

# Confines of Democracy

*Essays on the Philosophy of Richard J. Bernstein*

*Edited by*

Ramón del Castillo, Ángel M. Faerna, and Larry A. Hickman



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# CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION		ix
<i>Ramón del Castillo, Ángel M. Faerna and Larry A. Hickman</i>		
PREFACE		xvii
<i>Richard J. Bernstein</i>		
Part One:		
BERNSTEIN, RORTY AND AMERICAN PRAGMATISM		1
ONE	A Tale of Two Dicks	3
<i>Robert Westbrook</i>		
TWO	A Conversation between Friends: The Ironist and the Pragmatic Fallibilist	25
<i>Santiago Rey</i>		
	A Reply to Robert Westbrook and Santiago Rey	43
<i>Richard J. Bernstein</i>		
THREE	Two Tales about Pragmatism and European Philosophy (With an Introductory Family Tale)	47
<i>Carlos Thiebaut</i>		
	A Reply to Carlos Thiebaut	60
<i>Richard J. Bernstein</i>		

FOUR	Bernstein on the Narrative and Identity of Pragmatism in America <i>Gregory Fernando Pappas</i>	63
	A Reply to Gregory Fernando Pappas <i>Richard J. Bernstein</i>	75
	Part Two: EPISTEMOLOGY AND HERMENEUTICS	79
FIVE	Beyond Objectivism and Relativism (Again) <i>John Ryder</i>	81
	A Reply to John Ryder <i>Richard J. Bernstein</i>	93
SIX	Relativism, Good and Bad. Bernstein on the Pragmatic Conception of Objectivity <i>Ángel M. Faerna</i>	95
	A Reply to Ángel M. Faerna <i>Richard J. Bernstein</i>	108
SEVEN	An “Engaged Fallibilistic Pluralism” <i>Juan Carlos Mougán</i>	111

EIGHT	Hermeneutics, Practical Philosophy and the Ontology of Community: Wittgenstein, Gadamer and Bernstein	125
	<i>Núria Sara Miras Boronat</i>	
	A Reply to Juan Carlos Mougán and Núria Saras Miras Boronat	135
	<i>Richard J. Bernstein</i>	
	Part Three: GOOD, EVIL AND JUDGMENT	139
NINE	Pragmatism, Westerns and Evil. Remarks on Richard J. Bernstein and Forgiveness	141
	<i>Federico Penelas</i>	
	A Reply to Federico Penelas	154
	<i>Richard J. Bernstein</i>	
TEN	Critical Common Sense, Exemplary Doubting, and Reflective Judgment	157
	<i>Heidi Salaverría</i>	
	A Reply to Heidi Salaverría	169
	<i>Richard J. Bernstein</i>	
ELEVEN	Enlightenment, Utility and Terror	171
	<i>Antonio Gómez Ramos</i>	
	A Reply to Antonio Gómez Ramos	183
	<i>Richard J. Bernstein</i>	

	Part Four	
	DEMOCRATIC VISTAS	185
TWELVE	Bernstein on Deweyan Democracy <i>James Campbell</i>	187
	A Reply to James Campbell <i>Richard J. Bernstein</i>	197
THIRTEEN	Reconstruction of Democratic Experience <i>Alicia García Ruiz</i>	199
	A Reply to Alicia García Ruiz <i>Richard J. Bernstein</i>	211
FOURTEEN	Bernstein between Habermas and Rorty: A Deweyan Reconstruction <i>Larry A. Hickman</i>	213
	A Reply to Larry A. Hickman <i>Richard J. Bernstein</i>	223
FIFTEEN	Listening Without Banisters. Bernstein and Habermas on Democratic Ethos <i>Ramón Del Castillo</i>	227
	A Reply to Ramón del Castillo <i>Richard J. Bernstein</i>	243
	ABOUT THE AUTHORS	245
	Index	251

# A REPLY TO HEIDI SALAVERRÍA

Richard J. Bernstein

Heidi Salaverría cites one of my favorite passages from John Dewey: “The word ‘taste’ has perhaps got too completely associated with arbitrary liking to express the nature of judgments of value. But if the word be used in the sense of appreciation at once cultivated and active, one may say that the formation of taste is the chief matter wherever values enter in whether intellectual, esthetic or moral.” This is a passage that struck me when I first discovered Hannah Arendt’s writings on Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* —and especially her discussion of reflective judgment. Although Arendt scarcely knew the works of Dewey and the pragmatists, her reflections on judgment resonate with the view of judgment expressed by Dewey. And I think that this conception of judgment needs to be placed in a much larger intellectual context.

Both Dewey and Arendt (in different but related ways) were reacting against a tradition in philosophy that tended to think of all judgment as being a version of what Kant called determinate judgment. And there has been a prevailing bias in much of modern philosophy that if something is not a determinate judgment then it is “merely” subjective. Consequently there has been a tendency to denigrate judgments that do not satisfy clearly specified objective criteria. This is not simply a theoretical issue but a practical one. In many areas of human life there is a suspicion and skepticism about the appeal to judgment. We can even see this increasingly at work in academic institutions where one seeks “objective” criteria of evaluation such as the number of articles published in prestigious peer reviewed journals. Unless there are clear “objective” criteria to justify a judgment, it is considered to be unacceptable. Now although Arendt’s interpretation of Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* is idiosyncratic, it is also brilliant. Arendt had a deep insight about the importance of judgment in all aspects of human life. She felt that in extreme situations such as those of totalitarianism one could *not* rely on existing rules but only on one’s cultivated individual judgment. Although the first part of the *Critique of Judgment* is primarily concerned with aesthetic judgment, she claimed the *Third Critique* was relevant for grasping what is distinctive about political judgment. Heidi Salaverría is correct in noting that most philosophers in the pragmatic tradition have neglected the *Third Critique*. When they deal with Kant (pro or con) it is primarily the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the *Critique of Practical Reason* that is the focus of their attention. But Heidi shows how relevant the *Critique of Judgment* is for understanding theses that are central to the pragmatic tradition. So I agree with Heidi that Arendt’s understanding of reflective judgment, which requires

an appeal to the *sensus communis*, helps to sharpen the pragmatic idea of *critical* common sense. Peirce, James, Dewey, and Mead were skeptical of appeals to reason that do not involve the formation and reformation of critical habits. Dewey's entire educational philosophy is based on the commitment that it is possible to cultivate new creative critical habits in a proper school environment. And these critical habits can enable us to make discriminating judgments in particular novel concrete contexts. Social and political change cannot be accomplished by reason alone —by appeal to arguments— but only by the transformation of habits and social practices. In this respect the pragmatic tradition is clearly relevant to contemporary debates about social and political reform.