Evanescent and Embedded Agents

Richard Vernon, Western University


http://wp.me/p1Bfg0-3L5
Justin Cruickshank’s opening essay, and the further work arising from it by him and others, makes a strong case for the value of label-wariness. Overcoming a binary constructed by the way in which Popper and Rorty have routinely been classified, Cruickshank finds in those two theorists a problem-solving orientation that sets a path for constructive thinking about democracy. Overall, I have the impression that Popper comes out slightly better than Rorty does from bringing them together, in that Rorty still takes justification to be the test of truth-content—hence, justification being (in his view) lacking, his postmodern scepticism—while Popper more radically adopts a nonfalsification test. Rorty, from a Popperian point of view, is a sceptic because he sets the bar of veracity too high: a very common move. But it is not Cruickshank’s purpose to award prizes for comparative merit, nor is it mine in this brief commentary. Rather, I want to draw attention to something of a contrast between Popper and Rorty, not at all in order to undermine Cruickshank’s project, but because the contrast between them seems to me to point towards an important issue in “democratic problem-solving”.

The contrast is one that emerges if we move down from the epistemological level, at which Cruickshank’s essay is generally pitched, to take account of Rorty’s fine-grained politics. Doing so is legitimate, I believe, because—famously—Rorty himself drew a line between the (postmodern) epistemology that attracted him and the kind of political assumptions that he adopted. Postmodern epistemologies, he believed, should stay in the English departments. Political action should be guided by nothing more epistemologically complex or interesting than the reduction of suffering. On this, he wrote (1989, 63), J.S. Mill had said the last word (though to accept that, it should be noted in passing, we would have to equate “harm” with suffering, a move that will of course exasperate careful Mill scholars). In Achieving Our Country (1998a) Rorty gives us a list of suffering-reduction achievements that, he believes, should be remembered and celebrated, and on which progressive movements, he says, should build. I do not know of a similarly detailed list in Popper, whose political views are more abstractly stated, generally as an extrapolation from his philosophy of science (especially in Open Society). This introduces something of an asymmetry into the comparison, but I do not see how to avoid it, except by staying at the epistemological level which, for the reason just given, may be to scant a distinction that Rorty evidently thought to be crucial.

On Popper’s Political Thought

Let me begin with the briefest possible characterization of Popper’s political thought. It too, as it happens, is in one respect J.S. Mill-like, and one might note in passing that the two theorists’ shared admiration for Mill’s On Liberty could provide an interesting starting-point for addressing what they have in common, and where they differ. Mill wrote, “The beliefs that we have the most warrant for have no safeguard to rest on, but a standing invitation to the whole world to prove them unfounded”, continuing “This is the amount of certainty attainable by a fallible being.” That anticipates Popper’s later view that what is distinctive about the procedure of science is that claims are to be formulated in a way that maximizes their vulnerability to refutation, their surviving refutation being the only ground that we have on which to lend credence to claims made. This puts epistemology on a radically foundation-free basis that, Popper claimed, makes many ancient controversies obsolete. Likewise, the
process of “discovery” is downplayed in (veridical, as distinct from historical) significance, for how one gets there is of no importance if what matters is what happens when one does get there—what obstacles one then confronts, and whether one then surmounts them or not. (More on this below.) Pursuing this line of thought, Popper goes so far as to describe science as a “subjectless” enterprise (1970, 57) in which all that matters is the force of the better evidence. When a scientific claim is refuted, then, Popper declares (perhaps over-) dramatically, “The believer perishes together with his false beliefs” (1972, 122). The believer has only the status of a vehicle.

It is not difficult to see important parallels with a certain kind of (idealized) politics, though once again we must note that Popper’s politics is more abstractly sketched than Rorty’s, and make allowance for that. It would be the politics of a liberal-democratic state, liberal in the sense that every conjecture, however arrived at, is given space, and democratic in the sense that every conjecture must face opposition and possible refutation in a public forum. That this picture obviously idealizes the actual practices of Western states, in Popper’s time and in ours, no doubt provokes the “Cold War warrior” label. But there is no reason to suppose that theorists who idealize aren’t aware of the ways in which reality falls short, and of the need to correct that. Nor should it be assumed that because Popper aligned himself with one side it was the choice of side that motivated his argument, not the reverse.

In any event, it isn’t the Cold-War-warrior issue that I want to raise in order to pursue a contrast with Rorty (who by the way would have been happy to have been called a Cold War warrior!). Rather, it is the “subjectless” character that Popper attributes to science and, by his own extrapolation, to liberal politics. If it has a political exemplar, it would be some version of deliberative democracy, in which, likewise, the competition of ideas tends to displace the conflict among persons. Theorists of deliberative democracy distinguish their view from the familiar pluralist or market view of politics as the clash of interests or preferences.

According to deliberative democrats, we come to the forum not with interests or preferences that demand satisfaction, but with a willingness to expose our initial views to public critique and to change them if that is where the argument goes (Gutmann and Thompson, 1996). It might be a bit over-dramatic, again, to call such a view of politics “subjectless”—because, after all, the contested proposals do have to be put forward and defended by human subjects, no doubt with conviction—but that term applies in the sense that the political process is conceived of, basically, and to the extent that it is valuable, as a collision among ideas rather than as a conflict among persons (or groups of people). What matters is not the fact that I (or we) hold one belief and that you hold another, and that the beliefs get some standing from the fact that you and I respectively hold them, but that from a regulative point of view one of us holds a belief that may turn out to be less vulnerable to refutation.

It is here that a major fault-line appears between Popper’s politics—or at least the direction in which Popper’s politics would ideally seem to go—and the approach that Rorty adopts in his political thought. For in a “subjectless” politics agents could in principle be evanescent, while in Rorty’s favoured politics agents are institutionalized and act out of a strong sense of their own continuing identity and, often, their own interest too.
Rorty and Collective Agency

What is missing in the era of identity politics, Rorty believed, is the contribution of strong collective agency inspired by the sense of having an ongoing presence in public life. The paradigm case is, of course, the labor union, the mainstay, for perhaps a century, of progressive politics. Rorty emphasizes that unions were also, often, bastions of various kinds of exclusiveness: here he applauds the work of what he calls the “cultural left” in bringing to light once-obscured forms of oppression. But without the institutionalized support of millions of working people the egalitarian project of the left is perhaps fatally weakened. In good part, of course, this is because in the labor movement the egalitarian project was firmly linked to the advancement of workers’ socioeconomic interest: and it may be in that regard that Popper’s science-politics analogy most clearly loses its grip.

From a motivational point of view, the sense of justified self-interest is very different from the admirably ego-free model of disinterest that Popper admired. And the failure of an attempt to advance one’s interest is rarely taken as a reason to quit as opposed to a reason to renew the effort if one can. “Politics is about interests” (Shapiro 1999) is a provocative overgeneralization, but to the extent that Rorty emphasizes the place of interest adopts it he moves the discussion onto a terrain that an epistemically-conceived politics may neglect. Immediately after the Trump election, many commentators saw uncanny prescience in Rorty’s prediction that by abandoning the defence of the economically deprived, the Democratic party ran the risk of losing them to a demagogue who would exploit their resentments. Left out of the distributive paradigm, as it came to be termed, they then had to suffer being left out of the recognition paradigm too, and took their revenge on “recognition’s” supposed beneficiaries.

But it is not the element of “interest” alone that distinguishes Rorty’s view. He also wrote about the role of universities, for example, making large claims for their political importance (1998a, 50). He did not much stress the role of churches, but surely he should have, given the role of (for example) black churches in the civil rights movement, or, in the previous century, the role of English churches in the abolition of the slave trade (Appiah 2010). But whether we are thinking about economic or intellectual or spiritual motivation, the general point is that Rorty’s political world is peopled by decidedly non-evanescent actors. It is essential to effective politics, he believes, that there should be groups with long-term commitments and a sense of their continuing identity and purpose so that defeats can be absorbed and the struggle can continue.

Among the many powerful objections to neoliberalism by Cruickshank and others in Democratic Problem-Solving, this theme of Rorty’s points to a special reason for concern. It is characteristic of neoliberalism not only to close off macropolitical alternatives but also to infect institutions with a market ethos, so that their distinctive internal character is flattened, and they cease to be available as potential agents of political dissent, of the sort that Rorty regarded as essential to critical politics.
Institutions, such as trades unions, to use Rorty’s most recurrent example, come into being because groups of people have life-experiences in common, and once in being they create further life-experiences that their members share, and value. Here I want to go back to Popper’s epistemically powerful distinction between discovery and justification. Despite its scientific importance, it fits uncomfortably in politics because the process of discovering one’s political orientation is not easily left behind, embedded as it is in one’s life circumstances; and perhaps it should not be left behind, even. If it is as an agricultural labourer or a hand-loom weaver in 19th-century Britain, or a suffragette, or a member of a black evangelical church in the southern US in the civil rights era, or a journalist facing oppression in Erdogan’s Turkey, it is exactly one’s experience of coming to dissent from the status quo that needs to be made known to others. It is that experience that gives both content and moral weight to the claims arising from it. It is not after all an objection to your becoming an anti-poverty activist that you have yourself experienced poverty—as though your personal narrative of discovery somehow undermined the value of your political commitments.

The worry here may be, of course, that once we let in agent-relative considerations in this way then we open the door to relativism—thus undermining the validity of critique. That worry seems overdrawn. Let us take the case of poverty -- the example is John Horton’s (2010). Suppose I am acutely aware of the effects of dire poverty because of my childhood experience; let’s say I can’t forget what it was like to go to school hungry. So, when I look at the society around me the consequences of poverty are salient to me in a way that other issues, let’s say environmental issues, or animal welfare issues, are not. That doesn’t mean I live in a different moral world from the environmentalist or the animal welfare advocate. Nor does it mean that in order to share political space with them I have to share their personal narratives of discovery or adapt my priorities to theirs. We can communicate and sympathize with others whose outlooks embody what we may term different moral gradients, or different basic views about what most compellingly demands to be surmounted.

**Circumventing Democracy**

There is a converse worry, which is that if we delegitimize agent-relative reasons then we will end up treating democracy as an obstacle to be somehow circumvented or directed. If only agent-neutral reasons count, and we can discover them, why bother counting heads? That question of course has an ancient and distinguished precursor in Plato, who regarded democracy as a distraction from truth-seeking, akin to a drunken pleasure cruise. I do not see how one can dissent from Plato’s caricature unless we find a place in democracy for the public value of giving weight to personal experience.

It’s a hard job to explain why it is of public value that citizens should believe that their personal or group narratives should shape policies that all citizens are compelled to accept, whether they accept these narratives or not. There is an information-sharing model, which seems to be the best interpretation of Aristotle’s case for including a democratic element in the constitution. There is a common experience model, that led Bentham to believe that broadly-based majorities would share sufficiently common interests to deny support to self-interested elites. Neither seems satisfactory across the board. Perhaps the best one can do is
to say that the case can’t be grounded in anything other than one based on civic respect. Epistemology, in the last resort, may have less to do with it.

But a conclusion of that kind may be seriously question-begging, given the ambiguities of “respect.” Those ambiguities come to light in, especially, the politics of intercultural relations, where, it has been pointed out, “respect” may mean simply taking you as you are, and refraining from any sort of evaluation from my point of view, or, alternatively, it may mean responding attentively to what you have to say and giving my candid opinion so that we can advance, through mutual critique, to something that we can share -- I don’t take you seriously unless I criticize you (Jones 1990). I take it that the latter interpretation is closer to Popperian politics—we should engage in argument in a common endeavour to discover who is right, in the sense of being demonstrably less vulnerable to the evidence that we turn up together. But if important political actors are, as Rorty believed, institutionally embedded, then they are putting not just their proposals but their identity on the line, and surely we can understand that they may demand or expect respect in the former interpretation: take us for who are. We are not willing to “perish” even if we lose, because we matter.

But why should we give in to that demand or expectation? Because the model of epistemic competition, attractive though it is in terms of furthering the normative aims of democracy, contains no institutional means of closure. A democratic means of closure is a majority vote. But a majority vote doesn’t represent the epistemic outcome of the debate that precedes it. It represents the majority’s view of the epistemic outcome of the debate that preceded it, and for the minority that continues to dissent that view has no more epistemic weight than their own. What can make it weighty is a procedural consideration that needs a justification of another kind.

**Winners and Losers in the Debate?**

I began by saying that I wasn’t going to award prizes, but I’m sure I’ve given the impression that I think Rorty wins and Popper loses. If so that is unfortunate because I really have no stake in either of them winning or losing. I think their juxtaposition is enormously valuable, though, in focussing our attention on a fundamental problem in the theory of democracy. We don’t believe in democracy for no reason at all. We believe in it because, as noted above, it has implicit normative ends—it advances freedom and equality in some combination and interpretation of those contested terms. But what it does, as a process as distinct from a normative ideal, is reflect the balance of considerations as they strike nonideal people, whether responding to those considerations happens to advance freedom and equality or not. And that is itself a (respect-based) normative constraint, not just a fact of life.

Where this dilemma may become especially clear is, I think, in the context in which the largest version of Rorty’s theory of embeddedness emerges: he speaks of achieving our country. What we are to do must express some interpretation of what our country antecedently stands for, not some unembedded cosmopolitan principle. Whereas Popper wrote long before political theorists began to take an interest in issues of global justice, Rorty can hardly have been unaware of the efforts by political theorists to confront what we
believe we owe to one another, as conationalists, with the interests of outsiders. Indeed, he suggested that, although we feel loyalty to those with whom we are embedded, we can come to an idea of “a larger loyalty”—that is, a global one—and thus come to acknowledge obligations to people outside our own society (1998b). And surely we can. But why should we? Here, I believe, the argumentative pendulum swings back in Popper’s favour, though likely in a way that Popper himself may not have anticipated.

Rorty’s belief that political movements must align with and draw upon some version of patriotism is of course open to critique from an overtly cosmopolitan point of view (e.g. Nussbaum 1996, 4). But it is also at odds with his own recognition of powerful institutional identities within the patria. Suppose I am a member of a Canadian labour organization, or a Canadian feminist advocacy group, or a Canadian evangelical church, or a Canadian indigenous rights movement, it hardly follows either that I must prioritize my Canadian identity over any of those sub-identities, or that in advocacy for my cause I must favour rhetoric drawn from specifically Canadian narratives. “Achieving our nation” might be somewhere on my list but there is no reason to place it at the top. My allies and points of reference may well be transnational ones (Erskine 2008), and so Rorty’s embrace of patriotism puts something of a straitjacket on the pluralism that he also endorses. Here the vision of an open society, that is, one that is not precommitted to some collective goal or value, is more conducive to the democratic idea. In that respect, Popper’s view more successfully challenges the givenness of agent’s assumed identities.

Contact details: ravernon@uwo.ca

References


