Contributions and Limits of Rortian Pragmatism for Political Agonism

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This paper is concerned with outlining how the ethnocentric pragmatism of Richard Rorty may serve, from an epistemological standpoint, to consolidate the practical advantages that agonism possesses over deliberationism in the field of political philosophy. However, some problems are noted in the specific way that Rorty develops his particular agonist liberalism with regard to a potentially contradictory conception of the ethical-political place granted to victims of cruelty.

Bad news leads me to return to the Kulturkampf with redoubled vigor.
– Richard Rorty

Two ways of understanding politics coexist within the tradition of democratic thought. One of them emphasizes the irreconcilable plurality of interests and the inescapability of conflict as constitutive of political phenomena; the other one emphasizes the idea of common good in the search for consensus. For the first of these ways, the legitimacy of the democratic system lies in the institutionalization of mechanisms to ensure the expression and representation of competing interests. For the second one, the idea of legitimacy derives from the deliberation of citizens and the public use of reason.

During recent decades the labels of “agonism” and “deliberationism” have been imposed in order to express both positions, with Chantal Mouffe and Jürgen Habermas, respectively, as paradigmatic representatives of these political conceptions. My intention throughout this article will be to show, first, how Rorty’s work (pace Mouffe and perhaps Rorty himself) can offer an account of the advantages of agonism; and, second, how a weakness exists in the way that Rorty thinks the hegemonic struggle must be developed.

The importance of the metaphilosophical pragmatist creed that I endorse, the Jamesian slogan “what makes no difference in practice makes no difference in philosophy,” was strongly impressed upon me because of the various reconstructions that can be found in the literature about the debate between deliberationism and agonism. It is not easy to discern what kind of political
institutions would be differentially promoted by one or another proposal. Mouffe herself indicates that:

What an agonist approach certainly disavows is the possibility of an act of political refoundation that would institute a new social order from scratch. But a number of very important socioeconomic and political transformations, with radical implications, are possible within the context of liberal democratic institutions. ... We should not fall again back into the trap of believing that their transformation requires a total rejection of the liberal-democratic framework.¹

It seems to me that no practical differences are evidenced at the level of political institutions; rather, they reside in the way that various political actors are inserted into these institutions. I shall return to this later; however, I want to emphasize that it is actually possible to trace at least one difference at the level of the institutional consequences. It is a practical difference that has been widely discussed in the literature on deliberationism and that can be reduced to the question: “Is it important to vote in a deliberative democracy?”

The problem is well known: the deliberationist’s emphasis on validity understood as a result of discursive consensus regards the act of decision through voting as an interruption of rational discussion, which is presented as the only source of democratic legitimacy. Voting is usually justified by deliberationists as merely an effective means for achieving political goals when it is not possible to reach a rational consensus. In any case, the emphasis in these theoretical debates is designed to be able to justify how, even when voting (by people or by parliamentary representatives) is inevitable, deliberation is essential for legitimacy and for political stability, in the sense that losers at the moment of voting at least may feel that they have been heard. But by itself, voting is not what guarantees the legitimacy of decisions, nor is it what indicates that the decision has been taken. When within a collective decision there is total consensus, voting is redundant. At the height of contempt for voting, we can consider the Global Justice Movement deployed in the late 1990s and early new century, which employed a decision-making procedure whereby there was no decision until all assembly members had agreed and ensured, through various protocols, that the overall agreement had been reached by setting the decision through an act of collective silence. The rejection of voting, including the unanimous vote, is a consequence of the deliberationist creed that should not be surprising.

Conversely, agonism cannot but appreciate the vote as, on the one hand, the moment when the political nature of politics is expressed; and, on the other, the device that disrupts the forms of antagonism that may be conducive to a drop in the friend/enemy dichotomy. Mouffe uses Elias Canetti’s Crowds and Power to mark the point: