
Symposia on Gender, Race and Philosophy

Volume 8, number 1. Winter 2012

<http://web.mit.edu/sgrp>

The Traditions of Historical Others

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I.

When a distinguished American philosopher who has spent a considerable part of a productive scholarly career translating and interpreting a great and sometimes obscure German philosopher to an English-speaking audience turns at length to think about directly social-historical and political questions of moment—race and empire, for example—there is, one might expect, reason to pay attention. This is because our wager will be, naturally enough, that distinctive *philosophic* reflection on these matters will have something worthwhile to teach us about how best to *approach* them—how to formulate the most fruitful perspective, what the intellectual sources are for the most relevant or urgent questions, what

considerations of voice and location and power are necessary, and so on. For surely such topics as race and empire are topics about which a good deal has already been written, comparatively speaking, by historians, sociologists, and anthropologists. So chances are that, however widely learned about the relevant social and political past, we are likely to read our philosopher less for new facts than for how she or he teaches us to connect the historical context to *philosophic* or anyway philosophically-*inclined* questions about the present. In short, our wager is going to be that we ought to read our philosopher for the *methodological* uptake, the conceptual yield of *this* way of thinking about the topics at hand, as opposed to others.

In his book, *Race, Empire, and the Idea of Human Development*, Thomas McCarthy takes up a large and complex set of issues that are central to the very making of the modern world, and vital, moreover, to the conundrums that shape our immediate present.¹ What animates him is an all-too familiar paradox within the story of Western liberal humanism, namely that its understanding of itself as “universal history” has seemed inseparable from the moral evils of racial injustice and imperial domination. Racism and imperialism, he says, appeared together historically in the modern world, and have been an intractable feature of it ever since. Both racial and imperial thought, McCarthy tells us at the very outset, have “drawn heavily upon developmental schemes in which designated groups have been represented not only as racially distinct but also as occupying different stages of development, with their degrees of advancement often being understood to depend on their race and to warrant various forms of hierarchical relations” (1). For McCarthy, however, this historical fact is not fatal for the development idea (let alone the liberal one). The misuses of development do not exhaust its possibilities: “Like enlightenment ideas more generally, it is inherently ambivalent in character, both indispensable and dangerous” (18). And consequently it

requires not dismissal but “ongoing deconstruction and reconstruction” (18) so as to disable its vices and advance its virtues.

McCarthy’s book is meant to be a series of committed exploratory essays—half on race, half on empire—concerned to show that a viable conception of development (and its various enlightenment cognates) is possible, and indeed important, for thinking about the prospects of global justice. He is explicit about the approach he affirms and commends. Not surprisingly, for anyone familiar with his work, McCarthy aligns himself with Habermas and his idea of “critical history with a practical intent” against Foucault and his idea of “genealogy” (13-14). He shares the view of many who align themselves this way that the Nietzschean and Foucauldian idea of genealogy is unhelpfully subversive and dismissive of enlightenment, progress, development, modernity. On his view, only Habermas’s recasting of Kant’s moral theory into a “discourse-ethical principle of equal participation by those affected in establishing the narrative structures that govern their life together” supplies the necessary analytical tools to “decenter modes of theorizing that have underwritten Eurocentrism and white supremacy in the modern world” (14). For McCarthy there is an *unfinished* project of development to be undertaken that Kant and Habermas distinctly enable. And in pursuing this unfinished project, his “guiding assumption,” he says, “is that the resources required to reconstruct our traditions of social and political thought can be wrested from those very traditions, provided that they are critically appropriated and opened to contestation by their historical ‘others’” (14).

Now this seems to me a rich and troubling formulation of methodological first principles, and in what follows, rather than take up certain substantive areas of disagreement concerning liberalism and development, I am going to consider something of how it constrains the character of

McCarthy’s inquiries on race and empire. For what may at first sight seem an innocuous formulation is, upon reflection, one that exemplifies a mode of philosophic investigation that presupposes the basic sufficiency of its own moral-intellectual resources, the generosity and respectful tolerance of its attitude toward historical others.² But, as Romand Coles might ask, how *receptive* is this generosity? How responsive is it to *receiving* as distinct from giving? Does it open itself to criticism only so as to strengthen its basic position? How *dialogical* is its ethical stance?³ Notably, McCarthy’s approach bears significant contrast with, say, James Tully’s concern to refigure a “public philosophy” to similarly engage a worldly range of moral and political preoccupations.⁴ Tully, of course, aligns himself precisely *with* Foucault (and a number of other skeptics, including Wittgenstein and Skinner) *against* the conceptual-political implications of Habermas’s translation of Kantian moral foundations that McCarthy finds compelling. For him, McCarthy’s confidence in the resources of his own traditions—his idea that all they need is to be “opened to contestation by [their] historical ‘others’”—would be questionable, too meager and passive and monological a mode of generosity. Tully is committed to what he calls a “reciprocal elucidation” between philosophic and reflective public discourses that allows for a more robustly “dialogical” way of conceiving their relationship. I aim to take seriously McCarthy’s “guiding assumptions” about the value and work of moral-intellectual traditions, what he presupposes is entailed in reconstructing them in an anti-racist and anti-imperialist direction, and especially how he imagines “opening” them up to their historical “others.” But looking to expand Tully’s idea of “reciprocal elucidation” in the direction of considerations of moral-intellectual *tradition* suggested by such thinkers as Alasdair MacIntyre, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Talal Asad, and Michael Walzer, I am going to wonder aloud whether a *receptive* generosity can at all be activated without a more substantial address toward, and engagement with, traditions other than one’s own. And on

my view, this entails, on the one hand, *unlearning* the presumptive privilege of one's own moral-intellectual traditions, and on the other, *learning* something of the internal composition of questions and answers through which the relevant traditions of others have been historically shaped. Receptive generosity in a dialogue of traditions depends on this practice of learning and unlearning.

II.

To begin with, let us take McCarthy's meditation on the problem of the progress of historical consciousness of racial injustice in the United States in his chapter "Coming to Terms with the Past: On the Politics of the Memory of Slavery." This is an especially stimulating chapter because it seeks to grapple with a fundamental issue at the center of the racial present of the past in the US, namely the unrepaired injustice of slavery. To his credit, McCarthy is one among a small number of philosophers who in recent years have tried to think through the moral justification of reparations for slavery.⁵ His reflections are inspired by the German historians' debate of the mid-1980s about the significance of the Nazi past for the German present. It was urged by some that it was time to put the Nazi past behind them, that to continue to dwell on that past "served no better purpose than self-flagellation" (100). Famously, Habermas (among others) took a strong position *against* this view, arguing that there was an obligation "to keep alive, without distortion, and not only in intellectual form, the memory of the sufferings of those who were murdered by German hands," or else "our fellow Jewish citizens and the sons, daughters, and grandchildren of all those who were murdered would feel themselves unable to breathe in our country" (102-103). These are of course noble sentiments; but they are also central, I think, to McCarthy's idea of the role of history and objectivity (104) in shaping a responsible memory of the past: public memory of an unjust past is inseparable from the possibility of a progressive orientation to the future. And the lesson

McCarthy takes away from this debate in Germany is that "the politics of memory practiced there since the 1960s has had a profound effect upon political culture and national identity" (107). His aim is to use this example to gain some perspective on the problem of the historical consciousness of slavery in the US.

Now, central to McCarthy's account of the dismal state of the historical consciousness of slavery in the US is his idea that it is only with the rise of the post-World War II civil rights movement that the hegemony of the pro-Southern, anti-black perspective on slavery (such as that of antebellum historian Ulrich B. Phillips who believed that plantation slavery helped to civilize the slaves) was finally undermined. In his sketch of the historiography of slavery over the first several decades of the twentieth century, McCarthy mentions the well-known fact that black historians dissented from this white supremacist picture of the slave past. He notes *en passant*, for example, that Carter G. Woodson's seminal *Journal of Negro History*, launched in 1916, provided an important venue for alternative perspectives on the past; and he also notes, again *en passant*, that during the inter-war years the work of black historians continued to be disregarded, including W.E.B. Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction*, published in 1935. But curiously, this does not signal to McCarthy that there may be another *moral-intellectual tradition* embodying the memory of slavery and the black experience of racial injustice more generally, another moral-intellectual space of (lay, perhaps, more than professional) writing and reading and debate, which may be indispensable to his story of the progress of the historical consciousness of slavery in the US—namely an African American one, that is not merely "marginalized in the profession by the white mainstream" (109) tradition, but is non-identical with it. For after all, Woodson's work (such as, *A Century of Negro Migration* [1918], *The Negro in Our History* [1922], *The Mind of the Negro* [1926], and *The Mis-Education of the Negro* [1933]), and Du Bois's work (including, *The*

Suppression of the African Slave Trade [1896], *The Souls of Black Folk* [1903], *The American Negro* [1928], and *Black Folk, Then and Now* [1939]), are not merely isolated instances of black dissent, nor merely attempts by black intellectuals to speak to the dominant tradition of American historiography. They are dense discursive moments in a moral-intellectual tradition of black historical consciousness about, among other things, precisely the slave past. They build on earlier work, George Washington Williams's *History of the Negro Race in America from 1619 to 1880* (1883), for example, and they have in turn been built upon by subsequent generations of African American historians and social critics.⁶

So when McCarthy writes that "Americans" are unaware that racism is "integral" to US history and identity the question is: to *whom* is he referring? *All* Americans? *Which* Americans take (and have historically taken) race for granted, and are "without a developed awareness of the sources and causes of US racialized practices and attitudes" (114)? Again, is it *all* Americans? Furthermore, what standard of American racial consciousness do McCarthy's formulations tacitly invoke? What powers of racial ignorance or racial denial are being avowed or misrecognized in these formulations? Something in other words is oddly askew in McCarthy's appraisal of the racial landscape of American historical consciousness. Is it perhaps truer to say that *some* Americans (largely *white* Americans) don't take seriously the historical *archive* of black historical writing (lay and professional) from the nineteenth century to the present, in which a rich and diverse consciousness of the historical past of slavery is constructed and argued over?

In order to activate this archive and the moral-intellectual tradition that constitutes it, however, one will need a somewhat different conception than McCarthy has of what it means to learn from the traditions of historical others. On McCarthy's view, remember, his well-windowed traditions

already have the basic resources they need to reconstruct themselves in such a way as to free themselves from racial presumption and the practices and institutions of racial injustice; all that is required, he says, is that they open themselves to contestation by their historical others. Evidently, nothing more stringent is required, nothing say more *actively* engaged, certainly nothing reciprocal (in the sense that Tully suggests), nothing that entails learning to hear the internal idioms of these historical others. By contrast, to practice a more receptive generosity (of the sort that Coles urges), is to practice a mode of giving to others that is simultaneously a mode of receiving from them, and thus to demand of one's intellectual traditions that they strive to enact precisely the labor of learning that might enable one to grasp something of the internal texture and hermeneutic preoccupations and perspectives of one's historical others. It is not enough to merely render oneself passively open to contestation by historical others. Rather, what is necessary, in the instance at hand, is to reconstruct the distinctive questions and answers that constitute the historical traditions through which African Americans have thought and argued about racial slavery and its contemporary implications for their sense of social and moral identity.⁷

III.

As is well-enough known, the story of the colonial project from the fifteenth century onwards is not only the story of the conquest of non-European peoples and the appropriation and exploitation of their lands and resources, it is also the story of the *justification* for this violation under the varied descriptions of enlightenment, civilization, progress, development, and modernization. These idioms of European (and later, American) self-congratulation were, as McCarthy says, "deployed to reduce the cognitive dissonance between liberal universalism and liberal imperialism" (166). I am going to focus my attention on the chapter of McCarthy's book in which this formulation appears because it seems to me to

throw into the starkest relief the stakes of his argument about empire and development—as well as its limits.

McCarthy does not believe that the empirical fact of their historical convergence means that imperialism is constitutive for liberalism.⁸ This view he thinks is at the center of the incoherence—or anyway, the error—of those he refers to, comprehensively, as “postcolonial” thinkers. They are the central target of this particular essay, which is organized to demonstrate, on the one hand, the dead-end of their objections, and on the other, that what he calls the “development dilemma” that grows out of the internal tension between liberalism’s universalism and its dependence on hierarchy “cannot be theoretically eliminated, but may be politically displaced to a predicament with which we have to come to terms” (166). Not surprisingly, for McCarthy it is Kant who first recognizes this dilemma in his distinction between a “moral-legal standpoint” from which Europe is denounced for its evils, and an “anthropological-historical standpoint” from which those evils are rationalized (169). Kant, McCarthy says in an exculpatory gesture, “lived with the tension because he believed he could not do otherwise” (170). At any rate, in the nineteenth century, the dilemma remains evident in the “de-sublimated atmosphere” of John Stuart Mill, in the tension between his pronounced value of liberal autonomy and the paternalism of his attitude toward non-European people (176). And of course it does not disappear in Marx, who, McCarthy argues, retains the virtue of holding on to both horns of the universalism versus developmentalism dilemma (178). It is in fact *this* that will separate him from “postcolonial” thinkers who, losing confidence in Marx’s revolutionary universalism, “have grabbed on to the other horn of the dilemma: morally condemning neoimperial relations while dismissing developmental theory as an ideology of empire” (178).

This direction, however, derived from varieties of anti-humanism, McCarthy regards as a complete dead-end. He sketches “two broad streams” of “postcolonial” theory (one stemming from Foucault, the other from Derrida) that pursue a type of criticism aimed principally at “resisting Eurocentrism” (183). But both these streams are found wanting because they seem unable to answer the basic question: “in the name of what are these modes of resistance, transgression, and subversion exercised?” (183). If, McCarthy maintains, this sort of critique is “not to end merely in parasitic forms of discursive dissolution and identification through opposition, it should provide some idea of possible alternatives to liberal and Marxist conceptions of development” (183). And since apparently they cannot do so without drawing precisely on *modern* conceptual frames of reference, the repressed returns and we are once again faced with the intractable horns of our developmental dilemma. Here, McCarthy mobilizes Dipesh Chakrabarty’s *Provincializing Europe* to argue the view that we are in any case *all* moderns now and therefore even postcolonials cannot hope to think without European categories of thought.⁹ Consequently, in his view, we can do no better than to seek a path beyond the choice between “the ravages of neoliberal and neoconservative globalization, on the one side, and wholesale rejections of modernization, on the other” (184). And this leads McCarthy straight back to Habermas’s discourse theory of democracy with its internal principle of “reasoned agreement,” which in turn serves to underscore the originary virtues of Kant’s “reflective judgment.”

Now, it is true that postcolonial thinkers (by which *I* mean thinkers formed intellectually within discursive traditions that emerge in colonies and postcolonies) cannot escape modernity. This is an empirical fact—with an imperial history. But McCarthy, I think, draws a mistaken if familiar conclusion from it. For him this fact simply underlines his expectation that such thinkers as Chakrabarty are always-

already assimilated to the structure and sensibility of *his* moral-intellectual traditions, and are therefore seamlessly and transparently apprehensible to him from within them. Consequently McCarthy has no critical work to do to inquire upon, much less excavate, the genealogy of questions and answers that constitute any other moral-intellectual tradition relevant to Chakrabarty's thought. He cannot imagine, for example, that Chakrabarty inhabits the hegemony of the modern *differently* than he does, and does so precisely because Chakrabarty is partly constituted by, and is an active participant in, a non-European moral-intellectual tradition, one of whose nodal points is the work of Subaltern Studies. Indeed *this*, and not the banal fact of our modernity, is Chakrabarty's point: from the perspective of a modern, middle class, Bengali intellectual, he writes, European thought is *both* "indispensable and inadequate" for understanding India.¹⁰ In other words, the historical fact of his modernity does not simply translate into the normative force of its values. McCarthy doesn't imagine, then, that in order to take up *Provincializing Europe* in the affiliative way he aims to do, it is necessary to think the larger cognitive and normative problem-space of debates within which that book is an intervention. And were this undertaken it might of course lead to a useful contextualizing discussion, not only about relevant asymmetries between McCarthy's and Chakrabarty's "habitations of modernity"; but also about relevant divergences *within* Subaltern Studies itself concerning the meaning and implications of colonial modernity—the recognition, say, that Chakrabarty's sense of its measure might not be exactly shared, for example, by Partha Chatterjee in such work as *The Politics of the Governed*, or more recently in *Lineages of Political Society*.¹¹

In other words, postcolonial thinkers (like Chakrabarty and Chatterjee) are indeed modern insofar as they have *learned* to read and *think* in relation to the moral-intellectual traditions of Europe (and more lately, America); they have even learned

to *inhabit* these traditions almost as their own. But does this necessarily imply that their formations and habitations are *identical* with those traditions, or are interchangeable with their European or Euro-American contemporaries? Is the "narrative life" presupposed by those traditions self-evidently, unambivalently, theirs? Do their moral and intellectual traditions, however modern, have the same sources, cognitive structures, affective sensibilities, or orientations of address? It may be doubtful. So if postcolonial intellectuals have been obliged historically to learn to think inside of modern European and Euro-American moral-intellectual traditions, as indeed they have been, might it not be a reasonable expectation that Europeans and Euro-Americans *unlearn* the taken-for-granted privilege of their traditions and *learn* to think inside of the moral languages of their historical others, rather than merely seeking to assimilate them?

IV.

So when a distinguished philosopher such as Thomas McCarthy who has spent a remarkable scholarly career helping us to see the best of a certain strain of Continental critical theory *turns* to the historical world of racial and imperial injustice, we feel entitled to hold ourselves ready for a valuable lesson in method. But what is to be the *work* of method here? Very crucially, among other labors, it is the work of learning how to *listen*. It may be easy to forget that the story of race and empire in the modern world is not only the story of the making of discursive and non-discursive regimes of racial and colonial rule and representation, but also the story of *subjects*, constituted as racial and colonized others within these regimes, and who have sought in various intellectual ways to think through and argue about the origins, nature, and implications of their subordination. These arguments constitute the traditions of historical others. And therefore what matters, methodologically, as philosophy *turns* to this historical world, may not exactly—or at any rate,

may not *only*—be who vanquishes whom in the debate about the relative virtues of Habermas versus Foucault, or whether “liberal democracy” is to be the privileged direction of our political hope, but rather how Western philosophy (understood as a disciplinary dimension of a wider Euro-American discursive tradition) constructs a productive relationship with these traditions of its historical others. It is McCarthy, after all, who places this issue very squarely on the table—and happily so—when he provocatively raises the question of (or anyway avows his confidence in) the resources of *his* intellectual traditions in overcoming their implication in the history of racism and imperialism.

But if this is so everything must now hang on *how* this relationship is conceived, how one imagines a constructive dialogue among asymmetrically empowered intellectual traditions, or at least a dialogue in which one hegemonic intellectual tradition actively strives to hear and perhaps learn something from, not isolated texts assimilated into its own archive, but the sometimes barely translatable idiomatic debates that constitute the traditions of historical others. As I have suggested, among political philosophers James Tully has recently offered an attractive methodological way of beginning to think about this relationship or at least of setting it in conceptual motion, namely as a practice of “reciprocal elucidation” between academic philosophy and the reflective citizens who inhabit its wider discursive arena. This is certainly one way to activate the sort of receptive generosity that Romand Coles believes is missing from the otherwise well-intentioned stances adopted by contemporary moral philosophy—that is, activating a mode of giving to others that is also a mode of *receiving* from them. But on my view, in order to adequately receive what other traditions have to offer it may be that even this practice of generosity needs to be extended in such a way as to enable political philosophy to comprehend a reciprocal elucidation among moral and intellectual *traditions* thickly rather than thinly understood (in

ways suggested by MacIntyre, Gadamer, Asad, and Walzer). This is because moral and intellectual traditions (as indeed McCarthy implies about his own) embody more than merely haphazard relationships or points of view. To the contrary, they embody archives of formative debates, canons of interpretive practices, and interconnected styles of reasoning; they embody agonistically organized structures of authority, horizons of expectation, and animating memories—and these together help to shape a distinctive ethos and a distinctive way of inhabiting, comprehending, and engaging the historical world. And this means that the preoccupations and sensibilities of one moral-intellectual tradition are not *transparently* commensurable or interchangeable with the preoccupations and sensibilities of another. It requires a certain labor of learning how to read from *within* another tradition to determine what these are as moral and cognitive *languages*, and what sort of platform of translation and exchange needs to be constructed in order to effect a receptive dialogue with them.

¹ Thomas McCarthy, *Race, Empire, and the Idea of Human Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). Hereafter all references are in the text.

² One is reminded here of Richard Rorty’s confidence in the “well-windowed monads” of Western liberal democracy. See his defense of an “anti-anti-ethnocentrism” in “On Ethnocentrism: A Reply to Clifford Geertz” *Michigan Quarterly Review* (Summer 1986): 525-34.

³ See Romand Coles, *Rethinking Generosity: Critical Theory and the Politics of Caritas* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

⁴ See James Tully, *Public Philosophy in a New Key: volume 1, Democracy and Civic Freedom*, and *Public Philosophy in a New Key: volume 2, Imperialism and Civic Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

⁵ See, for example, Janna Thompson, *Taking Responsibility for the Past: Reparation and Historical Justice* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002). McCarthy had explored this theme in two related earlier essays: "Vergangenheitsbewältigung in the USA: On the Politics of the Memory of Slavery" *Political Theory* 30(2002): 623-648; and "Coming to Terms with Our Past, Part II: On the Morality and Politics of Reparations for Slavery" *Political Theory* 32(2004): 750-772.

⁶ For a fine account of Williams, see John Hope Franklin, *George Washington Williams: A Biography* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).

⁷ This is partly of course the debate about the "trauma" of the slave past and its shaping impact on the historical self-consciousness of an African American community. See Ron Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001); and see also the argument that African Americans should abandon the preoccupation with the slave past in Charles Johnson, "The End of the Black American Narrative" *American Scholar* (Summer 2008): 32-42.

⁸ Oddly, McCarthy gives as one reason for this view the fact that "critiques advanced by anticolonial liberals have typically appealed to liberal values" (169). But why should this familiar fact about anticolonial political ideology undermine the structural interconnectedness of liberalism and imperialism?

⁹ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000). McCarthy is quoting from the introduction of this book: "The Idea of Provincializing Europe."

¹⁰ Chakrabarty, *ibid.*, "Introduction: The Idea of Provincializing Europe," 6. See also, Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

¹¹ I am thinking in particular of the concept of "political society" that Chatterjee develops in these books: *Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); and *Lineages of Political Society: Studies in Postcolonial Democracy* (New York: Columbia University

Press, 2011). Does this concept merely express Chatterjee's idea that he cannot escape political modernity? McCarthy cites Chatterjee in a footnote (184, fn. 28) as though he offered merely "another version" of Chakrabarty's "line of thought" about the inescapableness of modernity in his earlier book, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993). But readers of that book will well remember how Chatterjee takes Benedict Anderson to task for precisely this assumption that the modern hegemonizes "even our imaginations" (*The Nation*, 5).