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Spirituals and the Language of the Oppressed: A Response to Rorty

Matthew Schlecht

In creating his liberal society, Richard Rorty argues that the intellectual must be an ironist. An ironist is a person who recognizes that it is impossible to find truths "out there" in the world. The ironist instead examines his/her own historical and conceptual background in order to find the contingency of what is commonly called truth. Once recognizing this, the ironist need not become a skeptic. Rather, the goal of a liberal society is to build solidarity among its members. Rorty uses this notion of solidarity to explain why we must work to take into account different world views.

However, Rorty's conception of how we relate to world views different from our own involves a troubling distinction between the intellectual and the "other." It is this concept of the "other" which I will examine in this paper. For Rorty, there exists a gulf between the intellectual and "other," caused by the fact that the oppressed "other" does not possess language, or rather, a voice in society. Therefore, the liberal ironist must speak for the oppressed. bell hooks, however, disagrees fundamentally with Rorty's notion of the oppressed as "other," and also points out that oppressed peoples do indeed have their own language. In fact, they have a rather unique view of the prejudiced society in which they live. It is my intention in this paper to use hooks' argument as the basis for a response to Rorty. In order to strengthen her position, I will also look to the American spirituals of the slave for more insights regarding the language of the oppressed. These songs, I think, make up a concrete rejection of Rorty's claims. Finally, I will discuss the work of Gayatri Spivak, and her insights into the dangers of speaking for the "other."

First of all, let us examine the premises of Rorty's argument that the oppressed do not have a language to work with. Because of the liberal ironist's recognition of the contingency of knowledge, all "facts" must be looked upon as simply products of a certain historical circumstance. There are no ahistorical truths. Thus, when society decides to disavow, for example, the law that "('Blacks have no rights which whites are bound to respect'), we have made a change rather than discovered a fact" (Rorty, 77). The point here is that the notion of all "men" being equal is not a truth, according to Rorty. Rather, it is the product of a certain world view. How then, does Rorty account for ethics, if one may use such a word?

Rorty postulates that suffering is the one thing which connects all humans together. There can be no real argument against cruelty. However, if we wish

to avoid suffering, we therefore are bound to respect each other. But Rorty also states:

> What matters for the liberal ironist is not finding such a reason but making sure that she notices suffering when it occurs. Her hope is that she will not be limited by her own final vocabulary when faced with the possibility of humiliating someone with a quite different final vocabulary (93).

One might translate this as a sort of statement of political correctness. Rorty does not want to offend the "other" through ignorance on his own part. Yet what really occurs when one "notices suffering"? This new vocabulary which Rorty advocates seems to be dangerous in that noticing suffering does not always mean anything will be done about it. Also, it is important that Rorty does not wish to attempt to understand this suffering from the victim's standpoint. Rather, he is satisfied with a distanced relationship to the person suffering.

Indeed, Rorty seems to make the oppressed figure a symbol of "suffering" rather than a human being who suffers. Which brings us to a most controversial passage in his work *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, where he says:

> [V]ictims of cruelty, people who are suffering, do not have much in the way of a language. That is why there is no such things as the 'voice of the oppressed' or the 'language of the victims.' The language the victims once used is not working anymore, and they are suffering too much to put new words together. So the job of putting their situation into language is going to have to be done for them by somebody else. The liberal novelist, poet, or journalist is good at that (95).

This strikes me as a very dangerous statement. In it, Rorty completely strips agency from the oppressed, and makes them out to be little more than animals who cannot speak for themselves. This idea of expressing one's self is important for Rorty, because he wants to keep the public and private spheres separate. A language is not the same thing as a belief system. The oppressed may have strong feelings in regards to their situation, but cannot do anything about it. In other words, the notion of the categorical imperative, for example, holding public life together is untenable. For until all share the same vocabulary, nothing can be done publicly. He says, "The idea that liberal societies are bound together by philosophical beliefs seems to me ludicrous. What binds societies together are common vocabularies and common hopes" (p. 86). Rorty insists that we must

confine our irony and longing for "self-creation" to the private realm, and concentrate on avoiding cruelty in the public sphere.

Yet this presents some problems for the above-mentioned oppressed. I do not think that Rorty *wants* to keep the voice of the oppressed silenced; however, he seems to think that as long as it is, liberals will be able to adequately speak for the oppressed. He inhibits the development of the oppressed voice by not allowing the "other" to make the jump from the private sphere to the public sphere. It is a vicious circle. You cannot participate in the public sphere if you do not share the common vocabulary, but you cannot share in the common vocabulary if the public sphere has denied the validity of your existence.

Rorty claims that oppressed peoples "suffer" too much to be able to create a language out of their experiences. However, bell hooks argues just the opposite: "I have confronted silence, inarticulateness. When I say, then, that these words emerge from suffering, I refer to that personal struggle to name that location from which I come to voice—that space of my theorizing" (146). For hooks, then, silence did not just happen. This silence was created by the oppressor. It is up to those oppressed to find their voices in the context of their suffering, and to combat this silence. Rorty does not seem to notice, or perhaps keeps quiet about the fact that when the liberal speaks for the oppressed, she makes them into an "other," and dehumanizes them.

Because of this, hooks says, "Language is also a place of struggle. . . . This language that enabled me to attend graduate school, to write a dissertation, to speak at job interviews, carries the scent of oppression" (146). This struggle is an attempt to find a place in the White language game, so to speak, while remaining rooted in the traditions of the Black community. hooks discovers that the best way to do this is to understand her unique position "on the margin." This is a very astute way of looking at language, and delivers perhaps the most serious blow to Rorty's dismissal of the oppressed voice. hooks discusses in *Yearning* a passage from another one of her works, *Feminist Theory*, which I found to be particularly enlightening. As she notes, Black people often worked in the center of the White world, and had to survive in the midst of it. Therefore, they gained a unique understanding of this world, as well as their own. Because of this understanding, it becomes easier to critique and enter into discussion with both worlds, which is exactly what hooks is doing in most of her works.

Thus, hooks states that "Understanding marginality as position and place of resistance is crucial for oppressed, exploited, colonized people" (hooks 1990, 150). By recognizing the power of the margin, a language can be created in a challenge to Rorty's view. Rorty wants to place the oppressed in the margin, and leave them there with no voice. He underestimates the knowledge which the oppressed gain from their position. And yet, as hooks says, liberals like Rorty "say that the discourse on marginality, on difference has moved beyond a

discussion of 'us' and 'them.' They do not speak of how this movement has taken place" (*Ibid.*, 151). By eliminating differences, these liberals also eliminate the voice of the oppressed. As hooks has stated all along, then, language really is a place of struggle.

One of the main points which hooks stresses as essential to the struggle is the notion of cultural criticism accompanied by concrete action. It is not enough to theorize about the suffering of the "other." One's identity within society can indeed produce a language, and therefore, this identity must be celebrated not only privately but publicly as well. Rorty, however, has problematically argued that *only* the ironist can operate in the public sphere. Cases of suffering within society can be dealt with in terms of public policy which seeks to protect the freedom of the oppressed, who cannot speak for themselves. However, this does not leave much room for a self-affirming "active freedom" on the part of the oppressed. For Rorty, the notion that we as humans are born with the right to freedom should "be reserved for private life" (*Ibid.*, 65). Rorty, then, contributes to the lack of an oppressed voice by insisting on White domination of the public sphere. Once again, such a view is inconsistent with the knowledge we have of the realities of the oppressed living in majority society. If this yearning for freedom is kept closeted, and

> [i]f there is not a mutual exchange between the cultural subjects (African-Americans, for example) that are written about and the critics who write about them, a politic of domination is easily reproduced wherein intellectual elites assume an old colonizing role, that of privileged interpreter—cultural overseers (hooks 1990, 9).

Regardless of this domination, however, the struggle will continue as it has for many years within the African-American community to create and develop a voice as an extension of identity. Hooks stresses the importance of a Black aesthetic, as a way to enhance pride and develop a language. Rorty does not seem to see these examples of an "oppressed language" within our own American history.

Music, for example, has always been a very useful medium for communicating ideas. When Africans were brought to North America as slaves for plantation owners, they were thrown into a foreign world with nothing to call their own. Since a good deal of them did not even share a common language, it might seem as though Rorty is right. The slaves' old vocabulary was not working anymore, and they were too oppressed to develop a new one. Yet, I will argue that this is not true.

Christianity provided the framework for the slaves to establish a kind of communal language. As stories from the White man's religion began to be passed

around, songs were developed right in the fields, and were sung as the slaves toiled. We know these songs as spirituals. From a practical standpoint, these songs made the work go a little bit easier, and substituted for the traditional African songs which the slaves had known in their homelands. Some of them also gave the hope that one day their troubles would end and they would meet Jesus in heaven. Again, it would seem as though these oppressed people had not found a new vocabulary, but rather were reduced to little more than animals, even in their attempts to make life more bearable. However, these songs were much more than work songs or songs of praise.

The spirituals are the perfect format for coded language. The slaves simply used the Biblical stories from their master's religion and set them to the rhythms of Africa. By using these biblical stories, the (so-called) Christian master could hardly stop the singing. However, these stories suited the slaves' experience remarkably well. And so, they could be used as coded messages. For instance, in the song "Go Down, Moses," we hear the story of Moses leading the Israelites from the land of Egypt:

> Go down, Moses,
> Way down in Egypt land.
> Tell ole' Pharaoh,
> Let my people go.

This situation described in song is obviously comparable to the slave yearning to be freed from his/her master's hand in the colonies and America. Not only did this song bring a recognition of injustice and freedom to the slaves' vocabulary, but it also could be used as a secret code for an intended escape. To the White master who may have heard this song, perhaps it was nothing more than newfound faith in God; however, it served a much greater purpose in the slave community.

Other spirituals which have the same coded purposes include "Steal Away" and "Follow the Drinking Gourd." In "Steal Away," we hear

> Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus!
> Steal away, steal away home,
> I ain't got long to stay here!

Of course, this song also uses the metaphor of stealing away to describe dying and going "home" to heaven. However, depending on when it was used, the slaves might also use this as a physical "stealing away"; a sign for an escape from the plantation. "Follow the Drinking Gourd" uses a more complex metaphor for its message:

Follow the drinkin' gourd
Follow the drinkin' gourd
For the old man is a-waitin' for to carry you to freedom

The "drinkin' gourd" in this spiritual is a name for the Big Dipper constellation. Thus, here is an example of a spiritual giving directions for an escapee's route northward. This clever use of secret code shows the subversive context which the slaves gave to the impotent religious language of the Whites.

What I have been trying to describe here is the ability of an oppressed group of people who have not been provided with much in the way of tools to survive in a foreign environment to do just that: create new ways of using a language which had been used for their very oppression. This is the task of the "oppressed voice." As Arthur Jones notes, there was an "ability of the captives to utilize the past to transform present reality as well as stake out clear visions for the future" (Jones, 43). Contrary to Rorty's belief, the oppressed are in a very unique and advantageous position to create a language. For they have enough understanding of the oppressor's language in order to adapt it, and use it against that same oppressor. This is what hooks means by finding a place on the "margin."

The genius of the spirituals was that they functioned as a revolt to the society which had produced the original language of their content. In other words, they could criticize the White man from within the context of his own religion! Take, for example, "All God's Children":

I got a robe
You got a robe
All God's children got a robe
Everybody talkin' 'bout heaven ain't goin' there

The irony here, of course, is that the slave has perhaps taken the Christian message to heart more so than the followers of the religion. How then, can one deny that these slaves had found a vocabulary in which to publicly express and alleviate their oppressed condition? It seems as though a language of the oppressed does in fact exist. The trouble now becomes whether or not the intellectual ironist will recognize this language.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak addresses some of the same issues that have been talked about here. She is most concerned with whether or not the South Asian woman has any voice at all. Ultimately, she decides that the answer to this question is no; however, she does point out that it is up to the intellectual to interact with this voice. In other words, it is not enough for these intellectuals to recognize the language of the spirituals, for example, as an oppressed voice, for

"[i]n seeking to learn to speak to (rather than listen to or speak for) the historically muted subject of the subaltern woman, the postcolonial intellectual *systematically* 'unlearns' female privilege" (Spivak, 295). There is work to be done upon recognizing the legitimacy of the "other." The intellectual must be able to discard this very notion of "other" and dialogue with the oppressed as individuals.

Spivak traces these ideas of the "other" to issues of dominance and essentialism. The need to speak for the oppressed, proclaimed by intellectuals such as Rorty, results from an attempt to assert dominance, and in particular, Spivak argues, male dominance. She uses the example of the practice of *sati* in India. The British ban on *sati* had much to do with an attempt to play the "rescuer" of Indian women. As Spivak says, "The abolition of this rite by the British rule has been generally understood as a case of 'White men saving brown women from brown men' " (*Ibid.*, 297). Therefore, it is important to notice what can be gained by advancing such a position as Rorty's. By eliminating the voice of the "other," and doing the talking for them, a figure such as Rorty's intellectual ironist is able to appear as the good liberal, always wanting to alleviate the suffering of the "other." Yet, by doing this, the liberal essentializes this "other" into a massive lump with no individual characteristics or voices. Instead of working to create a real dialogue with the oppressed, the liberal establishes dominion over them.

This dominion is akin to the physical slavery which I referred to above. By refusing to treat the Africans as human beings, the White slave owner made them slaves and saw them only as slaves. These people did indeed have their own language; however, the slave owner refused to see that in order to obtain his/her own needs. When Rorty refuses to engage in a dialogue with the oppressed, then, and insists on treating them as an "other" who must be spoken for, he enslaves and locks their voices out of society.

I hope to have shown in this paper that a language of the oppressed does indeed exist, and that the intellectual ironist helps to create the very oppression which he/she claims to be alleviating when speaking for the "other." The American spirituals were a kind of voice from the margin, which bell hooks talks about in her work. The authors of these songs created a language from observing the world of the oppressor, and using those observations in useful ways for their own lives and well-being. Thus, I would argue that there is no basis for Rorty's claim that there is no language of the oppressed, other than his failure to recognize this language and enter into dialogue with it.

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