Poetics, Politics, and Discourse

John Powell Ward


This is a fascinating, provoking, perhaps sometimes banal, but also sometimes thrilling collection. Since it demands on every page that we be reflexive in all our doings I should perhaps declare myself, at least to say that I came to the book via the writings of its editor, Richard Harvey Brown, and from my own experience as university teacher of both sociology and English literature. Brown's own books have worked toward a poetics and rhetoric of sociology and society, yet in their own tenor remain—naturally enough—in the tradition of the single extended thesis; carefully argued, self-knowing, with right humility but full of understanding. The present collection is disparate. It arose out of two conferences at the University of Maryland, yet the original programmes of those conferences show that only a handful of their speakers contribute to this collection. There is nothing wrong with that, but the collection itself presumably results from the activity those conferences bestirred, or that they stemmed from.

The general theme—but there I go already. Unification, especially as that gets institutionalized and thus wields power, is exactly what this collection wants to contest. Some of the pieces are theoretical in nature, or at least contest theory's legitimacy head-on; others are fieldwork reports, but with this difference, that they report not the fieldwork but the writing-up of that fieldwork which already exists. But that in itself is not new. The point is that, while all academic work carries its author's idiosyncratic tone, this X-raying of all writing and culture and their value-assumptions whatsoever engenders a centrifugal quality which takes us almost anywhere.

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All the papers, from their many angles and in their vividly diverse voices (in our non-positivist time, a voice can be vivid) do however attend to the ‘rhetorical turn’ which has entered the range of humanistic and social science disciplines in the USA in recent years. As is well known by now, the rhetorical turn is, roughly, the suggestion that our discourses, whether they purport to be purely empirical, objective or (as in philosophy for example) rational, are pervaded by the rhetoric that language embodies by its very nature. ‘Rhetoric’ is an ancient term, the pupils in schools in ancient Greece and the European Renaissance were taught it as part of the curriculum, and, as many contributors to this collection are at pains to point out, its connotation does not have to be derogatory. ‘Rhetoric’ as pejorative implies a set of devices to persuade the reader or hearer of a message in itself suspect. The rhetorical turn goes deeper; we cannot speak impartially or from no position; there is no such phenomenon. Even in mutual antagonism Chomsky and Saussure have shown us that. Yet the implications of this general idea come out in many ways in this book’s several papers.

There is a marked difference between the theoretical papers and those that emerge from fieldwork. Engaging with ‘theory’ is engaging with whatever-theory-is all the time. But if one wants to do a sociology of, say, Chicago Judaism, or the Scottish fishing industry, one has to engage with Judaism and fishing as much as with sociology. The diversities within the object-field (if one may posit so positivistically) affect the result. One field where the current debate waxes strongest is anthropology. Michael Herzfeld compares Evans-Pritchard’s famous account of the politics of the African people the Nuer, with Levi-Strauss’s equally renowned but very different ‘intellectual travel-book’ (my phrase) *Tristes Tropiques*. Evans-Pritchard’s concept of ‘segmentation’ (surely sub-Durkheim, though Herzfeld doesn’t comment) is an imposition of his own on African cultural history. Levi-Strauss by contrast saw famously that, in using his mind to examine the peoples of the Amazon basin, he equally used those peoples to examine the structure of his own mind. But by this very means he opened up matters right outside of himself. For example, anthropology was a ‘symbol of atonement’ for the damage done by his own culture to those peoples. But this leads to a central difficulty. For Herzfeld surmises (I’m not clear whether Levi-Strauss is being quoted) that the study of ‘other cultures’ is also a condescension. And ‘condescension’ savours of moral disapproval. The duality is opened up, and pervades this book, between whether our profound current anxiety is with language’s own inherent inadequacy, or, language being at least workable, it is our own attitudes, our self-seeking for material rewards and our need for status that the new reflexologists (Bazerman) wish to subvert.