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COMPARATIVE LITERATURE: EAST

WEST 7

比较文学：东方与西方

Department of Comparative Literature
Institute of Comparative Literature
Sichuan University, China



四川大学出版社
Sichuan University Press

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and West
Volume 7

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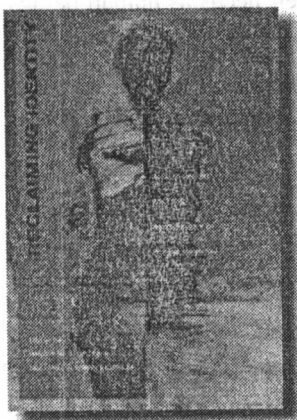
Editor's Notes

Post-Positivist Realism

Barbara Foley, Rutgers University, USA.

中文提要：本文作者对《重申身份》一书中所持的后实证现实主义（post-positivist realism）观点进行了深刻的批评。作者指出，从后实证现实主义立场出发论述身份问题会遭遇到逻辑与政治的难题。它所提供的答案只是症候式，而非实质性的。实际上，后现代主义在身份问题上所处的尴尬也是后实证现实主义所同样面临的。

Paula L. M. Moya and Michael Hames-Garcia, eds., *Reclaiming Identity: Realist Theory and the Predicament of Postmodernism*.



1. Post-positivist realism, the philosophical position displayed and explored in *Reclaiming Identity*, in many ways brings fresh air into the halls of academe. Asserting that postmodernism's war upon the notion of identity as intrinsically essentialist has resulted in an aporia-ridden epistemology and a paralysis-ridden politics, the contributors to this volume va-

riously argue for a notion of reality as at once socially constructed and objectively knowable Realism—understood in the philosophical, not

literary sense—need not be hamstrung by the naively empiricist premise that objectivity entails knowledge free of presuppositions; moreover, experience need not be reduced to the realm of an emotionality a priori theorized as pre-rational. Instead, the essayists here contend, the experiential sphere—where people's identities are, for better or worse, primarily shaped—is a site informed by cognitive processes and possessed of the further capacity to render knowledge of the world. Several useful insights, supplying the ground for epistemological and political critique, flow from this formulation of identity. First, it becomes possible—indeed, politically desirable—to differentiate between identities providing greater or lesser access to what can be generally understood as human needs: racism and racist identity promote ill being, antiracism and antiracist identity promote well being. Second, as a corollary, fact need no longer be sundered from value: there emerges the basis for arguing that a praxis which is better for people ethically is also truer to their needs as human beings. Third, the proposition that identity is the product of attempts—either healthy or self-destructive—to define a social self means that it is susceptible to historical change. Error, rather than constituting a realm of necessarily injurious mistaking, plays a crucial role in the movement toward truth: in particular, if an individual attempts to grapple with her/his oppression, her/his dialectical movement toward wholeness will reveal truths simultaneously individual and social.

2. In expressing admiration for central features of the post-positivist realist program, I write as a Marxist who discerns important points of tangency between this program and the methodology of historical materialism. Indeed, in some arenas, post-positivist realism potentially supplements Marxism. While Marx and Engels insisted upon the

class-bound nature of morality and chastised the utopian socialists of their day for embracing ahistorical notions of human good and human need, their own indignation at the suffering produced by capitalism often invoked what appeared to be universal moral standards. (One need only think of the account of the consequences of enclosure in Volume I of *Capital*.) Post-positivist realism, refusing to sunder fact offers the political leftist a well-articulated and stable ground upon which to argue for the moral superiority of egalitarian to class societies. Moreover, post-positivist realism potentially expands the domain of praxis in Marxist epistemology, insofar as it expands the domain of the experientially-based knowledges that are relevant to the formation of explanatory paradigms which then enable deeper and fuller theory and practice. Finally, the post-positivist realist notion of epistemic privilege provides theoretical grounding for the guiding principle, canonical among most leftists, that those who are most oppressed are most likely to have the fewest illusions about capitalism, to be most from value, receptive to totalizing class analysis, and to make the largest contributions to emancipatory theory and practice.

3. I could thus devote much of this essay to noting the many places where I found myself nodding in agreement as I perused *Reclaiming Identity*. I shall concentrate, however, on the many other places where—also as a Marxist—I found myself registering disagreement. Let me sketch the main lines of my critique. Part of my discomfiture stems from the near-complete erasure of Marxism, and Marxist categories of analysis, by almost all the contributors to *Reclaiming Identity*, despite their frequent nods toward terms and concepts drawn from the Marxist tradition. (The exception is Caroline S. Hau's essay on Third World Marxist intellectuals, to which I shall turn in the final section of these

comments.) This lack is troubling, first, for historical reasons: starting with Lenin and Lukacs, many Marxist theorists have explicitly addressed what it means to embrace a paradigm, which is surely part of the realist tradition to which *Reclaiming Identity* makes its contribution. Indeed, Marx's methodology in *Capital*, if not fully theorized epistemologically, draws upon a mass of theory-saturated data in its claim to offer a critique of political economy.

4. The absence of any serious engagement with the Marxist tradition in the volume is still more troubling, however, for political reasons. Marxism has put itself forward as not just a theory but a means to liberate the oppressed; in the course of the twentieth century, millions espousing the identity of worker — or its hammer-and-sickle companion, peasant—have attached their wagons to the socialist or communist star. If we leave aside for the moment whatever one might think about the particular historical projects accomplished in the name of Marxism, it is still puzzling that Marxism's central category of identity—class—is not once considered as the basis of even *one possible identity among several* by the contributors to *Reclaiming Identity*. Although the contributors' occasional mentions of class and exploitation suggest that they consider themselves in some way aligned with the Marxist tradition, their particular failure to engage with the fundamental Marxist concepts relevant to the problem of identity—in particular, ideology and objective interest—renders them incapable of disengaging with liberal pluralism. Post-positivist realism's methodological compatibility with Marxism in the abstract does not guarantee that, when enlisted in the cause of what I shall here call second-wave identity politics, it transcends the limits of the politics of the first wave.

5. I disagree, finally, with the essayist's underlying premise that postmodernism's most serious problem has been its epistemological relativism, leading to an erasure of the truth-value of the experientially-based identities that, properly theorized, are crucial to emancipatory social movements. Instead, as I see it, the cardinal sin of postmodernism was—and remains—its relentless war upon totality, which itself must be understood not just as (or even primarily as) an attack on Western rationalism but as part and parcel of the Cold War-era attack upon communism (however etiolated egalitarian practices may have been under really existing socialism). For a Marxist, a totalized understanding of the dialectical process that is society entails recognizing that the primary dynamic shaping this process is—in our moment—capital's drive to exploit. This understanding further means that the great majority of the world's denizens—whatever their nation, race, gender, ethnicity, or sexuality—have an objective interest in abolishing the wage relation and living in a classless society. This does not mean that identities other than class identities are not real or not important; nor does it mean that these other identities can or should be reduced to class. Indeed, it may be through the prism of these other identities that a given individual primarily experiences her or his contradictory relation to capital. From the Marxist standpoint, however, *all* identities are molded by the individual's insertion in the multiple structural relations generated by the capitalist mode of production; any project for a better world is therefore assimilable to—indeed, supportive of—a pro-capitalist liberal pluralism if it does not explicitly take on—and work toward abolishing—these relations. To the extent that identity politics (second-and first-wave alike) invoke, implicitly or explicitly, a model

of multiple oppressions derived from multiple—and discrete—causes, they cannot offer structural explanations for why it is that the ordinary people who need to live in the better world can be motivated by ideas and feelings—racist, sexist, nationalist, homophobic—that further their entanglement in hierarchical ideas, attitudes, and practices.

6. In my view, only a Marxist notion of ideology—encompassing such unfashionable components as false consciousness and social control—can adequately account for the phenomenon that millions of otherwise good people possess ideas that are—as post-positivist realism so astutely demonstrates—bad. Moreover, only the notion of objective interests can offer a more than missionary or humanitarian reason for why anyone who is not a member of the ruling class should make common cause with another non-rulers struggle for a fuller life. While post-positivist realism is well positioned to explore—indeed, deepen—our comprehension of the mechanisms of ideology and the dimensions of objective interest, its current ensnarement in the project of reconstituting identity politics vitiates this potential. Indeed, as I shall suggest in my closing comments, *Reclaiming Identity* may be significant mainly for its demonstration that postmodernism's antipathy to totalization is so hegemonic that even programs purporting to be diametrically opposed to postmodernism end up perpetuating a number of its principal tenets and assumptions.

7. At the end of her lucid and informative introduction to the volume, Paula M. L. Moya expresses her conviction that post-positivist realism has the potential to push intellectual inquiry (especially in the humanities) in theoretically productive directions. Accordingly, she generously invites the reader “in the spirit of cooperation..... to take seriously [the writers] various claims and to

show us where we—individually or collectively—might amend, revise, or advance our thinking about the task we have undertaken”(23). Sharing with Moya and her co-contributors the belief that we muddle our way toward truth through error, I offer my comments here in the same dialectical spirit, hoping that my occasionally polemical tone will be justified, or at least understood, by our common recognition of the issues—the realities—that are at stake in our debates.

* * *

8. Satya P. Mohanty is, more than any other single figure, the progenitor of what we might call post-positivist realism for literary theorists; his “The Epistemic Status of Cultural Identity: On *Beloved* and the Postcolonial Condition” —originally published in 1993, and subsequently included in his *Literary Theory and the Claims of History: Postmodernism, Objectivity, Multicultural Politics* (1997) — is reprinted at the beginning of *Reclaiming Identity* and furnishes its Ur-Text. Since almost all the contributors to the volume refer to this seminal essay, it all the more bears careful scrutiny. Mohanty sets forth here the central tenets of post-positivist realism, locates it in the moral realist paradigm worked out by philosophers of science like Richard Boyd, and then fleshes it out in two extended narrative examples. Citing Naomi Scheman’s commentary upon a now-famous abused woman named Alice, Mohanty demonstrates persuasively that Alice’s anger, released and processed through her participation in a women’s consciousness-raising group, is the theoretical prism through which she views her world and herself in it correctly. Her emotions are based in an objective assessment of her situation and are thus rational and justified—and both more moral and more true than those of her antagonistic and benighted husband. However fragmentary and

untheorized, Alice's experience contains a cognitive component that both reflects and furthers her understanding of her world.

9. Mohanty further argues that Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, by validating Sethe's murder of her baby as a manifestation of the epistemic privilege afforded the slave mother, enacts the procedures by which knowledge is achieved through error. Sethe achieves identity by affirming her capacity for self-determination (54). Paul D, by acknowledging that in his lust for *Beloved* he had been escorted to some "ocean-deep" place he once belonged to, learns that he had been wrong to accuse Sethe of having four feet, not two. "Both motherhood and the gendered division of labor on which slavery was built", Mohanty concludes, "are objective historical and social facts that shape what he knows and what he does not, [and] that—consequently—influence the moral judgment he makes" (52, 61). The processes by which the historical Alice and the fictional Paul D attain knowledge through error exemplify, for Mohanty, the centrality of identity—as understood through the methodology of post-positivist realism—to transformative political practice.

10. Although Mohanty's essay makes an able case for a realist reclaiming of identity, its case for a far-reaching liberatory practice is not, to me, as persuasive. For Mohanty makes it clear that the "collective political struggles and oppositional social movements" (41) which will be aided by this second-wave identity politics can proceed within the limits of existing social arrangements. Indeed, he starts by considering the immediate practical benefits of his program: If multiculturalism is to be a goal of educational and political institutions, we need a workable notion of how a social group is unified by a common culture, as well as the ability to identify genuine cultural