On Democratic Experimentalism: Toward a Culture of Love and Non-Violence

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This essay rethinks democratic experimentalism from an ethical point of view, and look at its potential for the future by drawing on two key thinkers of the late 20th and early 21st century: Richard Rorty and Luce Irigaray. I explore the experimentalist character in Irigaray’s later thought and point to a pragmatist link in her works, and then dynamize her original theory of sexual difference by pointing to G.H. Mead’s symbolic interactionism. Then a revolutionary character of Irigaray’s thought is defended by focusing on her interventions into the very core of Western philosophy and in particular its Hegelian heritage. By introducing Rorty into the debate, a pledge is made for a new democratic culture of love and nonviolence as a ‘spiritual’ mode of democratic experimentalism needed in our times. Finally, I show that Irigaray’s and Rorty’s thought share an affinity toward intercultural thinking, bearing important consequences for an ethicoo-spiritual project of democratic experimentalism.

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One of the foremost tasks of our age, according to Fred Dallmayr, is to reconnect ethics with politics. This can mean, firstly, to push the liberal conception of politics towards the so-called ethical liberal democracy, and, secondly, to proceed ethically and politically towards a new world culture of non-violence, drawing also on rich intercultural knowledge of our times. For this purpose, Dallmayr invokes Dewey’s idea of radical democracy as a conjoint mode of associated living. We can agree that it is within this idea of communal life, associated both with new ethical and intercultural visions that any future attempt of introducing ethics into politics (or reconnecting both in a new way) is to be grounded.

This essay is an attempt to rethink the issue of democratic experimentalism from an ethical point of view and look at its potential for the future by way of drawing on, in my opinion, two key thinkers of the late 20th and early 21st century: Richard Rorty and Luce Irigaray. It is an attempt to bring both thinkers closer to the rich democratic ideals of Dewey and at the same moment
to explore some possible further developments within pragmatism and feminism that would lead to a conceptualization of the idea of democracy as a way toward culture of love and non-violence. Although the original points of departure of Rorty and Irigaray could not differ more (analytical philosophy vs. Lacanian psychoanalysis) there still exists a common ground (especially in their later works) for putting them into a fruitful dialogue. Beyond the fact that both in fact entered the philosophical arena with a book on the role of “mirrors” and the criticism of the “Eye of the mind” in the history of Western epistemology and metaphysics (Rorty published his book Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature in 1979, and her seminal Speculum of the Other Woman Irigaray slightly earlier, in 1974), in their later works both Rorty and Irigaray are clearly and passionately committed to one sole goal: they see the progress of sentiments\(^2\) as a most useful way of hoping for any future ethics and culture of democracy. Both are also fervent critics of the “classical” vertical transcendence and pledge for a more sensible and “pragmatist” horizontal mode of our “between-us” as a mode of associated living. In the very first lines of one of her later works (Sharing the World), Luce Irigaray defends her philosophical project in a way that heavily resembles Dewey’s pragmatist ideals:

> When the world corresponds to the transcendence projected by a single subject ... [t]he intuition of the infinite can remain, but the dynamic, indeed the dialectical, relations between time and space somehow or other freeze.... And the proposal of new values is generally contested until the milieu becomes imbued with them and imposes them as an almost eternal reality of truth, after it has become immune to their novelty.\(^3\)

Irigaray defends the way of an infinite, and, we may add, experimentalist character of our becoming. It is only possible to secure a world for myself through a projection toward the future horizon of between-us. In this process, I have to acknowledge the irreducible otherness of the other (her/his transcendence) and respect the sexual difference (the difference being both natural/empirical and transcendental). This dialectic – i.e., a process from the closure of subjectivity toward the transcendence of the other – is the first possibility of the revelation or opening of the infinite in me. Only when I am imbued with the irreducible otherness of the other, and fully attuned to its horizons, contesting my fixed and static existence, it is possible to ascertain the dynamic and dialectical (but peaceful) relation between two worlds. It is indeed possible to bring Irigaray to the closest vicinity of pragmatism even more directly.

In her book on nomadic ethics, entitled Transpositions, Rosi Braidotti labels Irigaray’s work with the term “ethical pragmatism.” Braidotti draws on Irigaray, labeling her as a critic of liberal individualism and characterizing her as a thinker whose