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The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism. by Cornel West

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THE PROFESSOR AND THE PROPHET

Most white leftists wish that African-Americans would grow up and find some firmly secularist leaders.

Richard Rorty

Among prominent leftist intellectuals in the United States, Cornel West may be unique in being patriotic, religious, and romantic. None of these three attitudes is popular on the Left these days. The American intellectual Left (which is pretty well coextensive with the American academic Left) has mocked patriotism ever since the sixties. It remains as unforgiving of our having sent troops to Vietnam as the American Right is of our having brought the surviving troops home. This Left finds religion tiresome, and wishes it would go away: the fact that Martin Luther King was, and Jesse Jackson is, a preacher, is a source of embarrassment, as is the fact that Malcolm X was a Muslim. Most white leftists wish that African-Americans would grow up, would find some firmly secularist leaders. So they will be depressed and exasperated to find West, one of the country's most gifted nonwhite philosophers, describing himself as "a Christian prophetic pragmatist." Finally: romantic hope is, for most American leftists,

a sign of intellectual immaturity. For such hope is incompatible with the ice-cold, man-from-Mars style of thinking and writing exemplified by Foucault, and with the scorn for the social hopes of the Enlightenment which we postmoderns are supposed to have learned from Nietzsche and Heidegger. From the point of view of most of the American Left, West's *tone* is all wrong. So much the worse, in my view, for that Left.

West is a member of the group around *Dissent*, a magazine that is almost the only surviving organ of "the Old Left"—the Left that, between 1930 and 1965, saw the labor unions and their alliance with the Democratic party as the hope of the country. Most American labor unions have been pretty well busted, so these days there are no labor leaders like Walter Reuther and Sidney Hillman to serve as power brokers—to get something for the poor and the weak in exchange for Democratic votes. Democratic politicians who would like to raise suburbanites' taxes in

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this essay**

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order to rescue black children in the ghettos are either overwhelmingly defeated or, once elected, deserted by their own party. The sense that America is a model for the world—the Emersonian sense that provided a moral identity for American intellectuals all the way from the 1830s through the 1950s—is almost entirely gone. West and Irving Howe, the founder of *Dissent*, are among the few U.S. intellectuals still patriotic enough to see their country as a symbol of social hope. But their voices are presently being drowned by those of the conscientiously hopeless postmodernists.

Howe ended his *The American Newness* by saying, in words that West would happily second,

Simple Emersonians we can no longer be. We are descendants, through mixed blood, who have left home after friendly quarrels. Yet the patriarch's [Emerson's] voice still rings clear: "This confidence in the unsearched might of man belongs . . . to the American Scholar . . . Patience—patience . . . A nation of men will for the first time exist."

Patience? After all these bitter years? Darkened with the knowledge of loss, he speaks again: "Never mind the ridicule, never mind the defeat; up again, old heart!—it seems to say—there is victory yet for all justice."

Howe and West would agree that if you have Emerson you can get along quite well without Nietzsche or Foucault, and that if you retain a sense of what America might yet become you can brush aside all the downhill-all-the-way stories about “the

West” or “modernity,” stories of the sort told by Adorno and Heidegger.

But West is in a different, and somewhat more difficult, line of business from Howe. Howe is a professor of English who can invoke Whitman and Melville, Dreiser and Farrell, Wright and Baldwin. West is a philosophy professor who looks

The ignorance and disdain for philosophy within the Anglo-American academy have always been puzzling to outsiders

back to James, Dewey, and Du Bois, as well as a lay preacher who looks back to King and Niebuhr. In the United States, to be a literature professor is to be in a pretty good position to serve as a culture critic, to set an agenda for left-leaning students. Literature departments are big and powerful in American and British universities; people like Paul de Man, Edward Said, and Howe are widely read.

To be a philosophy professor, however, is a bit awkward, for philosophy has never been taken half as seriously in the high culture of the English-speaking world as it is in countries like France, Germany, Italy, and Spain. Most American professors neither know nor care what their colleagues in philosophy do. In Britain, when the Thatcher government told the university faculties to self-decimate, everybody else quickly agreed that the philosophers were their most dispensable

colleagues. To make things worse: within both British and American philosophy departments, people who start acting like critics are viewed as “not really philosophers.” This is one reason why West, a professor at Princeton, teaches in the Department of Religion rather than the Department of Philosophy. West’s fellow philosophers usually regard him as Willamowitz-Möllendorf regarded the young Nietzsche, the author of *The Birth of Tragedy*—as someone who has wandered so far outside his academic discipline that he no longer counts as a member of it.

The ignorance of and disdain for philosophy within the Anglo-American academy have always been puzzling to outsiders. Such an attitude toward philosophy baffles leftist intellectuals in the Third World who, brought up on Marxism, now wonder about whether Foucault or Deleuze or Baudrillard might serve the purposes Marx once served. Such intellectuals typically take for granted that serious political reflection requires philosophical underpinnings. But the causes of the Anglo-Saxon attitude toward philosophy go back a long way, at least as far as John Locke’s claim that he was an “underlabourer” in the service of the New Science, sweeping away rubbish left behind by his philosophical predecessors. This rhetoric recurs in Dewey, whom West quotes as saying that “a chief task of those who call themselves philosophers is to help get rid of the useless lumber that blocks our highways of thought, and strive to make straight and open the paths that lead to the future.” Most English-speaking philosophy professors accept this self-deprecatory conception of their cultural role. They

would agree that their discipline is auxiliary to more central areas of cultural activity, in a way that most French and German philosophy professors would not. (An English-speaking philosophy professor myself, I am typical of my breed in thinking that this modest self-image is the healthiest one for philosophers to have.)

The Anglo-American notion of what philosophers are good for is at the opposite pole from Husserl’s claim, in *The Crisis of the European Sciences*, that only rigorous phenomenological analysis can save us from barbarism, and from Derrida’s occasional insistence that constant vigilance against the return of the metaphysics of presence is the price of political and moral progress. Nobody in the United States these days takes such claims for philosophy seriously except the conscientious postmodernists. I suspect that they do so simply by force of leftist habit—because Marx (Ph.D., Philosophy, Jena, 1841) made a big deal out of philosophy. (Marx’s bad example was, alas, enthusiastically imitated. Remember Lenin on Berkeley? Stalin on language? Mao on contradiction? If Sendero Luminoso bombs its way to the top, we can count on Abimael Guzmán—Ph.D., Philosophy, San Marcos U, c. 1970—to add another short, peppy, masterwork to the Little Library of Scientific Socialism—one that everyone up and down the Andes, from the starving schoolchildren to the village elders, will have to memorize.)

In theory Marxists are supposed to subordinate theory to practice, but in practice, wherever the name of Marx has been honored, the “underlabourer” image of the philosopher is displaced by an image of the

philosopher as architect—a skilled professional, with whose services no self-respecting leftist movement can afford to dispense. This is one reason why pragmatism has traditionally been without honor among Americans who call themselves “radicals,” as opposed to those who call themselves “liberals.” In the 1930s American Communists were trained to call Dewey “the philosopher of American imperialism,” and to contrast his and Emerson’s sentimental “bourgeois” sloppiness with the purportedly proletarian rigor of dialectical materialism. They despised Dewey’s reformism, his unwillingness to whoop it up for violent revolution. In recent years, the post-Marxist “postmodernist” Left has renewed the charge that pragmatism is “objectively” conservative, in that it cannot provide the sort of “radi-

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cal critique” which Marxism once offered us—the sort of icy-cold, “scientific,” unromantic, analysis that, so the postmodernist story goes, is required to cut through “ideological distortions” and lay bare the underlying realities.

These radical critics are quite right in suspecting that pragmatists are no good at laying bare underlying realities. This is because pragmatists do not believe there are such things. We pragmatists think that the

reality–appearance distinction is an awkward and misleading tool of analysis, one that needs to be replaced with a distinction between the oppressors’ descriptions of what is going on and the oppressed’s descriptions, unsupplemented by the claim that the oppressed are on the side of the *really* real. “The wise man,” Dewey said, “reads historic philosophies to detect in them intellectual formulations of men’s habitual purposes and cultivated wants. . . . In philosophy, ‘reality’ is a term of value or choice.” The oppressed have different purposes and wants from their oppressors, but they do not have deeper insight into reality. They just want to relieve suffering, to change things for the better.

Understanding things as they “really” are is not—Plato and Marx to the contrary—necessary for accomplishing that purpose. The trouble with the oppressors is that they are causing unnecessary pain, not that they have gotten things wrong. So all that intellectuals can do for the oppressed is help them formulate their purposes and their wants in a way which cuts loose from earlier language, language that the oppressors designed to serve *their* purposes and fulfill *their* wants. But the good new language will be neither more rigorous nor less “ideological” nor less “superstructural”—closer to what is really down there at the base—than the bad old one. It will just be a more useful tool for changing things so as to decrease pain.

To dismiss the metaphysical question of what is really real, and the epistemological question of how we would know the really real when we saw it, is to do what West calls “evading” philosophy. He

sees the history of what he calls “left romanticism” as starting with Jefferson and Rousseau, going on to Emerson and Marx, and culminating, in a “third wave” with Dewey and Gramsci. The bulk of his book covers the American members of the second and third waves. In a brilliant first chapter, West shows how Emerson

evades modern philosophy, that is, he ingeniously and skillfully refuses: (1) its quest for certainty and its hope for professional, i.e., scientific, respectability; (2) its search for foundations. This distinctively American refusal is the crucible from which emerge the sensibilities and sentiments of future American pragmatism.

In the next three chapters—which discuss Peirce, James, Dewey, Hook, Du Bois, Trilling, C. Wright Mills, and Niebuhr—West shows how this process of setting aside questions about certainty and reality worked itself out, up to about 1970. He gives a sensitive and coherent account of some central strands of American intellectual history. His description of American hope is moving in its sweep and drama, as well as acute in its descriptions of the tensions that drove the various figures he discusses. Anyone who still thinks that American intellectuals have always had to import ideas from abroad will have his or her eyes opened by West’s book. So will anyone who does not realize that the United States too is “an old socialist country” (the phrase E. P. Thompson used to describe England, in indignant response to the Althusserians’ implicit claim to be, as Thompson put it, “the first white Marxists” to plant the flag there). Uninformed

images of America as a greedy and ignorant giant, still in its intellectual childhood, are still common among Left intellectuals around the world; it would help to dissolve these images if the U.S. government would spread copies of West’s books around its libraries in foreign parts.

Up through his discussion of Niebuhr, West’s book is under control, and does what he wants it to do. But things get a bit shaky and uncertain in the last two chapters. Chapter 5 (“The Decline and Resurgence of American Pragmatism: W. V. Quine and Richard Rorty”) is, to my mind, an unfortunate excursus; West might have done better to go straight from Niebuhr to Roberto Unger, for these two prophets are of roughly equal size. Standing next to them, mere professors such as Quine and I look dwarfish. The Quine–Rorty chapter deals with events internal to the history of American philosophy departments, rather than with events on the larger intellectual scene. So when one goes from Chapter 4 to Chapter 5 there is a sudden, disconcerting, shrinkage in scale. Shifts of fashion among philosophy professors (like those inaugurated by Quine’s remarkable “Two Dogmas of Empiricism”—his repudiation, in 1951, of Carnapian positivism) simply do not have much resonance within American culture. The story told in my *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* about how philosophers like Quine, Sellars, Putnam, Davidson, and (most romantically and influentially) Kuhn reinvented Dewey’s naturalism and antifoundationalism is, at most, a footnote to the larger story that West wants to tell. (Lest I seem ungrateful, however, let me

add that West's account of my own work is as informed and sympathetic a treatment as it has ever received.)

In his final, crucial, crowded, hurried, eventful, sometimes almost ecstatic, sixth chapter—"Prophetic Pragmatism: Cultural Criticism and Political Engagement"—West faces up to some tensions that were latent in the earlier chapters. The basic tension is between a wish to evade philosophy and a hope that something rather like philosophy will be a powerful instrument of social change. This tension can also be thought of as that between the pragmatist as professor and as prophet—the pragmatist as cleaning up rubbish left over from the past and the pragmatist as the dreamer who first glimpses the concrete outlines of a better future.

If pragmatism is taken in the professorial sense, the term "prophetic pragmatism" will sound as odd as "charismatic trash disposal"

In the first sense of pragmatism—the professorial—pragmatism is merely a way of evading the usual boring skeptical conundrums about truth, knowledge, the deep nature of things, and the relation between language and the world. In this sense, pragmatism is, as Papini and James say, like a corridor off which innumerable rooms open. All it does is give you a forum in which people can talk about how to fulfill their needs, which beliefs work to get

them what they want, without running into Platonic and Cartesian impassés. As such a corridor (or, to revert to an earlier metaphor, as a way of getting rid of some Platonic and Cartesian rubbish) it is neutral between alternative prophecies, and thus neutral between democrats and fascists. Pragmatism plus Nietzschean prophecy was as handy for Mussolini as pragmatism plus Emersonian prophecy was for Woodrow Wilson and the two Roosevelts. If pragmatism is taken in this, the professorial sense, then the term "prophetic pragmatism" will sound as odd as "charismatic trash disposal."

Unless we pragmatist philosophy professors find some prophets whom we can serve as auxiliaries, we are not of much interest. As an experienced expounder of pragmatist doctrine, I can go on for hours about how to be antirepresentationalist in philosophy of language, antiessentialist in metaphysics, anti-Cartesian in philosophy of mind, antifoundationalist in epistemology, and so on. But it is hard to find occasions to do so which serve some political purpose, hard to feel that my professional services are just what victims of injustice need. So I ruefully agree with West's remark that "[Rorty's] project, though pregnant with rich possibilities, remains polemical (principally against other professional academics) and hence barren." My only excuse is that I do not think that professorial pragmatism is a good place to look for prophecy, or for the sorts of rich possibilities which the prophetic imagination makes visible.

James and Dewey, I admit, were lucky enough to combine, to some extent, the

roles of professor and of prophet. For in their time, there was still some relation between pragmatist philosophical doctrines and attempts to overcome racial prejudice, to make labor unions seem morally respectable, and to subordinate property rights to social needs. This was because, at the turn of the century, the intellectual right was still trying to justify repressive institutions in either religious or rationalist terms. So bringing pragmatist arguments to bear against religious or rationalist arguments for political conservatism was a useful thing for James and Dewey to do. It is less clear that any such arguments have a function in the United States today. We have nobody worthy of the name “rightist intellectual” who needs to be confuted. Nowadays nobody even bothers to back up opposition to liberal reforms with argument. People merely say that taxes are too high, that their brother-in-law would have had a better job had it not been for his company’s affirmative action program, and that it is time for the poor and weak to start looking after themselves.

In Dewey’s America, as in Emerson’s, there was work for intellectuals to do in cracking the crust of convention, questioning the need for traditional institutions. But nowadays, as far as I can see, the problem is not a failure of imagination—a failure of the sort which philosophers might help with. It is more like a failure of nerve, a fairly sudden loss of generous instincts and of patriotic fellow-feeling. Whatever it is, it is making the United States look like the Sick Man of the Northern Hemisphere. Our greed, timidity, and whininess permit the Europeans, the Jap-

anese, and the leftist intellectuals of the Third World to think of our country—a country with a great intellectual and moral heritage—as having entered its dotage, regressed to a second childhood.

Like West, I rejoice in the thought that I am a countryman of Emerson’s and Dewey’s. I should love to believe that there is something called “prophetic pragmatism,” something that is, in West’s words,

a deeply American response to the end of the Age of Europe, the emergence of the United States as a world power, and the decolonization of the third world. The response is “American” not simply because it appropriates and promotes the major American tradition of cultural criticism, but also because it is shaped by the immediate American cultural situation.

I would love to believe this because I would love to believe that the present sloth and greed of the American voters, and their inability to grasp the grim joke they played on themselves when they elected Reagan and Bush, is not an augury for the future. I would love to believe that my country is capable of more than hiding behind tariff walls and exhibiting John Wayne-style military bravado. I should like to think that suburban complacency in the face of ever-increasing unemployment and misery is just a passing phase. But I do not see much reason to think any such thing. West has not persuaded me to abandon what Unger calls “the downbeat, Alexandrian” tone of the disappointed liberal.

To return to my previous point: pragmatism in the professorial sense is just a repudiation of the quest for certainty and foundations which West describes as “the evasion of philosophy.” This evasion is socially useful only if teamed up with prophecies—fairly concrete prophecies of a utopian social future. Pragmatist philosophy professors like Quine, Putnam,

The philosophy professors cheered from the side lines, but were of no great use to the civil rights movement

Davidson, Bernstein, and myself can play a social role only if they can find some prophet to whom to attach themselves. Dewey and James, working at the heart of the Progressive movement early in the century, managed to weave their philosophizing together with the social criticism of people like Veblen and Jane Addams, and the prophecies of people like Du Bois and Debs. But the last great prophetic dreamer we have had in the United States—Martin Luther King—did not have much use for philosophy. He got along nicely with a few phrases borrowed from such theologians as Rauschenbusch, Tillich, and Niebuhr. The philosophy professors cheered from the sidelines, but were of no great use to the civil rights movement.

Are they being of any use to social progress nowadays? Only, as far as I can see, to feminism. In this area, the Amer-

ican professoriate, including the philosophers, is making itself very useful indeed. Feminist members of the academy are inventing new ways of speaking about the relations between men and women. They are founding something like a new cultural tradition. Feminist philosophers like Marilyn Frye may be the closest thing we have to prophets these days. But although feminists are painfully aware that they speak mostly for middle-class women, and would love to link up feminism with the struggle of the weak against the strong (which, in the United States, is inseparable from the struggle of blacks against whites), they have not come up with anything very convincing. Attempts to invent a “unified theory of oppression”—to find a philosophical way of integrating “issues of race, class, and gender” (a mantra that American academic leftists have by now chanted into meaninglessness)—have produced little of interest.

West is, I think, torn between urging such attempts on and suspecting that nothing much is going to come of them. The worst passages in his book, to my mind, are those in which he adopts the priggish tone characteristic of those American leftists who talk (unironically, alas!) about “political correctness.” For example, he says of Roberto Unger’s *Politics* that

To write a masterful text of social theory and politics that does not so much as mention—God forbid, grapple with—forms of racial and gender subjugation in our time is inexcusable on political and theoretical grounds. To do so is to remain captive to a grand though flawed Eurocentric and patriarchal heritage.

I find it hard to believe that West really thinks Unger is thus held captive. Even if he does, I think he should be willing to excuse Unger, to let him write about what he knows best and not insist that he grapple with what he knows less well. I do not see what “theoretical grounds” for inexcusability West might have in mind. As for political grounds, I suspect that political ends are best achieved not by a factitious syncretism but by getting as specific and concrete as possible.

Although West may be (thanks to his connections with the black churches) the closest thing to an “organic intellectual” my country has these days, and may thus be (except for the feminists) as likely a source of specific, concrete, patriotic, prophetic vision as anybody else around, I think that he suffers from the same professional deformation which afflicted Marx. He is still enamored of the idea

I think our Left could use a lot less political correctness

that his own academic discipline—philosophy—is somehow more closely linked to prophetic vision than are, say, anthropology, literary criticism, economics or art history. Surely it is time to give up the idea that prophecy comes more naturally to readers of Descartes or Quine than to readers of Herder or Geertz, or of Milton or Kundera?

It may be that these criticisms of West are simply a product of what West calls my “fervent vigilance to preserve the prevailing bourgeois way of life in North Atlantic societies, especially American society.” But this fervent vigilance is largely a matter of urging that we hang on to constitutional democracy—the only institutional aspect of the “prevailing bourgeois way of life” about which I get fervent—while patriotically striving to keep social protest alive. Like Howe, I view such protest as having been, until relatively recently, *part* of “the prevailing bourgeois way of life” here in the United States—a part we can be proud of and maybe, even now, build on. But, unlike West, I think that it will be easier to encourage such protest if we toss aside the last remnants of Marxist thought, and in particular the desire for a general theory of oppression. (We might also, incidentally, drop West’s regret that Dewey “unfortunately . . . failed to grapple seriously with the Marxist tradition”; that seems to me like regretting that Jesus did not spend more time with the Talmud.) I agree with West that what the American Left most needs is prophecy—some sense of a utopian American future. But I think our Left could also use a lot less political correctness, and a lot less of what Stanley Fish has called, acutely, “anti-foundationalist theory hope.” Sometimes (as in Rousseau, Dewey, and Unger) theory has been the helpful auxiliary of romance. But just as often it has served to blind the intellectuals to the new possibilities that romantics and prophets have envisioned.