

The Priority of Democracy to Social Theory

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This article examines the role of social theory in Cornel West's account of radical democracy. I explicate and extend the critical implications of Richard Rorty's views for the revolutionary impulses in West's project, and then I examine West's use of Sheldon Wolin's notion of "fugitive democracy" as a potential instance of the "theoretical resentment" against which Rorty cautions. Drawing from John Howard Yoder and Karl Barth, I conclude by demonstrating how West's account of the Black Church contains resources to chasten the detrimental excesses in Wolin's account, while maintaining a robust sense of radical democracy.

My essay's title alludes to Richard Rorty's effort to historicize certain seventeenth and eighteenth century philosophical concepts such as "self-evidence," and the notion of an autonomous, rights-bearing "self," among others. Rorty claims that what is best about the liberal-democratic practices of contemporary North American culture is enhanced by being unmoored from philosophical justifications. As Rorty sees it, philosophical articulation is more like conceptually re-describing a set of promising, historically contingent social experiments than justifying them on the basis of secure first principles.¹ Philosophical accounts employ one among several possible vocabularies to describe the contingent social practices that constitute democracy. Rorty's argument for the priority of democratic practices to the philosophical justification of those practices points toward a central point of contention between him and his former student, friend, and fellow-pragmatist, Cornel West.

West agrees with Rorty's evasion of philosophy, but differs in his vision of what is needed in order to refine and expand democratic practices. Rorty thinks that once he has "demythologized" democratic practices, his work is done: participants in democratic conversation are thereby freed-up to envision new social possibilities and pursue unbounded self-creation. Joshing his fellow-citizens out of certain inherited conceptions and intellectual habits, and imagining new and better ones, serves the end "of replacing shared knowledge of what is already real with social hope for what might become real."² For West, by contrast, a democratic enterprise must be predicated much more upon critique than conversation, though conversation remains integral. It requires tracking and

practically challenging institutionalized forms of power by way of theoretical praxis, more than merely historicizing inherited concepts. An adequate democratic project must give priority to relentless self-interrogation over unbounded self-creation, though the creative potentialities of democratic practices inform West's conception of hope as much as they constitute Rorty's.

For West, authentic democracy must be *radical*. It must entail the genuine participation of each member of the *demos* in that body's self-determination, maintenance, and self-creation. Such democracy is "operative only when those who must suffer the consequences have effective control of institutions that yield the consequences, i.e., access to decision-making processes."³ The kind of amelioration and social hope that democratic practices make possible requires continuous confrontation with whatever forces and structures that would prevent any member of the *demos* from actively participating in political processes to which he or she is subject. Most frequently, this means fighting forms of marginalization predicated upon race, class, gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation (among many others). West searches Rorty's vision of social hope for some difference that makes a difference in its consequences for tracking the operations of power, and then combating oppressive existential conditions of the *demos*. "Rorty's neo-pragmatism only kicks the philosophical props out from under liberal bourgeois capitalist societies; it requires no change in our cultural and political practices," he concludes, "What then are the ethical and political consequences of his neopragmatism? On the macrosocietal level, there simply are none."⁴ West's vision of radical democracy, by contrast, entails grappling with the forms of systemic evil and power that perpetuate the social misery of one's fellows. Because such forces remain inscribed (often tacitly) in prevailing social practices and institutions, however apparently democratic they may appear, social theory plays an indispensable role in any genuinely democratic project.

West shares Rorty's Deweyan faith in the creative potentialities of already existing democratic practices. And yet, a radically democratic posture will ground its hope for the kind social amelioration that West and Rorty both desire, in part, in the capacity of the critical intellect to ceaselessly grapple with the injustice and inequality that inevitably taint those practices. This is "hope against hope," against-the-evidence hope in the face of seemingly irreversible social conditions, apparently insurmountable odds, and inescapable forms of power. Such a stance is radical in that it takes aims at "the roots": systemic origins of injustice and inequality. It deploys its analyses of social, political and cultural practices and institutions with an eye toward revolutionary ideals. That is, it measures current conditions against the possibilities of detecting, rooting out and transforming the forms of domination that infect the prevailing status quo. At the same time, it frames its revolutionary impulse against an aversion to utopian thinking, in full recognition that new forms of domination are certain to arise. West tempers the stringent mixture of revolutionary impulse and aversion to utopian thinking in his radically democratic stance with a "Pascalian wager"

on the capacities of ordinary people to participate directly in determining and ameliorating their social existence.

So envisioned, radical democracy occurs against the backdrop of a distinctively modern form of traditionalism. It rests on what West refers to as the “two pillars of modernity”: the legacies of Athens and Jerusalem. The Athenian strand draws upon the intellectual heritage of self-examination beginning with Socrates. The Jerusalem pillar is grounded upon the prophetic currents in Judaism and Christianity that reach back to Yahweh’s calling of the Hebrew prophets and forward to the witness of Jesus. Of course, to participate in a democratic tradition means to grapple with insufficiencies of the legacy that one has been handed as much as to frame one’s struggles in the present, and hopes for the future, in light of the best resources that that legacy has to offer. For all the precious, life-sustaining resources that the Socratic and Prophetic afford, they both lack the means by which to fight systemic forms of oppression and domination. As a result, a radically democratic project will be distinctively modern in the sense that it will employ critical tools drawn from the modern tradition of social theory in order to reckon with its past, critically illuminate the present, and envision future possibilities.⁵

On one hand, West’s insistence upon the need for socio-theoretical critique appears to be merely a necessary supplement to any moral and/or religious vision, or democratic faith. On closer inspection, however, prescribing the indispensability of social theory to radical democracy might risk giving priority of place to such theory at the expense of other critical forms and discursive practices. Such risks have posed points of contention between Rorty and West for some time. In the following pages I explore these differences, and the challenges they present for West’s account of radical democracy. Specifically, I examine West’s uses of Sheldon Wolin’s conception of “fugitive democracy” as a point in his work at which the currents of democratically-minded reform and revolutionary impulses in modern social theory problematically converge. Wolin’s categories, I argue, risk implicating West in a set of theoretical oppositions that may ultimately deplete the resources of democratic faith and social hope that he ultimately seeks to vitalize. Any such risks, we will see, are a matter of degree and emphasis in West’s work, and not a matter of terminal deficiency. I conclude by explaining how West’s account of the Black Church already contains the resources by which to chasten the potentially detrimental excesses in Wolin’s account, while retaining a robust conception of radical democracy.

1. What Calls for Theory?

The indispensability of socio-theoretical critique to radical democracy rests upon a set of distinctions that West draws between social theory and critical forms drawn from religious or moral traditions. *Moral criticism* draws on moral and/or religious traditions in order to speak on behalf of “the least of these,” and

in order to envision prospects for improving wretched social conditions. And yet, such ameliorative visions are, however inadvertently, likely to remain implicated in the very dynamics of power they set out to criticize owing to their lack of systemic depth. They need to be informed about the root causes of social misery. West uses the term “demystification” to refer to the kind of analytical explanation that “demystifies” the conditions for the possibility of some object of analysis. It “lays bare the complex ways in which meaning is produced and mobilized for the maintenance of relations of domination.”⁶ It tracks power in an unrelenting mode. In contrast to such critique, the Socratic and prophetic legacies take up interpersonal facets of social and political relations, usually at the expense of attending to the structural and institutional dimensions of social misery. Thus, for instance, slavery could co-exist along side both Jesus and Socrates without any sense of incongruity. Each embodied their respective visions of agapic love and the value of human critical intelligence by treating as fully human the slaves with whom they interacted. And yet, neither called into question the institutional structures and cultural presuppositions that made slavery an unquestioned norm in their respective contexts. The Socratic lacks empathy and compassion (“Socrates never cries,” West is heard to say, “Intellectual self-mastery becomes the ‘tyranny of reason’ – becomes idolatrous”). The prophetic fails to sufficiently grapple with evil, especially systemic evil. “Christianity is first and foremost a theodicy, a triumphant account of good over evil.”⁷ Christianity’s “against-the-evidence hope for triumph over evil” attracted African slaves in the United States. It provided them a means to persist through wretchedness of slavery, the cruelties of Jim Crow America, and present conditions of marginalization. However, this capacity for Christianity to view of the world “from below” is what makes it a religion so well suited for the oppressed (so Nietzsche, Marx, and various liberation theologians remind us).⁸ In order to be adequate, analyses “must appeal to traditions of social theory and historical sociology just as visions must proceed from traditions of moral and/or religious communities.”⁹

Historically, for instance, Black theologians critically grappled with the existential realities of racism by drawing upon every theological and biblical means available to them. However, systemic forms of *socio-economic* inequalities underwriting and perpetuating cultures of racism in America remain largely invisible to the critical frameworks they have deployed. As a result, their political programs and social visions have generally failed to reckon with the complex interrelations between imperialist domination, sexism, class exploitation and racism. The economics of Black empowerment became – and, to a large degree, remain – synonymous with successful entrance into the American middle class. This notion of amelioration “clamors for a bigger piece of the ever growing American pie, rarely asking fundamental questions such as why it never gets recut more equally or how it gets baked in the first place.”¹⁰ This is no mere oversight, West points out. Largely because of its insidiousness, class exploitation actually contributes more to conditions of powerlessness among Blacks than

does the factor of race itself. “I am suggesting that the more Black theologians discard or overlook Marxist social criticism, the further they distance themselves from the fundamental determinant of Black oppression and any effective strategy to alleviate it.”¹¹

Responding to West’s challenges, in part, Black theologians programmatically addressed the late capitalist “roots of the crisis” they faced.¹² The “social, media and political power systems” uniquely engendered by capitalist economic frameworks devalue the capacities of everyday people to manage their lives as well as their social and political realities. Such frameworks place the means of production – along with the political and social processes in any way relevant to those means – exclusively under the control of those who own and control the means of production. They exclude those actually engaged in producing. These insights marked important additions to the critical program of Black theology. And yet, if Black theologians were to offer more than lip-service in their recognition of systemic forms of power, West pressed further, they would need to root their Kierkegaardian apprehension of “existential issues facing individuals” in a critique of capitalist civilization.¹³ Deploying the best insights of “theoretical praxis” from progressive Marxism, their critique would need to issue in political activism aimed at fundamentally transforming prevailing conditions toward a more humane set of arrangements. These practical possibilities would be predicated on the application of “a social theory whose aim is to demystify present ideological distortions or misreadings of society, to bring to light who possesses power and wealth, why they do, how they acquire, sustain and enlarge it and why the poor have so little.”¹⁴

The framework of my present query might make West’s challenges to Black theologians sound like a Johnny-One-Note tune about Marxist theory. This is anything but the case. West recognizes that there is nothing inherently liberating in tools of social-theoretical critique. Moreover, the dynamics of power or domination brought to light by any such analysis depend upon which set of socio-critical tools one employs, and the critic who employs them. Every set of critical tools permit certain silences by virtue of their positive categories. Moreover, the ends to which those tools are employed depend upon the interests and purposes of the critic in question. There can be no guarantee that such tools will be employed for liberative and democratic purposes. West is guided by his interest in solidarity with the oppressed; an interest axiomatic to the Christian commitments that motivate his democratic faith. He works as an improvisational theoretical artisan for whom the task at hand determines which tools to use. Vigilant against dogmatism in his Marxist proclivities, in the case above, for instance, he goes on to enumerate several points at which Black theology exceeds Marxist analysis owing to former’s non-reductive framework for religion and culture.¹⁵ Elsewhere he pragmatically deploys a Foucauldian genealogical analysis of the emergence of white supremacy as an object of modern scientific and intellectual discourse.¹⁶ He eclectically blends neo-Freudian and post-structuralist theories in order to critique the concept of race.¹⁷ More recently, he

highlights the Weberian dimensions of Wolin's analysis of the imperialism at the heart of liberal states, and the deficiencies inherent in representative democratic forms. At each turn he cautiously diagnoses the need for theoretical analysis, while reiterating that any theoretical framework he brings to bear will ultimately suffer from insufficiencies.¹⁸

And yet, clearly, social theory plays both a central and indispensable role in West's account of radical democracy. This role raises important questions about the character and status of any would-be prophetic social critic, as well as the apparent implication that tools drawn from the tradition of social theory accomplish ends that other critical forms cannot. If radical democracy is predicated upon the persistent application of the tools of social critique, then it is equally predicated upon the skills and expertise of the social critics who wield those tools. Critique is in the hands of those persons who have the requisite knowledge of (the training to use) the necessary socio-theoretical tools. Use of such tools requires familiarity and practice: immersion in, and mastery of, various intellectual traditions. All of this presupposes the luxuries of leisure and scholarship. How available are such tools to "the plebs," those upon whose speaking radical democracy predicates itself?

West is not unreflective on this point. He recognizes the "high quality skills required to engage in critical practices," as well as "the self-confidence, discipline and perseverance necessary for success without an undue reliance on the mainstream for approval and acceptance" which is required of any public intellectual who would work toward radically democratic ends.¹⁹ Such a public intellectual, for which West uses the term "organic intellectual," engages in the intellectually enriching culture of the academy while simultaneously striving to remain grounded and active in organizations outside the academy. She will "fuse the best of the life of the mind ... with the best of the organized forces for greater democracy and freedom from outside the academy."²⁰ Transgressing these boundaries will likely take the form of grass-roots organizing and pre-party formations. Even so, theoretical expertise makes the public intellectual particularly vital to radical democracy. "Demystification," he writes, "gives theory a prominent role and the intellectual a political task."²¹

Kept in proper perspective, this account of the political dimensions of the public intellectual's vocation, and the integral role that theoretical analysis plays therein, will neither fetishize theoretical means nor aggrandize the intellectual's political function. West holds up Antonio Gramsci as a politically active intellectual who remained theoretically attuned to the concrete struggles of ordinary people.²² "For [Gramsci], the aim of philosophy is not only to become worldly by imposing its elite intellectual views on people, but to become part of a social movement by nourishing and being nourished by the philosophical views of oppressed people themselves for the aims of social change and social meaning." Intellectuals of this sort must refuse to compromise about the centrality and necessity of critical intelligence. And yet, West adds a crucial caveat, "they should not demand that all peoples mimic their version of critical intelligence,

especially if common efforts for social change can be strengthened.”²³ Such a delicate, critical shifting and catching of balance is surely difficult to strike, and perhaps even more difficult to maintain.

At its surface level, West’s description of the organic intellectual calls to mind the efforts of pragmatist thinkers like William James and John Dewey to reorient the intellectual’s vocation toward public life, and political and social relevance.²⁴ And yet, prescribing social-theoretical critique as a central component for adequately tracking structural power is a move that diverges considerably from their respective approaches. In fact, the insufficiencies that West diagnoses in Rorty’s neo-pragmatism turn out to be largely symptomatic of early American pragmatist thought generally: “most important, an inadequate grasp of the complex operations of power, principally owing to a reluctance to take traditions of historical sociology and social theory seriously.”²⁵ The political trajectory of the pragmatist tradition stresses civil conversation and democratizing forms of education as the primary means of overcoming class conflict, political strife and social disparities based on race, gender and ethnicity. West concedes that education is critical, but expresses suspicions about its capacity to cut deep enough, namely, to combat the reluctance of so many Americans of European descent to willfully work at racial justice, nor to cut to structural and institutional forms of power.²⁶ By and large, pragmatist thinkers remain insufficiently attuned to the plight of the oppressed by overlooking the structural dynamics perpetuating that plight. Pragmatists need tools of social critique in service to their democratic faith as a means of systemic analysis, as well as for self-reflexive critique of their own criticisms, interests and purposes.²⁷ Dewey’s exemplary reformism needs Marx, or some comparable form of social-theoretical analysis: Max Weber, W.E.B. Du Bois, Simone de Beauvoir, among others.

Rorty, by contrast, plays down theoretical means and aims. Democratically minded citizens can find most of the resources they need for reform articulated in James and Dewey, and the romance and imagination for democratic innovation and transformation in Walt Whitman’s *Democratic Vistas*. Contemporary Americans can find what they need in a model for a transformative grappling with tragic social realities – rooted in a conception of evil understood to be of this world and, therefore, finally passable – in Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address. Rorty deemphasizes the aspiration to marry prophetic and imaginative impulses with philosophical or theoretical accounts for good reason. He genuinely believes that sustained engagement in the reformist possibilities afforded by a constitutional democratic framework can amend past deficiencies and decrease human suffering. Literary inspiration, romantic imagination and moral education provide resources sufficient to cultivate in fellow citizens the desire to imagine themselves in each others shoes, and most poignantly, the shoes of the despised and oppressed.²⁸ Creating more just social and political arrangements are tasks far more likely to be accomplished in terms of sisterly and brotherly love, the desire shared between lovers, and the modest

self-respect required for both (all in the shape of poem and story) more so, that is, than in terms of social-analytical critique. Rorty writes:

Whitman's image of democracy was of lovers embracing. Dewey's was of a town meeting. Dewey dwelt on the need to create what the Israeli philosopher Avishai Margalit has called a decent society, defined as one in which institutions do not humiliate. Whitman's hopes were centered on the creation of what Margalit calls, by contrast, a civilized society, defined as one in which individuals do not humiliate each other – in which tolerance for other people's fantasies and choices is instinctive and habitual. Dewey's principal target was institutionalized selfishness, whereas Whitman's was the socially acceptable sadism which is a consequence of sexual repression, and of the inability to love.²⁹

Rorty holds up James Baldwin as one who grappled with the worst that America had to offer to both blacks and gays, and yet maintained the courage to hold out hope for a future in which America would overcome the shame of its past. Baldwin wrote of fellow-Americans as lovers as well. "If we – and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others – do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world."³⁰

Rorty's greatest concern is avoiding the forms of self-loathing to which much social theory is prone.³¹ Certain theoretical postures breed resentment. Critique often frames conditions or institutions as depraved to the point of irremediability owing to the presuppositions of the particular theoretical framework in question (such as the outright inescapability of domination). The seductiveness of much theoretical analysis lies precisely in its promise to "cut to the roots." Some theorists take this to invest their armchair (or academic seminar room) deliberations with instant political implications. And yet, the real fruit of such theoretical enchantment is often various forms of spectatorial contempt. "[Intellectuals] begin to think of themselves as a saving remnant – as the happy few who have the insight to see through nationalist rhetoric to the ghastly reality of contemporary America," Rorty writes, "But this insight does not move them to formulate a legislative program, to join a political movement, or to share in a national hope."³² In fact, it makes the very idea of such hope appear highly self-deluded. It leads them "to step back from their country and, as they say, 'theorize' it. It leads them to ... give cultural politics preference over real politics, and to mock the very idea that democratic institutions might once again be made to serve social justice."³³ Such critical theorists come to see the United States of America "as something we must hope will be replaced, as soon as possible, by something utterly different." Theorists not only position themselves over against the arbiters of the status quo, but also against social critics who

hold out hope for reform-minded responses to the wretchedness of prevailing conditions. Such critics, they charge, operate under the delusion that things simply are not as bad as they seem. They claim that would-be reformers are insufficiently radical, however withering their diagnoses may be. As a result, the notion of “radicality” comes to be synonymous with “the more excessive the criticism the better.” Over against such critical postures, Rorty’s concern is nothing less than salvaging the hope and modest sense of self-worth that must nourish any project of self-creation at its roots.

Theory is not *essentially* resentful, of course. And one need not wield some theory in order to settle into a predictably resentful posture. Social theories can play a valuable role in service to edifying, inspirational and self-creative ends.³⁴ Occasionally they have served as “a helpful auxiliary of romance,” Rorty writes. “But just as often it has served to blind the intellectuals to the new possibilities that romantics and prophets have envisioned.”³⁵ Rorty is not beating an “anti-theory drum” for the sake of some alleged theory/practice dichotomy implicit in his pragmatist commitments. He is critical of the tendency to fixate on socio-theoretical analysis as a fad among academics, and by implication, the American Left. He is less concerned with theoretical roots than with pragmatic fruits. Once analysis is rendered and it comes time to ask “so what?” and “what next?” what will such a fixation with socio-theoretical analysis enable and help accomplish? If critique helps imagine new possibilities, see in new ways, illuminates possible modes of action, inspires hope, then so much the better. Rorty will still want to ask why we should not prefer to speak of the ideals of social democracy and economic justice, rather than the terms of socio-theoretical critique; why, that is, we should not prefer the more familiar word when it will do.

If, by contrast, socio-analytical explanation results in paralyzing self-contempt, spectatorial resentment, or an entrenched, enclave mentality predicated upon categorical denunciation of conditions beyond repair, then it is likely laced with a destructive form of apocalypticism. Perhaps it results in the type of doom-saying escapism that kept Heidegger in the provinces among a romanticized Black Forest peasantry, or the pessimism driving Herbert Marcuse’s claim that all-pervasive technocratic domination had so assimilated all critical possibilities in the context in which he wrote that meaningful conflict was impossible.³⁶ Whatever its guise, Rorty writes, “hopelessness has become fashionable on the Left, principled, theorized, philosophical hopelessness.”³⁷

Rorty does not have West directly in mind in the forgoing cautions and criticisms.³⁸ West is too multidimensional and self-critical in his use of social theories. His project is too multi-faceted, too oriented by a concern to make things better for the least well off, to fall flatly into a category of “theoretical resentment.”³⁹ Moreover, West marshals Rorty’s preferred resources to the ends of democratic criticism at least as deftly as Rorty himself. The question, then, is not whether West’s impulse for critique can coincide with his democratic commitments, but whether he can wield those tools and aims in ways that avoid

overwhelming the democratic bearings of his radical ends. This may be more difficult than it initially sounds. Can West allot power analysis, construed in terms of social-theoretical critique, such centrality, along with the theoretical frameworks that so fit that subject matter, and yet avoid the specters of despair, self-loathing, or spectatorial contempt? Critics who more accurately fit Rorty's description may hear certain of West's diatribes and ask "What prevents you from being as *radical* as we are?" In the face of such temptations, West will muster the wherewithal to execute a Pascalian wager or Kierkegaardian leap of democratic faith. And yet, might certain of his theoretical excesses leave readers less inclined to leap or wager without recourse in the face of those temptations?

These critical points are worth pressing. At stake is nothing less than the grounds for hope available to an adequately conceived democratic project. How often have citizen-constituted, grass-roots movements explicitly employed tools drawn from the tradition of social theory? King did not. The Abolitionists did not. Lincoln did not. These are among the exemplary participants in democratic resistance and social criticism. Moreover, each of these was pivotal in realizing some of the architectonic shifts in the social structure of American society: the elimination of chattel slavery, and civil rights for people of color. Can they pass the muster of *radical* democracy on West's account? If thinkers and movements such as these fail to, what hope can there be that any pleb will; without, that is, relying on those who wield social-critical tools? Might West's prescription of specifically socio-theoretical critique risk wresting the radically democratic moment from the very people upon whose agency it predicates itself?

West might respond that such questions presuppose a vulgar leveling, homogenizing, or perhaps even romanticizing of the demos. He might claim that it dismisses as specialist and elitist what are, in fact, substantial *vocational* distinctions among the members of the demos. Fellow citizens have different aptitudes and talents, and thus may be called to fulfill different capacities and roles in service to the common good of the demos, he might respond. One such role happens to be that of the organic intellectual. Any such intellectual is a member of the demos. In as far as she strives toward the ideal of "organic intellectual," she will seek to remain grounded in the particulars of concrete situations rather than removed abstraction.

This response bears crucial truth. Fellow citizens will have different vocations. To claim that a democratic project entails that the people be in some sense "the same" – or that excellence or virtue is anti-democratic elitism – would be a caricature of West's democratic ideals. It would parody his conception of democracy as a range of historically-extended, tradition-situated social practices that admit of varying degrees of proficiency and skill. Might it be possible, nonetheless, to differentiate vocations, roles and virtues without designating any one of them as more essential than its complements to a radically democratic project? And even if certain vocations are ostensibly more central to democracy radically understood, need the same kind of prioritization hold for the particular critical forms that facilitate that democratic association?

Can we be certain that the tradition of social theory achieves critical ends that no other critical form can? Moreover, if radical democratic criticism is predicated upon traditions of social theory and historical sociology to be executed by the prophetic critic, is it possible for the demos to track evil and systemic oppression through its work-a-day discursive practices? Moral criticism falls short because systemic domination often pervades the very presuppositions of the practices in which such criticism consists. Yet, West's vision of radical democracy suggests that if the demos tracks evil and power for itself, by way of moral, religious, observational criticisms, then its vigilance remains inadequate. Its criticisms, and ensuing actions, may well ameliorate particular situations. However, they will ultimately remain mired in the deeper and tacitly pervasive presence of the very abuses of power such criticisms seek to alleviate.

West will likely respond that appealing to open-ended, reformist possibilities – poetic, moral and imaginative resources positioned over against trenchant theoretical analysis – is all-to-easy when some would-be reformer has not experienced a life and death struggle for one's existence on a daily basis. One cannot but take these words with grave seriousness. However hopefully invested in the future of American democracy Rorty may be, *Achieving Our Country* and *Democracy Matters* stand on opposite sides of a fault-line that threatens to sever America's present identity from its past, if it has not already. When Rorty admonished the intellectual pessimism of the theory-clad, spectatorial Left in the late 1990s, his greatest worries were “suburban complacency in the face of ever-increasing unemployment and misery,” the greed and sloth of American voters and “the grim joke they played on themselves when they elected Reagan and Bush.”⁴⁰ Who could have an inkling of the whirlwind we would reap in the meantime: a stolen Presidential election, the 9/11 terrorist attacks, an unjustified war perpetrated on the basis of the Bush Administration's mass deception and manipulation of the American citizenry, and heretofore unseen disregard for civil liberties in the Patriot Act and domestic spying programs. This criminality is then overlooked owing to a collective, paralysis-inducing dread and anxiety that West refers to as the “niggerization of America.” “Never before have *all* classes, colors, regions, religions, genders, and sexual orientations felt unsafe, unprotected, subject to random violence, and hated,” he writes, “Yet to have been designated a nigger in America for over 350 years has been to feel unsafe, unprotected, subject to random violence, and hated.”⁴¹ America's is a democratic experiment that was predicated upon the enslavement and persistent subjugation of an entire race of people; an “ignoble paradox” that is still alive and well today. Only in painfully attending to the blood-stained memories and lessons of this paradox can contemporary Americans hope to find their foothold, sense of orientation, and resist contemporary imperialism.

Hurricane Katrina starkly fore-grounded how lost the latter point is on the contemporary America public. She exposed tens of thousands of New Orleans' poorest residents (disproportionately black) who lacked even the resources

necessary to avoid the well-anticipated path of the storm. Beyond the immediate aid of bottled water and cash, virtually no sustained thinking has gone toward actually diagnosing the deficiencies of structural and social arrangements that could precipitate a humanitarian disaster of such proportions in the first place. At the same time, responding to the reality of its own “niggerization” by fanatical terrorists, America’s masters of war continue to “niggerize” with equal fanaticism enemy combatants and non-combatants in officially and unofficially sanctioned torture hubs like Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib (among many others). The near absence of outrage and effort to hold our leaders accountable suggests that American citizens are content to forfeit their agency to corporations and professional politicians. We stand by as passive viewers of a digitally-enhanced, media-distributed reality TV show, where agency is incarcerated in an interest-based vote at the end of the day. Amidst conditions like these, what is a citizen to hope for? How is a citizen to muster hope at all?

West is one of the most acute critics of contemporary U.S. imperialism. The greatest challenge to twenty-first century America, he points out, is resisting its free market and militarist imperialist strivings, and somehow reviving a sense of participatory, democratic agency and vigilance. “We live in a propitious yet perilous moment,” he writes:

[I]t has become fashionable to celebrate the benefits of imperial rule and acceptable to condone the decline of democratic governance. The pervasive climate of opinion and the prevailing culture of consumption make it difficult for us to even imagine the revival of the deep democratizing energies of our past and conceive of making real progress in the fight against imperialism. But we must remember that the basis of democratic leadership is ordinary citizens’ desire to take their country back from the hands of corrupted plutocratic and imperial elites. This desire is predicated on an awakening among the populace from the seducing lies and comforting illusions that sedate them and a moral channeling of new political energy that constitutes a formidable threat to the status quo.⁴²

West tempers the perilous tone of his jeremiad with an occasional, yet crucial, nod to an ever-so remote propitiousness implicit in these prevailing conditions. He dares to broach the possibility, as T.S. Eliot does in his later work, that darkness reminds us of light. Against the background of his radical diagnosis of America’s current predicament West directs his readers to beacons of hope like Frederick Douglass, Martin Luther King, Jr., James Baldwin, and Toni Morrison, as well as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Herman Melville, and Walt Whitman. He holds these up as exemplars of the kind of democratic virtues desperately needed in current circumstances.⁴³ At such moments West holds out for his readers a genuine, though slender reed of hope in tandem with the stark

possibility that the world's oldest living democratic experiment could completely fail, and may already be well into the process of doing so.

Though his socio-critical analyses remains eclectic and pragmatically deployed, West turns to the work of his friend and teacher Sheldon Wolin for a means of critiquing U.S. imperialism, and the pervasive apathy of the American citizenry. In Wolin, West finds a staunch advocate of the radical, participatory democracy witnessed to in the plebiscitary legacy of the Athenian polis. Wolin provides him with a more-or-less sufficiently deep critique of modern, constitutional and representative political forms, forms often referred to as "democratic." And yet, the Wolinian dimensions of West's critique suggest, at times, that searching for genuinely democratic practices precludes altogether hope that the institutional arrangements of our current situation are not simply beyond repair. At other moments, one wonders, if Wolin is right, whether we should hope for the repair of those arrangements at all. It is when West deploys the kind of socio-theoretical analysis most amenable to demystifying the imperialism of modern, imperial nation-states that he approaches a tipping point. At such a point, he may risk depleting the resources of democratic faith and tragicomic hope to which he appeals above.

I next examine Wolin's account of democracy as a "fugitive in history," explicating the role that Max Weber plays in that framework. The categories Wolin employs, I suggest, pose an instance of the theoretical excessiveness that Rorty warned of above. West's account of radical democracy is not determined to stand or fall with Wolin's version of fugitivity. West's account of the Black Church, expanded through the lens of insights of the theologians John Howard Yoder and Karl Barth, provides a critical vantage-point from which West can appropriate the best of Wolin's insights, while refusing his excessiveness.

2. Fugitive Democracy, Democratic Faith and Social Hope

Cornel West writes,

Behind Wolin is the ghost of Max Weber, who doesn't believe in liberalism. He doesn't think it exists – only concrete liberal states. He's a historicist. Liberal states for Weber are systems of domination in which professional administration, government bureaucratization leave little space for democratic participation and public deliberation. Meaning, then, that liberal states are systems of domination in which the voice of the demos is pushed to the margins owing to centralized forms of power manifest in professional administration and government bureaucracy.... [Wolin believes] that liberal states like the United States [are] system[s] of domination even given democratic elements within that system, like rights and liberties and so forth.... Wolin and I agree in part with Weber's description of liberal states. But [Weber] thinks radical democracy is a pipe dream.⁴⁴

While persuaded of the merits of small-scale, local democratic communities, Max Weber was deeply pessimistic about the prospects for the survival of democratic forms in both his native Germany or in the United States. In fact, he came to ascribe an incompatibility of the logic of authentic democratic practices and the instrumental rationality that increasingly disenchanting the modern world. He attributed this incompatibility to “the unpredictability of the electorate” upon which direct democracy is predicated. The efficiency and uniformity basic to extensive bureaucratic institutional forms such as nation-states and corporations stifled the passionate character of plebiscitary democratic practices. “In direct democracies, participation was an end in itself as well as a means, and for that reason efficiency mattered less than maintaining civic virtue,” James Kloppenberg frames Weber’s position. “But with a few notable exceptions, such as the Greek and Italian city-states and the Swiss cantons, democratic communities quickly collapsed and frequently, as in Switzerland, the appearance of participation masked the reality of elite domination.”⁴⁵ Weber based his doubts about the possibility of genuinely democratic practices on what he took to be the inescapability of modern forms of power as manifest in large-scale, bureaucratic structures. Bureaucratic arrangements minimized the political agency of citizens, and reduced what had been the virtue-engendering, historically contingent participation in politics to momentary, instrumental acts by discrete “voters” conceived in abstraction from history. “Only communities which renounce political power are able to provide the soil on which other virtues may flourish,” Weber wrote in an open letter to *Die Frau* of 1916, “not only the simple, bourgeois virtues of citizenship and true democracy, which has never yet been realized by a *Machstaat*, but also much more intimate and yet eternal values, including artistic ones.”⁴⁶

In the face of modern forms of domination, Sheldon Wolin similarly restricts his definition of democracy to the local and direct action of the people. Constitutional democracy, by contrast – what he occasionally calls “electoral democracy” – is democracy mainly in name. Representative structures install elite and privileged bureaucrats: professional politicians who become subjects of interest groups, lobbies in the context of a “free” market run amok such as our own. Such structures repress the passionate interests and participation of citizens in the processes of self-government. The passions of the demos become denuded by the efficiency of modern forms of power: instrumentalization, bureaucratic organization, market forces. The capacities of the common citizen for democratic involvement, in principle, come to mean little in as far as the demos becomes inoculated of the very desire to speak and act for itself on the basis of its highest ideals and beliefs.

In other words, bureaucracies do not merely constrain demotic passions, they inoculate them, which is a most insidious form of domination. “The result of state-centeredness is a politics in which at one extreme are the experts struggling to be scientific and rational while at the other is a politics of mass irrationality, of manipulated images, controlled information, single-issue fanati-

cism, and pervasive fear.”⁴⁷ Weber’s insights about bureaucracy and modern power saturate these lines. Implicit in them is a theory about the nature of the legitimacy of state. Wolin writes:

It is no exaggeration to say that one of the, if not the, main projects of ancient constitutional theorists, such as Plato (*The Laws*), Aristotle, Polybius, and Cicero, as well as of modern constitutionalists, such as the authors of *The Federalist* and Tocqueville, was to dampen, frustrate, sublimate, and defeat the demotic passions. The main devices were: the rule of law, and especially the idea of a sacrosanct “fundamental law” or constitution, safeguarded from the “gusts of popular passions”; the idea of checks and balances; separation of powers with its attempt to quarantine the “people” by confining its direct representation to one branch of the legislature; the “refining” process of indirect elections; and suffrage restrictions. The aim was not simply to check democracy but to discourage it by making it difficult for those who, historically, had almost no leisure time for politics, to achieve political goals. (Twentieth-century voter registration laws have a long genealogy.)⁴⁸

According to Wolin, authentic democratic possibilities amid the bureaucratic inevitabilities of modernity’s iron cage are limited to fleeting, “rebellious moment[s]” that entail “the taking back of one’s powers...”⁴⁹ He grounds the possibility of these moments upon his own democratic faith “...that ordinary individuals are capable of creating new cultural patterns of commonality at any moment”:

Individuals who concert their powers for low-income housing, worker ownership of factories, better schools, better health care, safer water, controls over toxic waste disposals, and a thousand other common concerns of ordinary lives are experiencing a democratic moment and contributing to the discovery, care, and tending of a commonality of shared concerns. Without necessarily intending it, they are renewing the political by contesting the forms of unequal power which democratic liberty and equality have made possible.⁵⁰

As this passage suggests, Wolin maintains a robust assessment of the capacities of the demos; what West would call his democratic faith. Moreover, he inscribes democratic hope into his vision of radical democracy by making memory of past democratic moments the basis for such moments. In as far as democratic moments are possible on Wolin’s view, they are not facilitated by the constitutionally democratic structures that frame their context. Rather, they occur primarily in spite of these institutional constraints or structural implementations. Institutionalization marks the birth of bureaucracy. Bureaucracies embody the forms of power that stifle authentic democracy. Authentic democracy must

remain, in a word, fugitive.⁵¹ “Democracy is a political moment, perhaps the political moment, when the political is remembered and re-created,” he writes, “Democracy is a rebellious moment that may assume revolutionary, destructive proportions, or may not.”⁵²

Like Wolin, Weber did not abandon all hope for authentic democracy, once it was properly reconceived. Rather, Weber placed his hope for democracy in modern contexts in the charisma of political leadership and small-scale movements, possibilities that he categorically opposed to bureaucratic politics. He thought that resistance to the bureaucratizing of local movements would require some catalyst. Weber thought that the more modern political structures and roles positively repressed the passions of the people, the more those passions would assert themselves unexpectedly, and charismatically. Elsewhere he expanded upon these ideas, writing:

In contrast to any kind of bureaucratic organization of offices, the charismatic structure knows nothing of a form or of an ordered procedure of appointment or dismissal. It knows no regulated ‘career’, ‘advancement’, ‘salary’, or regulated and expert training of the holder of charisma or of his aids. It knows no agency of control or appeal, no local bailiwick or exclusive functional jurisdictions; nor does it embrace permanent institutions like our bureaucratic ‘departments’, which are independent of persons and of purely personal charisma.⁵³

Weber then set himself to answering the difficult questions that arise once one has rendered such a diagnosis, and proposed such a solution. How to facilitate the in-breaking of charisma, in the form of leadership or otherwise? How to chisel out space in the midst of modern constitutional structures for some semblance of the political passions as he conceived them? Weber’s effort to facilitate charisma within bureaucratic structures (“to breathe the life of charisma into modern institutions”) finally led him to vie for Article 48 of Germany’s Weimar Constitution (“the emergency article”) which would invest the Reichspräsident with tremendous leeway for decision making in times of crisis. David Little describes this article as “the constitutional pretext for rise to power of Adolph Hitler” but a decade or so after its formulation.⁵⁴ Regarding the darker potentialities of charisma Kloppenberg writes that “Weber was willing to entrust such power to a democratically chosen leader precisely because he feared the numbing effects of bureaucracy more than he doubted the ability of the people to select responsible leaders.”⁵⁵

While Wolin searches for a way to accommodate the democratic passions, he moves in a direction quite opposite from that of Weber, toward the capacities, agency, and passions of the demos. And yet, like Weber, he predicated his account upon a categorical opposition of politics and the political, bureaucratic institutions and political practices, professionalism and passion. While this approach makes crystal clear and compelling what Wolin opposes, it

renders his positive vision somewhat ephemeral. By opposing bureaucratic structures and democratic moments, Wolin starkly contrasts the in-breaking of the fugitively democratic moment over against the modern political structures and practices that frame its occurrence. And yet, it is precisely the charismatic element in such moments that begs the question of how such moments coalesce and then disperse. Fugitively democratic moments tend not to just happen. Appealing to “the common people bringing their powers into concert” implies mobilization of some sort or other. Presumably, bringing the agency of individuals into concert will require enlistment, mobilization and direction, leadership and funding.

It is precisely at the point of positive articulation regarding these questions where Wolin’s explication of fugitive democracy is at its most austere. “Just what constitutes a restorative moment is a matter of contestation,” he writes. In as far as this is a pragmatic refusal to delineate an *a priori* description, then fair enough. However, it is at the point that one invokes the fugitive character of radical democracy some of the most difficult questions arise. How, precisely, do democratic moments coalesce, gain a critical mass, organize to form a coherent “taking back of power,” and then dissipate? What of the potentially undemocratic temptations to which an aversion to institutional constraint may be prone? What of the compromise, struggle and imposition of power that so often indwells even small-scale political motion? Silence about the highly complex, internal dynamics of social movements might arouse the suspicion that a romanticized conception of the *demos* is in play here. It is not a conceptual stretch that the coalescing of individuals into the fugitive moments that Wolin describes may well find itself subject to the autocratic and anti-democratic temptations that stand at either side of the somehow coherent-yet-fugitive taking-back-of-power he prescribes. The caveat that such moments or movements remain small or of a grass-roots form is no guarantee that they will not manifest such tendencies. Charisma routinizes. Movements stagnate and stultify. The memories that inspire democratic movements can take on mythic proportions. Whose memories they are, and what they signify, are points of potentially intense contestation. We cannot extricate ourselves from the modern context anymore than we can choose not to have been born. Opting out of modern forms of power, and all the questions they bring in train, is simply not an option.

“Democracy in the late modern world cannot be a complete political system and given the awesome potentialities of modern forms of power and what they exact of the social and natural world, it ought not to be hoped or striven for,” Wolin writes. “Democracy needs to be reconceived as something other than a form of government: as a mode of being that is conditioned by bitter experience, doomed to succeed only temporarily, but as a recurrent possibility as long as the memory of the political survives.”⁵⁶ Clearly, it is too much to expect any set of arrangements to achieve its ideal in a completed system. However, does this fact mean that those ideals ought not to be hoped for or striven toward

in concrete ways? Is the rule of law within a constitutional framework something that can be more or less just? And when it is less so, ought we not *strive* to hold our leaders accountable for making it more so? Ought we not hope and strive for more just voter registration laws, and for campaign finance reforms that prohibit corporations from purchasing politicians? Even Wolin's staunchest critics would not ascribe such claims to him.⁵⁷

West, of course, is too dynamic to be pigeonholed a Weberian, and he certainly does not appropriate Wolin's "fugitive democracy" entirely or uncritically. One way to read the appeal of Wolin's account of fugitive democracy to West is the analogical light that it casts upon the life of the Black Church. As the central institution in the black community in America, the Black Church presents a concentrated reflection of, and a primary framework within which, black peoples' struggle to survive in a white supremacist society. Its history affords a microcosm of the complex interaction between individual and community, institutional polity, practice, and charismatic inspiration.

West's complex integration of these multiple dimensions in his account of the Black Church provides an analogical corrective to the categorical opposition at the heart of Wolin's account of fugitive democracy. West points out that the polity and institutional arrangements of the Black Church historically contrast starkly with "modern bureaucratic and hierarchic forms of organization."⁵⁸ While this afforded these communities a palpable sense of autonomy, and resulted in forms of leadership that were charismatic, it perpetually risked becoming, and inevitably became, autocratic. At the same time, it "imposed considerable constraints on the administrative capabilities and institutional capacities of black people."⁵⁹ The form and organization that facilitates the life of the Black churches is as fallen and fallible and perpetually tending toward corruption as the community itself. In other words, to invest this polity with too much reverence would be idolatrous. And yet, the shape of the polity matters. From one vantage-point, the organizational form of this gathered community was forged in all the contingencies of the history of a people captured, enslaved, and utterly disenfranchised in a political and social context predicated upon their subjugation. At the same time, this organization was formed as a response to God's call for these communities to become an earthen vessel pliable enough to oblige the movement God's Spirit time and again, sufficiently emendable, and mendable, to be broken and refashioned, humbled and lifted up (some might say "reformed and ever reforming").

Karl Barth accounted for this dual dimensionality of the Christian Church and the churches by distinguishing between two senses of *ekklesia*: *Gemeinde* and *Kirche*. Barth used the term *Gemeinde* in order to convey a sense of the Church as a parochially manifest, multi-form, and ever-reforming "gathering and following-under-the-Word." He contrasted *Gemeinde* to the structural dimensions of Church polity or hierarchy (*Kirche*). And yet, Barth claimed that there could be no simple either/or between these dimensions of *ekklesia*.⁶⁰ This is because, he explained, Christ has chosen to work through the all-too-human

structural arrangements and organization of the churches, much as he takes up, transforms, and works through the human words of Scripture. In fact, the tensions which well up in a dialectical shifting back-and-forth between the gathered congregations and structural frameworks may be where God will speak and work. In other words, the organizational and structural arrangements of churches matter.⁶¹

These institutional and practical dimensions, extended over time, frame a clearing in which Christians grapple with the in-breaking of God's Word; or perhaps more accurately put, the in-breaking of God's Word grapples with Christians. In light of Barth's account, John Howard Yoder wrote, Christian ethics becomes *ethos*, rather than ethic. Yoder explains:

Our hearing of God's Word is not a private matter. To hear God's word the Christian will listen to the apostles and prophets. He will listen to Jesus Christ, as the apostles and prophets testify to him. He will listen to the Christian church as it testifies to Jesus Christ. He will give account to his contemporaries and to his posterity. He will be ready before and after his decision to examine the reasons for his choice. This conversation which he carries on with the Christian past and with his contemporaries cannot be codified, and yet, since there is one God and one Word, it will be possible to find the main lines of Christian thinking about decision.⁶²

Barth's account of *ekklesia* may assist in similarly reconceiving democracy as an *ethos* reducible neither to institutions nor practices, discrete moments (whether past or present) nor allegedly ahistorical conditions. Like Yoder's reconception of "Christian ethics" just above, "democracy" can be reconceived as occurring in the complex and continuous interaction of past and future considerations, communally situated discursive practices *and* institutional arrangements and constraints.

It is not to be denied that constitutions and representational procedures of modern politics constrain social movements, and often do so in elitist, Plutocratic and imperialist ways. And yet, out of such constraints arise the possibilities, needs and demands for further social movements of reform and resistance. This insight is the flip-side of American democracy's "ignoble paradox" that the people whose subjugation has been a condition for the possibility of this democratic experiment is also a people who have most manifest the ideals of democracy's ethical and spiritual substance in its creation of the spirituals, jazz, and the blues. But this assumes that the hope and self-confidence required for such possibilities are sufficiently intact. As West says, it is often "in the trying" that one salvages and sustains such self-love and hope. Presumptuous despair and terminal disdain for prevailing conditions are the surest ways *not* to make a difference. Reconceived in this way, constitutionality can be framed an ingredient in facilitating democratic moments – itself, a means of resistance, as much as a buffer protecting elites from the people.⁶³

Constraint is, itself, a necessary condition for novelty and innovation even if, and perhaps especially when, such innovation occurs for the explicit purpose of turning back upon the constraints that made the moment possible in order to resist, criticize, and correct them. If such a reading still presents a dilemma for conferring the moniker “democratic” on such representational institutional arrangements and constitutional constraints, then so be it. Call them by another name. However, if so “reconceiving” democracy defines those structural dimensions out of the complex democratic equation *tout court*, then theorizing will have once again commandeered our efforts, and needlessly truncated available resources. Thinkers who strive to be hopeful about the potentialities of democratic practices will want to assess those institutional arrangements on the basis of their compatibility with – and capacity to respond to – properly conceived democratic interests and purposes. After examining the extent to which they might be challenged, held accountable to the people they represent and the laws of the land, reformed and revised, we can refer to them as “democratic” to the extent that they meet those critical expectations and demands in concrete, situation-specific instances. For precisely these reasons, Yoder provides a balanced criticism where Wolin does not. In fact, Yoder presents a much-needed corrective to Wolin’s excessiveness. He writes:

An alternative community contributes powerfully to social change through its conscientious refusal at certain border points to participate in continuing wrong. The boycott, conscientious objection, and other patterns of respectful obstruction contribute proportionately more to a redefinition of social goals than the continuing conscientious support of established patterns by the majority of the pursuit of change through the more routine patterns of evolution proved by bureaucracies and elections. This is not to deprecate the more routine forms, but only to observe that they are not the strongest, and that patterns of minority witness are often stronger, rather than weaker, when compared to mainstream methods.... Neither the position of conscientious objection nor that of conscientious involvement can be adequate if taken as a sweeping recipe. Only the insistence that both are open options, needing to be chosen situationally, can permit either to have integrity. Otherwise, the refusal becomes irresponsible or the responsibility becomes unfaithful.⁶⁴

Similarly, reducing “democracy” to either a set of institutional arrangements or a bundle of communal practices momentarily inspired by “the taking back of power” can be adequate. Both are subject to a range of temptations. Accommodating both, combined with a situation-by-situation assessment, will increase our chances of maintaining a sense of critical balance between social hope and democratic faith, and the necessities of radical, withering criticism and revolutionary moments.

West is aware of the temptations to which Wolinian excessiveness is prone. Moreover, he has the resources within his prophetic pragmatism to correct for that excessiveness. “Like love in Christian narratives, existential democratic practices are perennially crucified only to be resurrected and again betrayed by false prophets and grand inquisitors,” he writes. “Hence, democracy in history is a tragic-comic phenomenon – a sad yet sweet dialectic of courageous agency and historical constraints, a melancholic yet melioristic interplay of freedom and limitations that identifies and confronts social misery only to see its efforts to overcome such misery often fall short of their mark. Hence it is neither sentimental nor cynical. Rather it is relentless and resilient – with compassion – yet usually disappointed with its results.”⁶⁵ Amid the Wolinian tones of these lines, West holds out a palpable sense that terminal pessimism and apocalypticism are luxuries. Hope is too fragile to take for granted, or easily forgo. It does not just naturally emanate of its own accord. Construed as a virtue, it requires practice and navigating the vices that stand on either side of it: unreflective or presumptive optimism on one hand, or despair in our present capacities and prospects for the future on the other. As a virtue, one acquires the capacity to hope gradually, only after confronting situations in which one’s ability to sustain hope is tested. A realistic hope is hard won, and requires cultivation and renewal – rooted in memory and yet oriented toward the future. It interweaves with other virtues, such as courage and faith. Democratic hope, in particular, both makes possible, and issues from, the practices of critical discourse and deliberation in which historically situated democratic association consists.

Truth, West says, is the condition of letting suffering speak. A radical democratic project that predicates itself upon “letting the demos speak for itself” must equally emphasize upon *listening* to the demos. But such a “letting suffering speak” for itself is more likely to engender testimony and observation, than analysis leveled in the idiom of social theory. This point is not to shun socio-theoretical critique. It seeks to side-step any *defacto* privileging of socio-theoretical critique in virtue of prescribing that particular form of critique as indispensably central to a would-be democratic project. The positive correlate of this thesis is a pragmatic preference for the more familiar word, when it will do. It amounts, moreover, to recognizing the many different ways that people diagnose systemic social evils, and then articulate their resistance to those evils with which they struggle and suffer. For these purposes we should be just as interested to grant priority to the observations and testimonies of those involved directly, as opposed to those of the social theorist. This is not to deny the significance of socio-theoretical analysis. Rather, it holds up the democratizing of our discourses as the guiding norm of any such analysis, thereby maintaining the priority of democracy to social theory.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I delivered earlier drafts of this paper to Harvard University's Religion and Social Theory Colloquium, and later at the Northeast Ethics Colloquium at Brown University in 2004. I am grateful to the faculty and students who participated in those conversations, and for additional feedback from Martin Kavka and Todd Cioffi.

NOTES

1. Richard Rorty, "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy," in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press: 1991), pp. 178–179.
2. Rorty, *Achieving Our Country* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 18.
3. Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), p. 213.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 206.
5. West, "The Limits of Neo-pragmatism," in *Keeping Faith: Philosophy and Race in America* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 140.
6. West, "Theory, Pragmatism and Politics," in *Keeping Faith*, p. 90; see also John B. Thompson, *Studies in the Theory of Ideology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 5f.
7. West, *Prophesy Deliverance!: An African American Revolutionary Christianity* (Louisville, Kent.: Westminster Press, 1982), p. 35.
8. *Ibid.*
9. West, "The Limits of Neo-pragmatism," p. 140.
10. West, "Black Theology and Marxist Thought," in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, Volume One (1966–1979)*, ed. James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1979), pp. 409–424, at p. 416.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 415–416.
12. James Cone, "Black Theology and the Black Church: Where Do We Go From Here?" and "Message to the Church and Community," both presented at the Black Theology Conference in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1977. Cone's essay is reprinted under the title "Epilogue: An Interpretation of the Debate among Black Theologians," in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, Volume One*, pp. 425–440.
13. West, "Black Theology of Liberation as Critique of Capitalist Civilization," in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, Volume Two 1980–1992*, ed. James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore (New York: Orbis, 1993), pp. 410–425, at p. 416.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 416–417.
15. West, "Black Theology and Marxist Thought," p. 417; see also "Race and Social Theory" in *Keeping Faith*, pp. 265–270, especially p. 267.
16. West, *Prophesy Deliverance!*, 2nd edn. (Louisville, Kent.: Westminster/John Knox, 2002), pp. 47–68.
17. West, "Race and Social Theory," in *Keeping Faith*, pp. 265–270.
18. West, "The New Cultural Politics of Difference," in *Keeping Faith*, pp. 21–24.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
20. West, "Theory, Pragmatism and Politics," in *Keeping Faith*, p. 102–103.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 90.
22. West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, pp. 231–232.
23. *Ibid.*
24. Rorty, “The Professor and the Prophet,” *Transition* 52 (1991): 70–78, at 77.
25. West, “The Limits of Neo-pragmatism,” in *Keeping Faith*, p. 135.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 137. See also West’s response to Scott Pratt’s essay, “Race, Education, and Democracy” in *Pragmatism and the Problem of Race*, ed. Bill E. Lawson and Donald F. Koch (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), pp. 188–202 and 225–230, especially pp. 226–227.
27. West, “The Limits of Neo-pragmatism,” p. 140.
28. Rorty, “Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality,” in *Truth and Progress* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 179–181.
29. Rorty, *Achieving Our Country*, p. 25–26.
30. James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Dell, 1988 [1963]), p. 98. Rorty borrows the title of his book from Baldwin; see *Achieving Our Country*, p. 12.
31. Rorty, “The Professor and the Prophet,” p. 22.
32. Rorty, *Achieving Our Country*, pp. 7–8.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 36.
34. See, for instance, Rorty’s ringing endorsement of Gianni Vattimo’s claim that “commonsense Heideggerianism” is just what democracy needs. Rorty, “Introduction” to Gianni Vattimo, *Nihilism and Emancipation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), pp. ix–xx.
35. Rorty, “The Professor and the Prophet,” p. 78.
36. Or, for that matter, Marcuse’s later “optimism” that meaningful conflict could come only from minority groups on the fringes of society, somehow untainted by the pervasive conditions he diagnosed. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Herbert Marcuse: An Exposition and a Polemic* (New York: Viking Press, 1970), pp. 70–82 and 99–106.
37. Rorty, *Achieving Our Country*, p. 37.
38. Rorty aims these criticisms specifically at the Heideggerian pessimism exhibited by the sort of “post-humanism” inspired by Foucault. He aims, as well, at dyed-in-the-wool Marxists who play up the distinction between “bourgeois reformers” on one hand, and those convinced that capitalism must be defeated. “Because [the Foucauldians] regard liberal reformist initiatives as symptoms of a discredited liberal ‘humanism’, they have little interest in designing new social experiments” (*ibid.*). In his “Moral Identity and Private Autonomy: the Case of Foucault” Rorty expands the crux of the point, “You would never guess, from Foucault’s account of the changes in European social institutions during the last three hundred years, that during that period suffering had decreased considerably.” See Rorty, *Philosophical Papers Vol 2: Essays on Heidegger and Others* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 195.
39. Rorty, “The Professor and the Prophet,” pp. 36–37; see also *Achieving Our Country*, p. 46. For West, among a few others, Rorty writes, “‘Marxism’ signals hardly more than an awareness that the rich are still ripping off the poor, bribing the politicians, and having almost everything their own way.”
40. Rorty, “The Professor and the Prophet,” p. 76.
41. West, *Democracy Matters*, p. 20.
42. *Ibid.*, pp. 22–23.
43. West, *Democracy Matters*, p. 21.
44. West, “Response to Ronald F. Thiemann,” unpublished lecture, Harvard Divinity School, Cambridge, Massachusetts, on 7 November 2001.

45. James T. Kloppenberg, "Democracy and Disenchantment: From Weber and Dewey to Habermas and Rorty," in *The Virtues of Liberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 90–91.
46. Max Weber, "Between Two Laws," in *Weber: Political Writings*, ed. Peter Lassman and Ronald Speirs (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 76.
47. Wolin, *The Presence of the Past* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), p. 149.
48. Sheldon Wolin, "Democracy: Electoral and Athenian," *Political Science and Politics* 26 (1993): 476.
49. *Ibid.*, p. 56. See also Wolin, "Max Weber: Legitimation, Method, and the Politics of Theory," *Political Theory* 9 (1981): 415.
50. Wolin, "Fugitive Democracy," in *Democracy and Difference*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 31–45, at p. 58.
51. *Ibid.*
52. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
53. Weber's "The Sociology of Charismatic Authority," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. and trans. Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Galaxy Books, 1946), p. 246.
54. David Little, "Religion and Realism," p. 7.
55. Kloppenberg, "Democracy and Disenchantment," p. 93.
56. Sheldon Wolin, "Fugitive Democracy," pp. 42–43.
57. George Kateb, "Wolin as a Critic of Democracy," in *Democracy and Vision: Sheldon Wolin and the Vicissitudes of the Political*, ed. Aryeh Botwinick and William E. Connolly (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 39–57, especially p. 44.
58. West, *Prophesy Deliverance!*, p. 36.
59. *Ibid.*
60. Here I am following closely John Howard Yoder's explication of Barth's account in *Karl Barth and the Problem of War and Other Essays on Barth*, ed. Mark Thiessen Nation (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 2003), especially pp. 96 and 173f.
61. Barth conveys a clear sense of the complex multidimensionality of his account of the Church and the churches in Karl Barth, *The Church and the Churches*, ed. William G. Rusch (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2005).
62. Yoder, *Karl Barth and the Problem of War*, pp. 32–33.
63. It is conceivable that conditions arise requiring subversive, underground resistance to the powers that be. One thinks, for instance, of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's last resort decision in 1939 to return to Germany from the United States in order to collaborate with the underground resistance against the Nazi regime. Bonhoeffer was arrested for his fight, and eventually executed. When we reach the point of declaring the conditions we face depraved beyond repair, as Bonhoeffer did of Nazi Germany in the late 1930s, we too had better be prepared to leave our secure places, and take the necessary risks. See Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Theologian, Christian, Contemporary* (London: Collins, 1970), p. 559.
64. *Ibid.*, pp. 158 and 159.
65. West, "Preface: The Tragicomic and the Political in Christian Faith," in *Prophesy Deliverance, 20th Anniversary Edition* (Louisville, Kent.: Westminster/John Knox, 2002), p. 9 (*italics added*).

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