to his critique of ontologizing approaches to political thought by considering the relation to Rorty’s focus on cultural politics to two varieties of agonistic political theory, a practice-based view associated with Jim Tully and an ontological view associated with Mouffe and Connolly. Building on his early discussion which endorsed Lois McNay’s judgment that Connolly’s ontologizing approach ‘results in a “socially weightless’ form of poltical thinking’ (p.151) that is both too strong (overdetermining his socio-political analysis) and too weak (inadequately prefiguring his normative arguments), Chin plausibly argues that Connolly’s approach involves a reification of the political that is both theoretically and politically problematic.

Chin’s achievement in this book is both to provide a detailed and sophisticated picture of Rorty’s philosophical significance for the practice of political theory and to pose a serious and sustained challenge to an ontologizing form of political theorizing that has widespread purchase within the field. It thus opens up a debate that may be central to the future direction of political theory – and that is surely enough to ask of any book.