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The Problem of “We”; or, The Persistence of Sovereignty

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And the Lone Ranger said, “We’re surrounded, Tonto.” And Tonto responded, “What do you mean, ‘we,’ white man?”

—Oldest joke in the West

I have been using the term *we* more often in recent writing projects.¹ Perhaps it is only personal idiosyncrasy, but I think that my increasing dependence on the first-person plural as a rhetorical device may be a sign of my anxiety about how to think about problems that have found expression in the recent controversy concerning the usefulness or uselessness of the concept of left conservatism. My use of *we* suggests that I believe there is an ad hoc connection to be made to a generalizable yet indefinitely inclusive group of people whom I want to be thinking with me as I explore what I think are serious dilemmas of political life. This calling forth of others to think with me is a device of persuasion: Invoking the word *we*, I am inviting **[End Page 55]** others to try to assume a posture similar to the one I take toward the subjects I think about. This is an act of overt incorporation. And while I know that such flat-footedness can have its own artful evasions associated with it—not for nothing am I schooled in poststructuralism—I nonetheless want to have that sense of being explicit in naming a “we.”

Using *we* also reminds me of the errant multiplicity of personality as captured in the opening gambit by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*. They write:

“The two of us wrote *Anti-Oedipus* together. Since each of us was several, there was already quite a crowd.”² Convinced by the example Deleuze and Guattari provide, I like to think that using the term *we* is not inevitably destined to be a move toward the powerful incorporation of others into an imperial self, or into other imperial projects, but may be a sign of a useful dissipation of self. But I’m not sure, and I wonder most about my use of *we* when I know that it is a substitute for the more vulnerable, and more often mocked, *I*.

There is a serious pain informing the attempt to constitute a “we” in the debates that have followed from the workshop on left conservatism at the University of California at Santa Cruz in January 1998. This pain has to do with how this awkward *we*—so embarrassing to invoke and yet so indispensable to thinking about the possibilities for justice—might obscure differences and exclude similarities.³ Who are we in our particularity and multiplicity? What claims can we stake in being present within the spaces of the variously imbricated projects of power as law, culture, and economy? My experience—surely falsifiable—has been that there is in every person I have ever met who is concerned about the injustices that afflict people a concomitant desire for a kind of unity of project, a hope that in the future “we” will not be alone in the recognition of the systemic injustices that so many suffer. I have—and I suspect many others have—at some time or another, usually in the earliest days of intellectual awakening, felt that surge of romantic self-consciousness (and self-pity) concerning the errant path of intent, the silence that greets intervention, the diminished numbers on picket lines of protest, the misfiring of discussions and debates concerning the injustice that afflicts those who suffer in one or another prison prepared for them by this civilization of productivity and consumption.

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Wendy Brown’s intervention at the Santa Cruz workshop concerning the problem of nostalgic desire for a return to the days when the targets were obvious and the injustice plainly expressed, and the responses that her analysis evoked from some audience members, seems to me to give full expression to the painful conundrum we face now. The unity we seek to achieve evades us. To paraphrase her incantation, we want the real back, in part because, as one passionate respondent to Brown put it, we have felt most alive and most real in moments of dramatic confrontation with injustice.

Some of us have made the problem of fragmentation and its consequences the starting point for explorations into other ways of thinking about justice and injustice, precisely because those moments of dramatic confrontation are no longer available to us. Rather than seek to “get the real back,” to paraphrase Brown, many of the theorists I find most useful these days—a noncollective and polyglot imagined group whom I call “new pluralists”—are reexamining the possibilities of political action in the wake of the fragmentation of experience that has made problematic appeals to the “real.” These thinkers plot alternative emergences of a conditional “we” that is, for purposes of political action, often unhinged from the univocal and limited expressions of desire contained in appeals to universal common sense.⁴ They variously hope to thread a meaningful path

between the reassertion of an ultimately nostalgic ground of political morality in a transcendent true and right, and the equally nostalgic refusal to cultivate an ethos responsive to the demands of justice.

Part of that process entails a continued interrogation of the forces that would insist on using the violence of categorization to reassert an unproblematic **[End Page 57]** common sense, to repress the variety of identities that have emerged to claim pieces of the turf of the shattered real as stages for important innovations in identity. Some of these forces—communitarians, for the most part—seek to reclaim a sense of commonwealth for the hierarchical forces of traditional, unified powers. In contrast, any project that works through this fragmentation seems to me to entail a critical moment addressing the rhetorical deployment of “we,” especially when *we* is used to express the presence of a sovereign power—sovereignty’s ever dramatic hold on the modern imagination as it is underwrites patriotic nationalism and love of country.

The force of sovereignty as expressed in the first-person plural is a driving force underlying what I consider as the strange ambivalences and worries expressed by Richard Rorty at the beginning of his recent book *Achieving Our Country*. Rorty opens his book of lectures by deploying an ancient and powerful simile, in which we might read the soul of each person by its expression writ large in the polity, and the character of the polity in the souls of its citizens: “National pride is to countries what self-respect is to individuals: a necessary condition for self-improvement.”⁵ For Rorty, country and individual are connected not only by syllogism but by affect, by an emotional involvement with this abstraction, which he argues is the only way for political deliberation to be imaginative and productive.

Rorty goes on to make this claim: “The need for this sort of involvement remains even for those who, like myself, hope that the United States of America will someday yield up sovereignty to what Tennyson called ‘the Parliament of Man, the Federation of the World.’ For such a federation will never come into existence unless the governments of the individual nation-states take a certain amount of pride (even rueful and hesitant pride) in their governments’ efforts to do so.”⁶ His imagined scenario for the surrender of national sovereignty does not surrender the idea of sovereignty itself but transfers it to a larger allegiance, to the supernational principles of some sort of world federation. The mechanisms through which this transfer of sovereignty from the national state to the supernational state remain unstated by him, though he seems here to suggest that somehow those who are most thoroughly affected by national pride (of the proper sort, a rueful and hesitant pride) are likely to be those who will most successfully transfer this allegiance to the larger federation. **[End Page 58]**

On the basis of this declaration, Rorty launches an attack on a segment of the American Left that he seems to think is responsible for the demise of serious political opposition to the Right:

Insofar as a Left becomes spectatorial and retrospective, it ceases to be a Left. I shall be claiming in these lectures that the American Left, once the old alliance between intellectuals and the unions broke down in the course of the Sixties, began to sink into an attitude like Henry Adams'. Leftists in the academy have permitted cultural politics to supplant real politics, and have collaborated with the Right in making cultural issues central to political debate. They are spending energy which should be directed at proposing new laws on discussing topics as remote from the country's needs as were Adams' musings on the Virgin and the Dynamo. The academic Left has no projects to propose to America, no vision of a country to be achieved by building a consensus on the need for specific reforms.⁷

One might argue with Rorty about his history of the fragmentation of the American Left, about his analysis of party dynamics, about his understanding of law, and even about his reading of Henry Adams. For instance, as he himself begrudgingly notes in another place, the racism of unions and the blind patriotism of many union leaders during the sixties were best addressed by those members of the cultural Left he now deplures. One might also ask him questions concerning his idea of spectatorship, what its pathology is, whether he means to imply that a simple volunteerism is the way in which such a seemingly deeply rooted problem might be overcome, or whether there needs to be a more sophisticated analysis of the problem than he offers here.

But at another level, the deepest contradiction in Rorty's argument, and perhaps the most plausible explanation for his hostility to what he calls the cultural Left, might be found if we compare that hostility with his suggestion concerning the "yielding up" of sovereignty with which he begins his book. That idea is a sort of strange fantasy that seems to allow him to be everywhere at once—opposing the nation on which he depends for succor and love, opposing those who are most likely to think of ways of defusing what we might call the bomb of sovereign power, and giving support for the most antiquated lines of left/right politics, the lines that assure the hegemony of institutionally brittle and conservatively biased party politics.

What is this sovereignty of which Rorty speaks in such terms? How **[End Page 59]** closely associated is it with the nation? To what extent is its power transferrable to a federation of the world, or is it transferrable at all? There are many people who have been concerned with this question for a long time. Just about all of them are intellectuals whom Rorty would identify as being members of his cultural Left, those concerned with the problems of identity and the demands for recognition that can come to be most powerfully and dangerously expressed through nationalism. For instance, Rorty's special whipping boy, Michel Foucault (whom Rorty smears as a foreign agent corrupting American youth in a manner redolent of an earlier, scary rhetoric), clearly was concerned about the persistence of sovereignty into the modern era, noting its affective force in law and liberal rights, and calling for a paradoxical liberation from the force of sovereignty—a cutting off of the King's

symbolic head.⁸

Those who have responded to Foucault's call, to Jacques Derrida's call, to the call of any of those thinkers who have come to understand that the stakes of a democratic politics in our era are as much about the modern crisis of representation as they are about the distribution of other goods—those who have responded not as slavish disciples or spectatorial cynics but as suspicious subjects/citizens of the most dangerous nation-state on earth, the United States of America—might wonder about Rorty's accusation concerning our failure to have been engaged by politics and his latter-day embrace of patriotism. Many of us who are now accused of spectatorialism are in fact marchers who have been as troubled as Rorty about the loss of the march and the loss of effectiveness of boycotts and pickets, and hence we have made that loss an object of our analysis, not a term of accusation. "We" who persist in exploring the conditions of fragmentation and plurality as theorists do so because we suspect that the stakes of power in this most dangerous nation-state cannot be understood and opposed without recognizing the power of sovereignty as expressed culturally by those who have embraced a combination of football and empire, a tradition that goes back at least to the end of the last century in the United States, when William James taught at a Harvard in which cultural values lent themselves to horrid adventures in destruction.⁹

Rorty is right in this aspect of his argument: The sovereignty that **[End Page 60]** we confront is not a source of pride for some of us, and those of us who lack such a feeling believe that the path toward relinquishing sovereignty does not pass through the territory of pride and patriotism. Instead, we understand this territory to be one that lends itself to spectacles of war and scaffold, to corruptions of power and scandals of poverty: George Bush and Gary Gilmore, Bill Clinton and nameless welfare mother.

Where does such a disagreement leave the Left? I would suggest with some room to move, opportunities to divide labor and to convene on questions of culture and labor, consumption and hegemony, identity and difference. But the persistence of sovereignty, of the nation and its discontents, still overshadows our efforts. The irony is that in attacking the cultural Left, Rorty is attacking those of us who I believe are best equipped to begin the conversation on how to move out from under that shadow.

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Thomas L. Dumm teaches at Amherst College. He is a founder and currently coeditor of *Theory & Event*, an online journal of political theory. He is the author of several books, including, most recently, *A Politics of the Ordinary* (1999).

Footnotes

1. If interested, see Thomas L. Dumm, *united states* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994), and Thomas L. Dumm, *A Politics of the Ordinary* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).

2. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian

Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 3.

3. A transcript of the proceedings can be found in the electronic journal *Theory & Event* 2, nos. 2 and 3 (spring and summer 1998), available at <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory/vruleheight.4ptdepth0ptwidth4pt&{vruleheight.4ptdepth0ptwidth4pt}event/toc/archive.html#2.2>.

4. Who do I mean when I refer to the new pluralists? In the American context, among others, I mean to suggest the following philosophers and political theorists (I mention some representative studies, hardly to exhaust the list): Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995); William E. Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995); Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Bonnie Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993); Anne Norton, *Republic of Signs: Liberal Theory and American Popular Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Frederick Michael Dolan, *Allegories of America: Narratives, Metaphysics, Politics* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994); Samuel R. Delany, *Longer Views: Extended Essays* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1996); Stanley Cavell, *Philosophical Passages: Wittgenstein, Emerson, Austin, Derrida* (New York: Blackwell, 1995); and Stephen K. White, *Political Theory and Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). Of course, there are many others.

5. Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 3.

6. Rorty, *Achieving Our Country*, 3.

7. Rorty, *Achieving Our Country*, 14–15.

8. Michel Foucault, "Two Lectures," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980), esp. 105–8.

9. For a thoughtful history of football and American empire, see Kim Townsend, "Teaching Men Manhood at Harvard," chap. 2 in *Manhood at Harvard: William James and Others* (New York: Norton, 1996).

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