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J. M. Albrecht, *Reconstructing Individualism: A Pragmatist Tradition from Emerson to Ellison*, New York, Fordham UP, 2012.

In *Consequences of Pragmatism*, Richard Rorty provocatively quipped, “James and Dewey were not only waiting at the end of the dialectical road which analytic philosophy traveled, but are waiting at the end of the road which, for example, Foucault and Deleuze are currently traveling” (1982: xviii). Which is to say, the richness of the pragmatist tradition lies in its ability to offer us countless conceptual tools for problems that continue to emerge and re-emerge, in various times, numerous contexts, and different traditions. In his book *Reconstructing Individualism: A Pragmatist Tradition from Emerson to Ellison*, James M. Albrecht mobilizes the pragmatist tradition to help deal with the troubling issue of individualism. Specifically, the specter of the “atomistic individual” has plagued the liberal tradition from John Locke onwards (and continues to play itself out in the debates between Rawlsian liberals and communitarians). Refusing the false dichotomy between atomistic individualism and traditionalist communitarianism, Albrecht argues for a “reconstructed” and thoroughly relational individualism by drawing on the work of pragmatism’s predecessor Ralph Waldo Emerson, the classical pragmatists William James and John Dewey, and two figures influenced by Emersonian themes, Kenneth Burke and Ralph Ellison. Emerson famously wrote that individualism “has never been tried,” and Albrecht’s reconstructed individualism is an attempt to articulate what Emerson here had in mind. The resulting work is a clear confirmation that pragmatism (and its predecessors and successors) has much to offer current debates in political theory.

Albrecht insists, “individualism remains a necessary component of any full and healthy model of democracy, but that it must be a reconceived individualism” (2012: 2). Such a project is particularly directed to the adherents of the political left, who are “often quickest to equate individualism with a reactionary politics,” but who must realize that “those committed to a more progressive and just society simply cannot afford to abandon the field and cede the rhetorical and cultural power of individualism to more conservative political agendas” (2012: 2). Classical liberal individualism has long been associated with the ideology of the political right as a justification for *laissez-faire* economics and an argument against forms of collective political action, economic regulation, and economic democratization. Liberal individualism asserts that the individual possesses pre-social (“natural”) rights that must be protected (but not interfered with) by “artificial” social or political forces. In the United States especially, this *philosophical view* spills over into *cultural practices* in many ways, including the prevalence of consumerism, materialism, and the invasion of the market into all dimensions of our lives. This atomistic and anti-social view of the self has come under fire from various philosophical traditions, including pragmatism. Albrecht traces a consistent attempt to re-articulate (or reconstruct) a more relational, socially

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embedded, and socially responsible form of individualism in the figures of Emerson, James, Dewey, Burke, and Ellison. This shared vision of a new individualism emerges from a shared set of commitments spanning this tradition of thinkers, including a “pluralistic metaphysics,” a “tragic optimism,” a “wholly relational model of the self,” a “democratic model of moral selfhood,” the virtues of “tolerance” and “openness,” and an “attitude of meliorism” (2012: 8-10).

Albrecht begins his discussion with Emerson, who has an ambiguous relationship with the pragmatist tradition. While Emerson’s work significantly impacted the classical pragmatists (as well as Burke and Ellison), certain of his commitments seem to clearly contradict the basic themes of pragmatist thought. Many of Emerson’s interpreters divide Emerson’s work into two periods. His “early idealist emphasis on individual power is seen as renouncing collective politics, and as blaming suffering and inequality on people’s failures to achieve individual regeneration,” while his “late, fatalistic acquiescence is seen as discouraging political action by reinforcing laissez-faire faith in the ability of large, impersonal forces to create a moral result” (2012: 27). On this reading, both early and later Emerson belongs clearly *outside* of the pragmatist tradition. When James read Emerson as a proto-pragmatist, with much admiration, he always believed that certain of Emerson’s ideas simply needed to be dropped altogether. One of the real successes of Albrecht’s book is that he convincingly demonstrates how we can “read Emerson pragmatically,” so as to reveal “the anti-absolutist balance that lies at the heart of his vision – a vision of human power and agency as existing in an antagonistic relation within and against the limits of our material existence” (2012: 31). That is, Albrecht’s reading of Emerson shows that proto-pragmatist themes (such as antagonism, action, transition, pluralism, and meliorism) run throughout Emerson’s writings, refuting the notion that Emerson was, first and foremost, an absolute monist.

One of Emerson’s most famous lines is “Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members” (1903-04, v. 2: 49). Indeed, Emerson’s insistence on anti-conformism and individual vocation seems to align him with the atomistic (“rugged”) individualism that Albrecht hopes to refute. However, Albrecht shows that Emerson has a much subtler notion of the relationship between the individual and the community. For Emerson, life is the interplay between “power” and “fate.” That is, individuals do have agency to pursue their diverse vocations, but only a *limited agency*, bounded by the constraints of one’s natural and cultural environment. Importantly, we are not only *constrained* by our environment, for Emerson, but we are also *enabled* by it. Albrecht argues, “self-reliance is thus not opposed to community (as is often assumed), but a means to more vital community” (2012: 55). The energetic powers of one’s character should be in tension with those unjust and oppressive elements of one’s community that deny all of its members the freedom to pursue their vocation. Furthermore, this agonistic stance is not to be understood as endorsing a personal, anarchistic politics. While Emerson was skeptical of collective political projects, he did not reject them. Albrecht shows how Emerson’s tone shifted as he became more outspoken about the abolitionist cause. Thus, Emerson should be read not as *against* community, but *for* a more inclusive (and

agonistic) community. The sections on Emerson argue convincingly that Emerson should be read as a proto-pragmatist with much to contribute to conversations and debates within pragmatism. Without a doubt, Albrecht's book will be an important contribution to Emerson scholarship.

Albrecht then moves on to the classical pragmatists. The section on Dewey is the most predictable and straightforward, since Dewey's project is so explicitly in line with Albrecht's (as evidenced by one of Dewey's book titles, *Individualism Old and New*). Dewey's project was to replace classic liberal individualism with a pragmatically reconstructed individualism, so as to clarify and guide leftist political projects. The more difficult task for Albrecht regards his reading of James, since many interpreters "who stress pragmatism's progressive, even radical, political potential tend to view James's individualism as an unfortunate encumbrance ... one that separates James from the more thoroughly 'social' thought of pragmatists like Dewey and Mead" (2012: 128). A common critique of James (similar to that of Emerson) is that his well-known distrust of "bigness" and "greatness" leads him to reject collective action in favor of an individualistic anarchism. Albrecht argues that James does, indeed, offer tools for a reconstructed individualism and a progressive politics. James, like Dewey, consistently argued against the dualism that underpins the atomistic individual. The self is relational and embedded in a pluralistic universe – a universe with many competing and incommensurable goods. The pluralistic nature of the universe leads to a necessarily *tragic* view of our moral lives. Every action entails the "butchering" of certain goods. The inevitable tragic loss that accompanies all human action requires a social responsibility to recognize the voices of those individuals and communities that are suffering this loss. But does James ever overcome his skepticism and aversion to collective political projects? Albrecht argues that James does by pointing to James's piece "The Moral Equivalent of War," where we see James's "dual insistence on the plasticity of human instincts, and on the necessity of reforming social conditions to reeducate those instincts" (2012: 189). However, it remains hard to see James endorsing an *collective political project* here, and Albrecht admits that "there are real difference" between James and Dewey that should not be blurred over, but nevertheless, we should see them as "complementary emphases within a broadly shared philosophical and political vision" (2012: 189).

The section on Dewey stands at the heart of *Reconstructing Individualism* because of how thoroughly Dewey theorized a reconstructed individualism in his own writings. For Dewey, the self is neither separate from the community, nor engulfed and determined by it. Like Emerson and James, Dewey recognizes one's environment as both constraining and enabling our individual action. The goal, for Dewey, is to democratically remake our environments so as to allow our various individual interests and goals to most completely harmonize with those of others. Implicit in this goal is the powerful pragmatist insight that both the self and environment are plastic and transformable. The problem that Dewey diagnosed in his time was the way in which corporate capitalism was unleashing forces that undermined the individual's control over her environment. What must we do to regain control over our lives in an era of corporate capitalism? Dewey's question undoubtedly remains our question today. The

resurgence of Dewey's thought in the last few decades is certainly due in part to the continued relevance of his thought in our contemporary political scene. Dewey helps us evade the absolutism of both classic Lockean liberalism and traditional Marxism by offering up a model of experimental democracy that sets as its goal the unleashing of individual power and creativity. Albrecht fully aligns his project with the admirable and important work of Dewey.

The book ends with a short discussion of Kenneth Burke and Ralph Ellison, entitled "A Tragicomic Ethics in the Emersonian Vein." The inclusion of Burke and Ellison in a book focused on pragmatism is rather surprising, but very welcome. Albrecht includes these two figures as inheritors of Emerson's thought. They both "reject a narrowly individualistic inference that might be—and too often is—drawn from certain of Emerson's ideas and utterances, in order to align themselves with a vision of Emersonian individualism that affirms a necessary synthesis between individual self-culture and social responsibility" (2012: 291). From Burke, Albrecht draws out a quasi-pragmatist "comic awareness of human limitation" that leads to "a pluralistic tolerance of diversity and conflict" (2012: 293). Burke, like the pragmatists, views the self as inevitably limited and constrained, hindered by blindnesses toward the lives of others, and yet responsible for the way our actions affect others. These themes are further drawn out through a reading of Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Many critics read *Invisible Man* as a rejection of Emerson's individualism, since Ellison creates a despised character Mr. Norton that embodies much of Emerson's thought. However, Albrecht argues that although Ellison clearly wanted to reject a "canonical Emersonianism" in *Invisible Man*, he also wanted to "appropriate the ethical possibilities of a more pragmatic Emersonian individualism" (2012: 283). For Ellison, the narrow view of individualism articulated by the classic liberal tradition is problematic because it negates our constitutive interconnectedness. The problem of racial injustice in the United States is only exacerbated by this predominant anti-social individualism. Only a reconstructed individualism – one that recognizes the social and relational nature of the self – will allow us to recognize how much we are each implicated in the lives of others, for good and bad. The political task of overcoming racial injustice requires that we discard our inherited, liberal version of individualism in favor of a pragmatically reconstructed individualism.

Many audiences will welcome this book. It offers a unique story about the lineage of pragmatism, which firmly roots pragmatist themes in the work of Emerson. Although this basic claim is uncontroversial, Albrecht argues that claiming Emerson as a proto-pragmatist does not require us to discard much of his writing. Rather, we need to learn to "read Emerson pragmatically." Fans of classical pragmatism will appreciate Albrecht's attempt to read James as a political thinker who has much conceptual overlap with Dewey's political thought. And the inclusion of Burke and Ellison in a book devoted to pragmatist themes will surely excite many. No doubt Albrecht's book is a timely one, as American politics continues to be dominated by competing conceptions of individualism. With left-liberals continually struggling to articulate a vision of the individual and community, Albrecht's book is a good place to turn.

References

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