

The Practice of Political Theory: Rorty and Continental Thought, by Clayton Chin.
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Clayton Chin's *The Practice of Political Theory: Rorty and Continental Thought* is a rich and insightful study into the relationship between Richard Rorty and various strands of contemporary continental political thought. There are many books about Rorty and more broadly Anglophone, analytic, liberal political theory but Chin's book is, as far as I can tell, the first book-length study that explicitly addresses Rorty's relationship to central currents in contemporary continental political theory. In assessing this relationship, Chin takes the big questions head on—questions about foundationalism, the sources of normativity, ontology, political justification, pluralism, about method in political theory—in a way that is both clear and incisive. And his discussion of various thinkers (such as Jürgen Habermas, Michel Foucault, and William E. Connolly) and their relationship to Rorty's thought is always nuanced, charitable, and illuminating. Chin's book is for all these reasons a welcome contribution. It will be read with profit by scholars and students in political theory and philosophy, especially those interested in the dispute between the pragmatist and “weak ontological” turns in recent political theory.

The book is organized into three main sections. The first, “Rorty and Political Thinking,” sets the stage for the arguments to come by placing Rorty's work in conversation with, and at times in opposition to, various meta-political trends in recent political theory. Chin is a careful, sympathetic, and extremely learned reader of Rorty. This is amply on display in the early chapters of the book, which feature meticulous discussion of Rorty's early metaphilosophy; his critique of epistemology from *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* and beyond; his brief flirtation with hermeneutics; and his later turn to a more naturalistic, Deweyan strand of pragmatism. On Chin's view, Rorty conceives of political theory “as a form of situated sociopolitical criticism attuned to the problems of internormative engagement, one that intervenes using the public language of its day to reconstruct problematic practices across difference” (4). That sounds exactly right, and Chin is to be commended for making this explicit. I am more skeptical about Chin's claim that this conception of political theory did not really emerge “in concrete form” until Rorty's final volume of essays, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, was published in 2007. I think there were ample indications, if not outright articulations, of this conception in much of Rorty's earlier work. But this is a minor quibble, and nothing Chin intends to accomplish in his book hangs on it.

The book's second section—"Rorty and Continental Political Thought: Ontology, Naturalism, and History"—is where much of the critical meat and potatoes of Chin's project are to be found. These chapters concentrate for the most part on the dispute between Rorty and William E. Connolly—between Rorty's repudiation of ontology and Connolly's insistence that, as Chin puts it on his behalf, "Any active interpretation of the world . . . always includes a set of assumptions about Being, humanity, and their relations" (74). These chapters offer careful and sympathetic overviews of Rorty's and Connolly's thought and characterize the dispute between them charitably, and, as far as I can tell, accurately. Ultimately, Chin concludes that the ontological critique of Rorty fails. He points out that, first, Rorty's "naturalistic framework" does not preclude ontological languages from having normative force. After all, if Rorty is right to deny the existence of any neutral, Archimedean point from which to adjudicate various claims about the world, then it makes little sense to rule ontological vocabularies out of bounds precisely for their failure to occupy such a point. From the point of view of the hopeless quest for timeless foundations, that is, ontological vocabularies are no worse off than other vocabularies. Such vocabularies become, on Chin's reading of Rorty, just one more set of tools at our disposal, to be judged in accordance with how well they help us accomplish this or that task or project.

Second, Chin responds to the charge that Rorty's brand of "naturalism" covertly relies on an "ontology of mastery." According to Connolly, while Rorty disavows a teleological conception of human beings and nature, his view still entails "a series of ontological assumptions . . . that approach the world as something to be bent to human agency" (18). Chin concedes that Connolly's "weak ontology" may expose some unacknowledged ontological assumptions in Rorty's view, but he denies that this insight (if accurate) makes Rorty's "cultural critical method for political theory" any less fertile. So, against the charge that Rorty's picture of human beings as "complex-tool-using social organisms who are the sole creators of normative claims" (121) entails the strongly anthropocentric view that the world and her resources are merely there for the satisfaction of our needs and desires, Chin replies that, "even if some ontological assumptions seem intuitively linked to Rorty's method, and even if they are bolstered by some incendiary comments, it is not necessary that these assumptions are inherent to his model of sociopolitical criticism" (121). I think this is exactly right.

I wish that Chin had spent more time in his book addressing what "ontology" ultimately comes to mean, as that word figures in vast swaths of contemporary political theory. For it seems to me that philosophers and political theorists tend to use this term in strikingly different ways. Does *any* claim about how things are represent an "ontology" in the relevant sense? Is my

uneducated grandmother unwittingly “doing metaphysics” when she asks me to retrieve a box from the garage? When the anthropologist points out that we *homo sapiens* are non-egg-laying, featherless bipeds, are these “ontological” claims in the sense of that term that is at issue in the dispute between Rorty and Connolly? Or do “ontology” and “metaphysics” instead make reference to a particular and rather old philosophical tradition, likely beginning with the pre-Socratic obsession over “substance,” which puts at its center the idea that one must penetrate past *mere* appearances in order to glimpse the really real? Rorty consistently urged his readers to understand “metaphysics” in this latter sense rather than the former. Metaphysics and ontology on Rorty’s view are philosophical traditions, historical sequences of questions, arguments, language-games, and texts. (That’s the only way one might turn one’s back on them, after all.) But it was unclear to me whether this was consistently the notion of “ontology” or “metaphysics” at issue in the dispute between Connolly and Rorty, and I wish that Chin had spent more time clarifying this. So, when Chin glosses Connolly’s view about the “necessity” of ontological reflection and the “irreducibility” of ontological assumptions, it was unclear whether he had in mind the more banal assumption that political theory depends to some extent on regular beliefs about what kind of creatures we humans are and about what the world is like (a banal assumption that Rorty would not have protested against, incidentally), or whether he was thinking of the grander philosophical project of plowing past appearance in the quest for a *fundamental* conception of how things really are.

The third and final section of the book—“Rorty and Contemporary Political Theory: Pragmatic Sociopolitical Criticism”—offers a sympathetic, *positive* reconstruction of Rorty’s political theory. Unlike a great deal of earlier scholarship on Rorty, which depicts Rorty as primarily a negative, debunking, skeptical figure, Chin joins others in so-called “third-wave Rorty scholarship” in seeking to locate the positive, transformational elements in Rorty’s conception of political theory. He shows us that there is in Rorty’s thinking a situated, democratic, and pluralistic way to theorize politics that does not become enmired in debates about foundations, certainty, or epistemological justification. According to Chin’s reconstruction, Rorty offers “an ethos for contemporary pluralistic democracy that takes inclusion beyond the quasi-foundational approaches of liberal proceduralism and radical ontological thought” (20). It is never easy to characterize an “ethos,” but Chin convincingly demonstrates how Rorty “calls for a return to the situated nature of sociopolitical life and its primary context in the vocabularies and practices of individuals and groups” (201). One upshot is that one cannot offer criticism of society by trying to take up a vantage point outside of it. (One is tempted to think of Michael Walzer’s notion of the “connected critic” as a parallel

here.) Indeed, on Rorty's view, social and political criticism often involves nothing more theoretically grandiose than urging something like "let's try X out" or "let's give Y a whirl." Such suggestions are usually driven by "cultural-political" attempts to remake the world in accordance with some of our hopes and ideals, but crucially, the authority of such criticism (to the extent that it has it) cannot depend on anything external to the communities and individuals to whom it is addressed. This reminds us that we should never expect political theory to deliver something that only political practice can provide, and that real political justification is never supplied *merely* from the armchair.

It is impossible to deny that Rorty's thinking has been the object of great ire and derision over the course of many years. Some of this, perhaps, is justified. But anyone well-versed in the critical literature on Rorty ought to be amazed at how badly misunderstood Rorty tends to be, at how much simplistic, one-dimensional, bad-faith engagement one finds among his critics. (These sins are probably more frequently committed by Rorty's philosophical critics than his political theory critics, but the general point remains.) Chin and his book belong to a renaissance of younger scholars of Rorty and pragmatism who are bucking this trend. This young cohort is taking Rorty seriously (though by no means uncritically); engaging his work in a deep and careful way; and always in a positive and constructive, rather than a contemptuous and destructive, tone. Chin's book exemplifies all these virtues. It is broad in scope but always detailed and precise. It pays attention simultaneously to the intricate details in Rorty's thinking and to the more broad-brushed "anti-authoritarian" vision that he was consistently trying to articulate and defend, without sacrificing either one to the other. This is no easy task, and Chin is to be commended for pulling it off so adroitly.

I highly recommend this book. No one interested in Rorty and his place in the landscape of contemporary political theory can afford to let it pass them by.