

THE ECLIPSE OF *THEORIA*

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Richard J. Bernstein, *The Restructuring of Political and Social Theory*, New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1976, pp. xxiv + 286.

Philosophy and science were born out of the same womb: primitive religion, the mytho-practical cosmos of the past. Yet, from the beginning, philosophy's concerns and method, have been distinctly different from those of science. Philosophy emerged as the quest for true knowledge, the practice of wisdom, the critique of everyday life. Plato's allegory of the cave proclaims philosophy the *theoria*, the true vision of reality, the ascent toward the sun of the mind and the rejection of the false world of shadows and appearance.

Philosophy interprets; its province is the normative sphere. Science explains; its subject matter is the empirical world of Nature, the discovery of its secret workings. These are ancient distinctions which have been obscured by the amazing growth of modern science. It is this growth that proved quite devastating for the visionary, speculative world of philosophic *theoria*. Truth and scientific precision and objectivity became coterminous. It is in this context that the rise of the social sciences and the eclipse of *theoria* have occurred.

In this very schematic prolegomenon I merely suggest the outlines of an ancient, complex story which still goes on, albeit in a modern version. The full story is the intellectual and cultural alienation of modern man. The tension, indeed the quarrel, between philosophy and science — its modern manifestation with its almost inaudible ancient echoes — constitutes the realm of Bernstein's inquiry.

This study grew out of the crisis in the social sciences that erupted in the 1960s. The polemics, debates, claims and counterclaims that surrounded this crisis concerned the nature of the social sciences and the role of theory. The author's hope is

to show that in what might otherwise seem a parochial and intramural debate about the social sciences, primary questions have been raised about the nature of human beings, what constitutes knowledge of society and

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politics, how this knowledge can affect the ways in which we shape our lives, and what is and ought to be the relation of theory and practice. (P. xiii)

His "primary objective in this study is to clarify, explore, and pursue" these fundamental issues (p. xiii).

Bernstein confesses that "the initial impression one has in reading through the literature in and about the social disciplines during the past decade or so is that of sheer chaos" (p. xiii). But this is only an initial impression. Bernstein believes that beneath this babel of claims and counterclaims "we can discern the outlines of a complex argument that has been developing: an emerging new sensibility that, while still very fragile, is leading to a restructuring of social and political theory" (p. xiii). It is as if a kind of Hegelian cunning of reason were at work. The restructuring of theory is self-adumbrated, it exists in a substratum just beneath the surface. It is the result of "a period of crisis" (p. xiii). We can aid and abet this process of gestation.

The author's "major objective is to evolve a perspective from which one can integrate what is right and sound" in each of the various competing orientations involved in the crisis-debates and, of course, "reject what is inadequate and false" (p. xviii). Bernstein is convinced that "despite tensions and conflicts" a coherence is discernible (p. xviii). It is this basic coherence that he wishes to articulate, unify and integrate.

The study emphasizes the Anglo-Saxon intellectual context. Bernstein explains:

the same basic problems that emerge in sharp relief in Anglo-Saxon debates about the nature of the social sciences and the role of theory, are also central to Continental investigations of the *sciences humaines* and the *Geisteswissenschaften*. The live options that are taken seriously and the forms of discourse manifestly differ, but there is a concern with the same primary issues. (P. xxi)

The thematic structure of the study consists of four parts: first, empirical theory — the naturalistic interpretation of the social sciences. This is followed by three distinct theoretical perspectives which challenge the naturalistic interpretation. These are: linguistic analysis, phenomenology, and critical theory. These form the remaining three parts of the study. Each part contributes to the debate; but only the totality is meant to disclose the essential dimensions of the restructuring of social and political theory. Each part serves as a clarification toward that end. For each part to serve as a step toward the resolution of the crisis, its analysis-critique must reach the very root of the issue.

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The section on empirical theory is very strategic. It defines the context of the whole crisis-debate: science vs *theoria*. Bernstein's intention here regarding empirical theory is to articulate faithfully (not to caricature) the views of those who conceive of the social sciences as differing only in degree and not in kind from natural science. The positivist influence among the advocates of this view is evident. Ambivalence and plain hostility toward normative theory are also evident. It is central to the doctrine of this school to refuse to draw a qualitative distinction between the social and the natural sciences. The social sciences are seen as an immature — though rapidly maturing — version of natural science. These scholars are convinced that scientific explanation means “discovery of and appeal to laws or nomological statements” (p. 43). The insistence on identifying natural science with true theory — the only acceptable form of theory — renders logical their desire to pattern social science upon the method and aims of natural science. This, of necessity, leads to the conviction that social scientists must remain objective and neutral: they must explain, not judge or justify. Their “task is *not* to make prescriptive claims about what ought to be — not to advocate a normative position” (p. 45).

The naturalistic interpretation of the social sciences not only neutralizes the normative-prescriptive dimension of social thought, but it also ignores the tradition of *theoria*, its ability to “distinguish appearance from reality, the false from the true, and to provide an orientation for practical activity” (p. 53). The *bios theoretikos* is ruled out.

Bernstein points out that the naturalistic school of thought is not monolithic. There are those empiricists:

who think our present ignorance so vast that it is best to stick to the task of refining techniques for collecting data and making low-level empirical generalizations about independent and dependent variables. There are those who think that such an endeavor is blind and directionless unless guided by the search for general theories. There are those who recommend a more modest endeavor of advancing theories of the middle range. (P. 43)

The many and varied disputes among the advocates of the naturalistic interpretation remain well confined within a framework basic to this perspective. Its central premise is never challenged. This framework also “fosters a distinctive attitude toward the history of the social sciences and especially social and political theory” (p. 43). A basic distinction is drawn between the history of theory and systematic theory (p. 43). But the distinction is polarized: “From a scientific point of view, the measure of past theories is

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and ought to be the present state of systematic theory” (pp. 43-44). Indeed, “present theory — to the extent that it is rigorously formulated and empirically tested — is the measure of the success or failure of past theory” (p. 15). Perhaps the most sophisticated version of the empiricist view would be this: “Empirical research without theory is blind, just as theory without empirical research is empty” (p. 14).

In the final analysis, the naturalistic interpretation of the social sciences severs theory and action; its view of theory is modelled after the natural sciences and “reflects a *total* intellectual orientation” (p. 51). Facts and values are distinguished by the advocates of the naturalistic view. Only facts are accepted as legitimately within the realm of scientific inquiry. Weber is referred to briefly and though Bernstein sees him as a more sophisticated and more serious scholar than most modern advocates of the fact/value dichotomy, he is found wanting. For “it is absolutely hopeless to think that we can justify . . . basic values; we can only choose to accept them” (p. 48). This is Weber’s final verdict on the issue, according to Bernstein.

Clearly, Bernstein disagrees with the naturalistic interpretation of the social sciences. In this section on empirical theory he examines the views of scholars such as Merton, Smelser, Homans, Nagel and, to a lesser extent, Parsons, Easton, Popper and Hauser. The thinker who struggled most effectively, though not exhaustively, with the question of the nature of science, social science, philosophy and the role of theory is Weber. Had Bernstein paid more attention to Weber he would have been forced to treat the question of empirical theory more philosophically, more lucidly and more constructively. Bernstein begins his study with Merton, a poor substitute.

Weber insisted on viewing science, its method and results, as capable of validation on a universal scale. In this, science was unique for Weber. But science was addressing questions of means, not ends. Thus science could rule supreme only within a limited sphere of human life. This sphere, indispensable in its instrumentality (especially in industrial societies), cannot deal with ultimate questions of value and meaning. This is the domain of philosophy. Ultimate value questions cannot and should not be settled without heeding the voice of science where issues of means, as they relate to ends, are concerned. Weber wanted science to become the indispensable servant of philosophy. But he wanted philosophy to realize how helpless it could be without any assistance from science. Social science stands between the two. It deals with the social world, the world of culture, beliefs and values. A world which can be understood interpretively in its full diversity. It is in this sphere of culture that ultimate values must be taken for granted. Their full investigation-validation is beyond the aims and capabilities of the social sciences. Neither can philosophy validate them in the manner and method of the definitive, irrefutable universality of natural science. This does not mean — as many

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wrongly assume Weber's position to be — that philosophy cannot assert distinctions, preferences and value judgements. What philosophy cannot do is refute as conclusively as science can. But Weber never suggested that philosophy and sociology ought to emulate the natural sciences. He realized that our lives unfold within a complex universe of ethico-technical questions which should not be confused, but which cannot be absolutely separated. Weber did not believe in the naive absurdities of a grand, general theory. No ultimate, final, comprehensive unification was either possible or desirable for Weber. Bernstein misreads Weber's position on the crucial issue of the fact/value dichotomy.

If Weber really believed that all values are the same, that no moral judgements could be made, and that values are questions of preference, why would he be so critical of so many aspects of our modern cultural wasteland? It is in Weber's thought that the confrontation of science-*theoria* takes place in its most modern and *philosophical* form and expression; it is a powerful, comprehensive and tragic encounter. In the figure of a distinctly modern, post-Nietzschean tragic hero, philosophy seeks refuge, recoils and then, at least temporarily, it eclipses.

Bernstein's treatment of the empiricists does not permit a radical (in the philosophical sense of the term) analysis-critique of the crucial question of science vs. *theoria*. The monistic, narrow, view of the naturalistic interpretation is rejected by Bernstein; the denial of a qualitative difference between natural science and social science is erroneous in Bernstein's view. But this is a minimal critique. We know what it rejects; it refuses to accept a highly constricted concept of empirical theory as *the* concept of theory. But the true concept of theory, vaguely intimated, remains invisible and divinely mysterious. Bernstein would like us to believe that the substantive elucidation of his theme is to follow this prolegomenon where the empiricist position is pronounced and mildly objected to. It is a genuine conviction on the author's part that indeed the subsequent chapters do orchestrate the restructuring of social and political theory.

Having stated the position of the "mainstream social scientists" — those social scientists who model social science after natural science — and having offered some preliminary criticisms, Bernstein turns to the second part of his inquiry — language, analysis and theory — based primarily "upon analytic philosophy, especially 'the linguistic turn' taken by Ludwig Wittgenstein and J.L. Austin." The influence of these philosophers on many modern thinkers generated the challenge to the pretentious claims of narrow empiricists that concerns our author (p. xvi).

Here Bernstein starts with the eloquent voice of Isaiah Berlin. A strong irreconcilable qualitative distinction exists between the subject matter of philosophy (and social science) and that of the natural sciences; Berlin, critical

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of the naturalistic interpretation of the social sciences, warns us that philosophy cannot be subsumed under formal or empirical techniques. He reminds us that human beings are self-interpreting, Nature is not (p. 61). Bernstein finds Berlin's ideas suggestive, but not definitive. Berlin's apologia for philosophy paves the way for Bernstein's treatment of the "linguistic turn." However, it should be pointed out that Berlin speaks within the tradition of philosophy (with a strong liberal orientation). Berlin, unlike Weber, rejects science as irrelevant to philosophy. Weber would have provided a more accurate context for the whole inquiry, as I have mentioned already. But besides Berlin there have been other voices of wisdom rejecting the narrow empiricist view of theory: Arendt, C.B. Macpherson, Strauss, Oakeshott, Voegelin. Though these thinkers do not share a common ideological perspective, they do not succumb to the prevailing scientism. Bernstein does not deal with their thought; nor does he acknowledge their existence in this very context. Thus an artificial monolith is created; great, complex intellectual diversity is ignored.

From Berlin the author moves to Winch. Attention is paid to Winch's claim that there is a logical incompatibility between society and the science of Nature. Human action and behaviour are viewed in a totally different light: to understand them we must move well beyond mere observation. Bernstein finds value in what Winch wants to say rather than in the actual claims he makes (p. 72). More comprehensively we are told

Winch's strategy of argument is wrongheaded, for it is a mirror image of what he opposes. The real object of Winch's attack is a form of scientism which refuses to recognize that there is anything distinctive about our social life and the concepts required for describing and explaining it. He is ferreting out the *a priori* bias which declares that talk of "understanding," "interpretation," "forms of life," and "rule-governed behavior" has no place in a tough-minded scientific approach to the study of social phenomena. (P. 72)

But the consequence of this critique, according to Bernstein, "is to isolate social life and the concepts pertaining to it from the rest of nature and empirical inquiry" (p. 73). Winch's position is found wanting and even contradictory; but his critique has the merit of achieving a degree of conceptual clarity which exposes the poverty of a simplistic empiricism.

From Winch we move to Louch: human action is viewed in moral terms; assessment and appraisal are needed in order to understand human action. These are moral in nature. The normative dimension so neglected by the

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empiricists is now stressed more and more. Louch's argument rests on a dichotomy that Bernstein finds suspect. This is an artificial either/or. "Either we concern ourselves exclusively with the variety, complexity, and detail of specific contexts of human performances, and with *ad hoc* descriptions and explanations of these, or we will be ensnared in the futile search for generality that results in empty, platitudinous, dubious claims and in universalistic doctrines that are positively evil" (p. 80).

Winch's and Louch's arguments are informed by a moral point of view. Their protest against rampant scientism and positivism is not limited to epistemological considerations. "Indeed, they are arguing for the intrinsic connection between epistemology and a moral point of view" (p. 84). But both undermine their position "by a latent descriptivism" which denies "rational criticism of existing social and political phenomena" (p. 84). Here Berlin is seen more positively; he urged us to accept social critique as one of the tasks of the theorist. And Weber is mentioned as one who "held out the possibility that philosophy might help answer" the crucial question: how shall we live. Bernstein is apparently oblivious to his contradiction — praising Weber here (p. 84) and criticizing him regarding the unresolvability of the question of ultimate values (p. 48).

At this juncture, Bernstein argues that the view of natural science held by the logical empiricists is also held by their critics (p. 85). It is a narrow and simplistic view of science. In order to rectify this erroneous view, Bernstein turns to Kuhn. By exploring the concept of paradigm in Kuhn's work, Bernstein wishes to show that the true picture of the life and growth of science is more complex than is commonly believed; he wishes also to show some basic difficulties and contradictions present in Kuhn's argument — especially regarding conversion, and rational and non-rational persuasion (p. 91). The celebrated distinction between ordinary and extraordinary science advocated by Kuhn is accepted face value by Bernstein. It is the transition from ordinary to the extraordinary that is problematic. I find it very disappointing that Bernstein does not realize that within the boundaries of a prevailing paradigm the life of science is what all advocates and critics of empiricism claim it to be. Nor does Kuhn or Bernstein distinguish levels of scientific discourse. Is an Einstein or a Heisenberg within a fixed paradigm? Kuhn's desire to inform us of the complexities distinctive to science has led to a different simplification; he has mechanized the process of scientific creativity. Popper's work and the much neglected but brilliant book *World Hypotheses* by S. Pepper should have been utilized here by Bernstein. It is philosophical poverty to treat Kuhn as *the* authority in this context.

The use and abuse of Kuhn's concept of paradigm — itself a problematic notion — is examined next by Bernstein. Truman, Almond, and Wolin, who have employed the concept in a strained analogy, are treated briefly. Truman

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and Almond make a very naive use of the concept. Wolin's ambiguous use of the concept is also demonstrated (p. 101). But Bernstein ignores Wolin's major work, *Politics and Vision*, where continuities and discontinuities in the life of political philosophy are panoramically observed. To treat Wolin's work only in reference to his war with the behavioralists is to constrict unnecessarily the universe of one of the most imaginative theorists.

A brief examination of the contribution of thinkers such as Charles Taylor, MacIntyre and Ryan regarding science and theory permits Bernstein to argue that a more complex orientation is emerging. A convergence of critiques of mainstream social science occurs (pp. 112-114). Thinkers such as Taylor give an indispensable, lucid critique of narrow empiricism, and point out complexities. They employ logic without renouncing theory's value orientation and critical task. But no comprehensive philosophical stance is articulated.

The third part of the study is devoted to phenomenology. Bernstein introduces the phenomenological challenge to scientism by discussing first Sellars' synoptic vision. Sellars seeks to unify the scientific and the manifest image of man. He attempts to ground the manifest image of man in an explanation of it "through more fundamental scientific principles." Again, "science alone is the measure of reality, and the standard for assessing legitimate knowledge of what human beings are" (p. 119). Sellars deals with both images of man: scientific and man-in-the-world. He does not deny the latter as narrow empiricists do, but he incorporates it in the scientific view, the primacy of which remains incontestable. Sellars' vision is sophisticated only by comparison with the crude narrowness of the logical empiricists. It is, in reality, an impoverished version of humanity. Bernstein is attracted to it, its claim to a grand synthesis. It is in light of Sellars' insistence on giving primacy to science that Bernstein introduces the phenomenological philosophy of Husserl. Briefly put, Bernstein sees Husserl's synthesis as a critique of the supposed primacy of science. Science — in Husserl's claim the mathematization of the world — and man-in-the-world, what Husserl calls the *Lebenswelts* must be bracketed; "we must perform a type of *epoché* in which we transform what seems to be so obvious and unproblematic into an enigma, and make it the subject of an independent investigation" (pp. 129-30). And this demands what Husserl calls the transcendental *epoché*. Husserl ultimately rejects the possibility of reducing the sciences of man to the natural sciences; nor should the natural sciences be the model. Here lies Husserl's indictment of Sellars' argument. Bernstein insists that Husserl does not assert "the ontological primacy of the *Lebenswelt*" (p. 129). It seems to me that unless the *Lebenswelt* is the proper grounding of ontology the transcendental turn must be seen as a pitiful absurdity. Husserl is severely critical of the scientific mentality. Though he wishes to exit the realm of mere appearance,

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he cannot constitute the avenue to transcendence outside the world of perception. It is in this sense that the *Lebenswelt* is the source of its own transcendence, the resolution of the enigma — what normally is unproblematic — the manifest image of man.

It is precisely this ontologization of the phenomenal world that Schutz wishes to push even further into the essence of inter-subjectivity. Schutz, whose thought Bernstein examines in a comprehensive introductory manner, struggles against Husserl's inadequate ontology and Weber's insufficient concept of *Verstehen*. I believe that Schutz was correct regarding Husserl, but as far as Weber was concerned I believe he ignored the mediating role of culture, a role absolutely indispensable for Weber. Ontology is filtered through cultural structures. Bernstein's interpretation differs from mine. He examines Schutz's concept of *Verstehen*, his concept of time, structure and constitution. Schutz, according to Bernstein, abolishes the either/or dichotomy present in vivid pronouncements in Sellars and Husserl (p. 157). Though he enriches our understanding of the manifest image of man, Schutz — and the phenomenological movement as a whole — is declared inadequate. In their perspective, the phenomenologist as theorist "is not directly concerned with judging, evaluating, or condemning existing forms of social and political reality, or with changing the world" (p. 169). Phenomenology is inherently limited; it is incapable of rising to a level of significant socio-political critique.

With this verdict Bernstein turns to the last part of his inquiry — critical theory. After a brief commentary on Horkheimer, ignoring Adorno and Marcuse, he concentrates on Habermas. The admiration he has for Habermas is quite evident. Here we are offered a systematic and comprehensive introduction to Habermas's thought. A mild criticism is voiced occasionally. Habermas is presented as *the* synthesizer. He is reconstituting the ground upon which the web of reason is to unfold.

I have enormous difficulty accepting Habermas as the saviour of theory. I see his effort as primarily epistemological. Unlike all the great theorists of the Frankfurt School who were fundamentally articulators of ontological arguments, Habermas does not confront the ontological question as *the* vital issue. (Bernstein disagrees with this — p. 192). The obsessive manner with which Habermas seeks to incorporate new directions in the various disciplines in his own thought is a sign of weakness and not of strength. I believe that Habermas's best work belongs to the beginning of his career and fame. His most recent work is repetitive and regressive. By comparison with the giants of the Frankfurt School, he is the living decline and academization of critical theory. But at issue here is Bernstein's promise of the restructuring of theory and not any specific part of his orchestrated scenario.

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Bernstein states that “an adequate, comprehensive political and social theory must be at once empirical, interpretative and critical.” He also informs us that there is a dialectical involvement between empirical research, interpretation, and critique (pp. xiv and 235). Bernstein seems to feel that the convergence he has identified in the polemics; the logical, internal and external weaknesses he has shown to exist in the schools of thought he has investigated; and the errors and insights he has identified *do* lead to the restructuring of theory. Proclaiming his optimism, tame as it might be, and stating and restating his necessary conditions for an adequate theory cannot and do not establish dialectical relations. In this study a great deal about *theoria* and science is intimated. But the exact nature of both remains quite elusive. When Bernstein speaks of his ideal theory is he referring to a comprehensive general theory? He states that “the primary problem today is the reconciliation of the classical aim of politics — to enable human beings to live good and just lives in a political community — with the modern demand of social thought, which is to achieve scientific knowledge of the workings of society” (p. xxii). This most noble aim is to be resolved by a miraculous resolution of the qualitative difference between science and philosophy or by rigorous structuring of the spheres of the two modes of thought. Bernstein does not establish the ground upon which such reconciliation can or ought to take place. The suggested dialectical movement never does emerge. Instead of philosophical articulation and insight we have erudite scholasticism. Instead of rigorous philosophizing we have a grand sociological overview devoid of conceptual clarity and of penetrating analysis regarding its own most strategic and vital concepts and values.

Bernstein in his optimism sees theory rising from its ashes like the mythological phoenix. After all, for Bernstein the ashes were only apparent, not real. But *theoria* is in eclipse, and Bernstein’s study does not alter this state of affairs. I suspect that the possibility for any revival and ultimate restructuring would demand an imaginative reinterpretation of Weber’s problematic juxtaposed with an interpretation of Marx and Freud — the three image builders of modernity. And I must confess, in a total absence of optimism, that this can only be a beginning. In a rare moment of powerful insight, Bernstein states that “there seems to be a natural progression from early Enlightenment ideals to contemporary positivist and empiricist modes of thought. What were once great liberating ideas have turned into suffocating strait jackets. There is a hidden nihilism in the dialectic of this development” (p. xxiii). This has not been confronted. Though eminently able for such confrontation, Bernstein opted for more secure glories.

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