

Living in the Crevices or: Can Sociologists Still Be Intellectuals?

An Interview with Richard Bernstein by Fabian Anicker

Richard Bernstein is Vera List Professor for Philosophy at the New School for Social Research (New York) and one of the most distinguished scholars in philosophical pragmatism.

Characteristic for his work is an enormous intellectual breadth. Bernstein is well known for his mastery in bringing authors and topics from different intellectual traditions together and make them speak to each other. In sociology he is probably best known for his contributions to the theory of action and the philosophical self-reflection of the Social Sciences in *Praxis and Action* (1971), *The Restructuring of Social and Political Theory* (1978) and *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* (1983). However, in his recent work Bernstein, while still interested in a wide array of topics, seems to have broken off the debate with the social sciences. At the end of a masterclass Bernstein taught in Munich, *Fabian Anicker* had a chance to ask him about this impression.

Fabian Anicker: I would like to start off by going back to your early assessment of the social sciences. What caused your interest in the social sciences in the 1970s?

Richard Bernstein: In my ›Restructuring of Social and Political Theory‹ published in the end of the 70s, there was a very specific problem. I think that most of the social disciplines had not really become a *Wissenschaft* that satisfied the model. But a good deal of the social sciences had bought into a logical empiricist model of science. I had back then been referring to Popper but taken in a more general sense of the period of this time there was a belief in the hypothetico-deductive model. According to this model, we have the level of theory and then we can deduce from it empirical laws and apply them to particular cases. We could point to figures like Merton, Neil Smelser or David Easton. In general there was a kind of sense that we have now arrived. We finally have reached a kind of firm ground and we can build on it. Especially for those people who were in some ways taken by Talcott Parsons this seemed to be an overall structure which you could fit the various approaches in. You could have arguments within this paradigm but there was a kind of confidence: ›this is a progressive scientific program.« Many thought it a great advantage that the social sciences no longer follow any model of ›Geisteswissenschaft‹ and could be understood as real ›Naturwissenschaften‹. And I thought this was a kind of a pernicious inference.

There was a very great skepticism at that time of phenomenological approaches even though you had fields like ethnomethodology as developed by Garfinkel. But that was really marginal stuff. And whatever Habermas was doing; that had ›nothing to do‹ with the social sciences – at least from the Anglo-American point of view.

You wanted to influence the positivist debate at that time?

I was not involved in the actual debate

But you saw your book as a contribution to this debate?

Yes, yes, it was really very much in connection with that debate. Indeed the end of ›*The Restructuring of Social and Political Theory*‹ is really one of the first discussions of Habermas in the United States. And also the book is structured by some kind of Habermasian theme. In *Knowledge and Human Interest*, which I consider one of his best books, he speaks about the technical cognitive interest, the practical meaning in the Aristotelian sense and the hermeneutical and the critical approach. And indeed my book was structured that way. I was arguing that any adequate social theory has to be empirical *and* critical *and* hermeneutic. So I wasn't just interested in the social sciences but the kind of whole ›Weltanschauung‹ that was emerging. And it was a critique of positivistic or logical empiricism or *Naturwissenschaft* conceptions of the Social Sciences.

Would you say that nowadays positivism is still the ›opponent‹ we should fight against in the social sciences?

I think that the Hypothetical-Deductive-Model has collapsed and so has the idea of the social sciences as a progressive theoretical program. Now, the *impulse* that went into positivism is still there but that impulse now has transformed itself into a dogmatic preference for quantitative work – »and the rest is just ›fluff!‹«. But there is certainly not this kind of sense of coherence; the feeling that we are involved in a discipline which is developing – this doesn't seem to me to exist in *any* of the social sciences.

In ›*Restructuring of Social and Political Theory*‹ you suggested that the social sciences and sociology should aspire to combine diverse methods, speak to different problems and try to link empirical questions with critical questions with hermeneutic questions and so on. Would you say – looking at the social sciences now – that it is still possible to pursue this project of synthesis and integration?

I want to be very careful here. I don't want to talk about things that I do not follow very closely any more. I know some of the work that social scientists have done – a bit Bourdieu, a bit Foucault and I certainly know Luhmann – but I haven't followed its recent developments. So I don't consider myself an expert on this. But I will nevertheless give you my dominant impression. It seems to me much more fragmentary and much more like a war of competing paradigms. In this respect it's very different from actual practices I think in many of the natural sciences. What one department will consider sociology another department won't consider sociology at all. But we are not going to have this in quantum physics. You may have people feeling that quantum physics is not important and favor some other thing but this kind of fragmentation... so you have all kinds of things.

F. What can be done about this situation from a pragmatic standpoint?

I think that being informed with a pragmatic ›ethos‹ is helpful in terms of how to think clearly and properly about a subject. But it cannot prescribe the right method nor give

you a ›confidence payoff‹ – »if we only did this then sociology would flourish« – there I don't want to go.

Could you explain the idea of doing social sciences with a pragmatic ethos a little further?

Pragmatic social science is science with a critical impulse. You see, for example in one sense the program that Habermas elaborated in the 1970s has collapsed. I don't think there is such a thing as a coherent critical social science. Even when he went to Starnberg¹ he still hoped to do research that would somehow fit into that grand schema. I think that too has collapsed. When people talk about critique now it is quite unclear what they mean. What kind of critique are we more attracted to: A Foucauldian kind of critique, or a Judith-Butler-Kind-of-Critique?

The only positive conclusion that I do feel we can draw from this: It is important to be open minded and respectful. And it's important to try to be sensitive to others. In spite of fragmentation going on, you also find all kinds of impulses to continue doing significant work. There are people still ambitious in trying to deal with general issues for example in colonial and neocolonial studies. I think it is important to do empirical analytic work. And I think it's just as important to do interpretative work and to be sensitive to it. Doing empirical work without realizing that you are doing interpretation at the same time can be a disaster.

So I think it is always important to stay aware of the empirical, analytical, interpretive and critical aspects of a topic. However, I'm not sure you can fit them all together, and I'm certainly not in a position of telling people how to do that.

It seems to me from what you said, that pragmatic social theory would not be ›grand theory‹ any more or ›theory of society‹ in the emphatic – maybe German– sense?

Let me put it this way. I have always been a little uncomfortable by the use of the term ›pragmatic theory‹. The kind of pragmatism I advocate as helpful is informing one's perspective and making one aware. It is important as a kind of reflective moment. If anybody came along and said ›the only thing important is quantitative analysis and I'm going to do this and that's the only thing‹ I would consider this person quite narrow-minded. Not everybody has to do everything. But I think you are going to do your own kind of work better, if you are sensitive to different kinds of issues.

During your early career you seemed to be very interested in social theory and the social sciences. But looking at your recent work it seems you have moved to more classical philosophical topics and the connection to the social sciences seems to have disappeared. Did you move away from the social sciences, or did the social sciences move away from you?

1 Where Habermas was one of the directors of the »Max-Planck-Institut zur Erforschung der Lebensbedingungen der wissenschaftlich-technischen Welt«.

I would characterize it differently. I dealt with these issues because they were very close to my intellectual interests and in the social sciences the philosophy of science was central to all kinds of disputes. What I think is correct about what you are saying: I felt that at some point I had to explicitly discuss what was being discussed in the social sciences. It is just, that nowadays the social sciences have become less interesting (laughs).

Why are they not interesting anymore?

It has to do with the fragmentation. I think you can hang up the sign of ›sociologist‹ and then go on doing almost anything. Now I do think that there are people working in those disciplines who are doing interesting sorts of things. But I do not see a disciplinary matrix anymore that really is unifying.

You consider the state of the social sciences to be theoretically fragmented. Yet, you are also an advocate of pluralism. How do you distinguish between fragmentation and pluralism? How much pluralism is ›too much‹?

That's not an easy question. I think that the level of fragmentation in the social sciences really is distressing. I'll tell you what I think is a sign of fragmentation by giving you an empirical measure: If you have two members in the same department and they discover that they have nothing in common – that's fragmentation. Pluralism could be more like: »Well, we share something in common, but I'm interested in a different set of issues« What I think is happening, is forms of excessive specialization that alienate academics from politics. As an academic you take part in the university discourse and that's it. I don't think this is just characteristic of the social sciences; it applies to a good deal of academic life.

So you stopped reading sociology?

I want to be careful here: There are people under disciplinary labels who are doing interesting work but I'm not convinced that I see a disciplinary matrix that really unites them. We have this phenomenon – you maybe know more about it as a sociologist; I'm only a pop sociologist – but I think there is a tendency for groups of people to become united across disciplines: people who read the same books or are influenced by the same types of things. When I go out and give lectures. People can be coming from many different disciplines. But they might be interested in Hannah Arendt, in Habermas or in Derrida. These are the things that unite people more than the disciplinary label and they can be in sociology or anthropology or psychology. Think of the class of people like my colleagues Simon Critchley and Judith Butler. What disciplines are they in? They can be in any discipline! (Laughs)

What can be done practically to escape this fragmentation and the narrowing of intellectual horizons? What kind of advice would you give to a young scholar like me who is worried to become a Weberian »Fachmensch ohne Geist«?

This is what I always tell my students: You have to learn how to live in the crevices. If you are interested not only in academic life but the life of mind, you have to look for places

where you can do it – and there is not a lot of them. When I entered academic life, the concept of a resume or a dossier didn't even exist – it was all »boys-network«. You had to remit a job and you called up your friends at Yale and they knew who were the good men. This had its bad aspects of course, but it gave you academic freedom. When I was writing my books I had people telling me, »this is not philosophy that's intellectual history«, but I – maybe because I grew up in New York and Brooklyn – I didn't care. That's what I wanted to do. And I was lucky because I was not penalized. So my advice is: learn the art of how to try and move within the spaces that allow you to do your sort of thing. I never thought of myself as playing the ›scientific game‹ in the sense of Bourdieu – but maybe it's good to have enough practical sense of how to get along with this. For example, if I had taken an attitude which is completely hostile to anything that goes on in analytic philosophy and wouldn't have wanted anything to do with it, I don't know if I would have been elected President to the Eastern Division of the American Philosophical Association. I did engage with analytic philosophy not because I was being strategic, but: be clever enough so you that you can play the game, but not be corrupted by it.

Thank you for the interview.