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Discourse, Digression, and Dialectic

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Discourse, Digression, and Dialectic

I want to begin by discussing the intimate relationships that I see connecting the three notions mentioned in my title, with an eye towards developing a notion of free dialectic that will have some interesting consequences for such topics as the science/ideology split. The term discourse, to take the first notion as starting point, can suggest primarily either free conversive communication, or the reified subject matter of a study of communication in general. (There is also the sense of discourse in which a discourse is a long and formal treatment of a topic, of a kind that the moderator's time constraint precludes here, but that sense won't concern us.) In the second of the two primary senses just noted, discourse suggests a dimension of language which is singled out as something lifted from immediate utilitarian needs, something that can be studied and played with. Discourse in this sense is flatly opposed to the idea that meaning is determined by

or a rigid semantic theory.

authorial intention, Deconstruction takes apparent meaning and authorial meaning and breaks them apart, locating meanings in the resulting fractures that are not at all consistent with surface meanings, but this kind of play with words may equally go on in working class coffee shop banter, where an author's meaning can be twisted into its opposite for comic effect by a clever reading. Discourse as something autonomous suggests another of our terms, digression, the ability to play liesurely with the possible meanings of a text. But discourse in the first of the two primary senses connotes that something concrete is under discussion, something that can be discussed from a variety of engaged points of view. The fact that ordinary discourse may resolve divergent points of view has tempted a number of thinkers to extend discourse into dialectic, our third notion, viewing dialectic as the common resolution of all of the points of view that discourse can theoretically provide. While dialectic is more than mere discourse, implying a particular kind of resolution of divergent points of view, they may have this much in common. Either proceeds from terms of language and ideas that we already

have, even if development will bring new ideas and new language into explicit recognition from this starting point. The important dialectical thinkers have always recognized an origin in normal discourse; they write in a natural language without the postulation of formal or technical terms that cannot be readily connected to everyday understanding. Dialectic is the explosion of everyday talk into a wider domain of ideas through a recognition of the internal strains of everyday talk, but it begins quietly enough in engaged curiosity.

Now let us look at the relationship between dialectic and digression, which is already in view. In dialectic, there is a resolute refusal to privilege any particular kind of statement. Let us look at the Greek millet seed paradox from this point of view, and consider these three statements:

First Statement (from experience): A single millet falling makes no noise.

Second Statement (from reasoning): 1,000 millet seeds falling make no noise. (1,000x0 = 0.)

Third Statement (from experience): 1,000 millet seeds falling make a big noise.

We will assume that the three statements are so troublesome

together as to trigger curiosity about their compatibility. Dialectic can suspend contradiction, but it intends an ultimate resolution of contradiction. The millet seed paradox illustrates the enormous problems the Greeks experienced with bringing thought and experience together, and it can stand here for the kind of puzzle that always exists where science is expanding. If one privileges experience, one might draw the conclusion from this situation that the step derived from reasoning was false. If one privileges reasoning, one must conclude from the truth of the third statement that the first statement is false. By not privileging experience or reasoning, other possibilities open up.[1] If we take the last two statements as equally true, we can obtain a somewhat unorthodox consistency by <u>adding</u> a fourth statement to the effect that a single (millet) seed falling makes a noise. In short, the second and third statements are jointly acceptable if we do and do not hear a single millet seed falling. Now, of course, we have arrived at the truth of the matter, but not by repudiating anything that we earlier thought to be true. A single millet seed falling does not make a noise that humans can normally hear, although it does make a noise that can be technologically

amplified into a sound that humans can normally hear. This correct resolution can be achieved logically, just by dialectical play, in that one refuses to privilege sentences of one kind or another in the original grouping, finding that the correct relationship of the first three sentences can be found in an enlarged set of sentences. In this way, digression along seemingly unconventional logical paths may be essential to dialectical progress. Forunately, the play element involved means that dialectical thought is more fun, more open, than logical derivation according to rules, and the original Platonic insight that Eros and truth are linked has a welcome defense. Dialectical thinkers have always shown this in their verbal playfulness and jokes, and I want to deal with unremittingly serious dialecticians by arguing that their seriousness is a sure sign that they're not unremittingly dialectical. Although more than the three notions of discourse, digression, and dialectic might be drawn into this network of consepts, we now have anough structure at hand to go to work on some pressing problems.

A dialectical refusal to privilege one kind of statement over another has a variety of consequences. Dialectically, we must hold open the possibility that

any two things will be (ultimately) connected, and that if we take a particular property, anything having that property must also not have that property. From the standpoint of classical logic and classical epistemology, this threatens chaos and disaster, although we have already had one instance of how threatening logical chaos can be escaped. The reason for this is that when an epistemology is added to classical logic that privileges some (classically consistent) set of sentences as true, the sentences which follow logically from this set must also be true, and the sentences whose negations follow from this set must be false. As epistemology privileges a larger set of sentences, provided that consistency is maintained, more and more sentences get sorted out as definitely either true or false. For the dialectical thinker, none of this can seem so certain. The same sentence may have to go into both categories, or a sentence and its negation into the same category, and it may be hard to determine just what the categories signify. This would seem to condemn the dialectical thinker to a level of provisional opinion that would preclude any real progress, and mean constant dithering. Actually, the same notion of progress is available to the

dialectical thinker as to the non-dialectical thinker, and that notion is illustrated by the ways things can become gradually clearer in ordinary discourse. At the reflective level, however, the dialectical thinker will not possess a methodological weapon against the anxiety that things will be discovered to have been put together badly, and that a completely new start may have to be made. The progress in free dialectic can never be the result of drawing merely logical conclusions.

In the face of this anxiety, dialectical thinkers have been repeatedly tempted to work out a notion of dialectical system. Any introduction of system to free dialectic is compatible with the retention of dialectical reasoning, provided that possibilities normally considered contradictory can be retained. The function of system is to lay down a formal notion of determinate negation defining a direction of progress in the resolution of contradictions. What is insidious about system is that it achieves reduction of anxiety about the direction of progress in a manner that tends inevitably to privilege reasoning over experience. The most severe steps must be taken to bring this tendency to an explicit recognition and to keep it under control, or the digressive play element in

dialetic will be fatally compromised. Although dialectic suggests that all things are connected, and that whatever has one property has its negative expression as well, a purpose for dialectic, or concrete thinking and experience, may cause us to assert that some connections are more important than others for various purposes of explanation, or that one property of something is more important for explanatory purposes of some kind than the complementary property. The caution of dialectic lies in a constant effort to establish the opposite. If some social movement is not obviously progressive and retrogressive at the same time, no matter how hard we try to see both sides, but seems simply retrogressive, it's all right to assert that. Dialectic keeps us honest by urging that we try to locate the missing property, but it does not insist that the missing property has to be of equal explanatory importance. The symptom of backsliding is to fall into dichotomous thought patterns which are conveniently provided by systematic labels.

Let us take a simple example, the distinction between science and ideology. If one isn't careful, one is likely to suddenly ask whether some body of apparent knowledge, like quantum physics, is one or the other. But now

dialectical caution should not be repressed. If science is thought to be knowledge, and ideology systematically false opinion, there appears to be a dichotomy, but the situation should arouse our suspicions. How can an ideology have a hold on people if it isn't true, even if it is also false? Doesn't it present an obscured, rather than a totally wrong picture of social processes? And how can there be a science that doesn't include ideological elements, that doesn't at least show how ideology is both true and false? Doesn't science grow inevitably out of ideology in a manner that should leave important traces? But to focus on these questions is still to shift one's gaze from something even more fundamental. Science and ideology are seen in this dichotomy as different bodies of discourse. But isn't it possible that a discourse which can be read as a science from one point of view can also be read and used as an ideology from another point of view, and for a different purpose? Indeed, stock examples of science such as quantum physics may well play both roles within current society. No matter how useful the distinction between science and ideology for particular purposes, it is probably a mistake to suppose on any occasion that a discourse is simply one or the other.

We can grant that there is an epistemological break as a science is born, without supposing that the resulting scientific discourse can only be read as a scientific discourse. To label a discourse scientific without regard for the location of that discourse in practice is an incipient theorist deviation from free dialectic.

Now with this rather hurried sketch of free dialectic somewhat in place, I am prepared to turn to my friendly but devastating criticism of Resnick and Wolff as dialectical economists. The criticism can be put most sharply in the following form: they're just a little too serious to be completely right. I would like to trace this out in their notion of discourse, and in their notion of essentialism.

In terms of discourse, Resnick and Wolff seem to begin with the notion that their Marxist theory can be set off from other economic theories in terms of its epistemological apparatus of overdetermination, contradiction, social totality, etc., as well as the economically determining notion of class as a point of entry into their positive theory. I quote here from their essay titled "Marxist Epistemology:"

> However, Marxist theory can differentiate itself from other theories in a different manner, and one which

> has the added value of permitting a resolution to the Marxist debate over economic determinism. Marxist theory has a particular and unique set of basic concepts with which it constructs its truth. It is this set which differentiates it from all other theories. In this set is the epistemological position sketched above (concepts of overdetermination, contradiction, social totality, etc.). In this basic set is also a specific concept of class which Marxist theory <u>defines</u> and deploys in a unique manner. As we understand (and have elsewhere elaborated) the Marist concept of class, it refers to one social aspect/process, <u>an economic process</u>, of extracting surplus labor within society.*

What is suspicious about this starting point is the assurance that this theory is differentiated from, and superior to, other Marxist theories (as well as many non-Marxist theories) in its repudiation of economic determinism. Even if the superiority is urged to be interior to their scheme in its epistemic credentials, Resnick and Wolff seem already

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* Resnick, Stephen A., and Wolff, Richard D., "Marxist Epistemology: The Critique of Economic Determinism," <u>Social Text #6</u> (Fall, 1982), p. 39.

Developing discourse begins to sound like developing system.

to know too much about what is inside and what is outside of their to-be-developed discourse. From a dialectical point of view, how can they be assured in advance that fundamental and subsumed classes will be conveniently distinct, or that they exhaust the relevant kinds of classes required by class theory? They seem to assume that certain dichotomies and consequences of their theory can be given in advance by invoking such notions as overdeterminism. But while determinism is an impoverished notion that is incompatible with overdeterminism, overdeterminism is a good dialectical notion, and hence it can't be incompatible with determinism in any simple way. The point here is that any apparent dichotomy between base and superstructure, or forces of production and relations of production useful to Marxist analysis must be held together by the mutual influence postulated inevitably by overdeterminism. Methodology, represented by overdeterminism, tells us that the social formation is always completely connected up. but it doesn't tell us just how it is connected up. Determination in the last instance simply is a special case, the observation that there is a determination, always, of any part of the higher segment of these dichotomies by the lowest segment

of the lower segment. This is a constraint of system, of course, but it is not very severe. We need to find the way in which this determination is realized at any given time. We may find that it is temporarily not very important in its specific form, but this is not yet determinism. Determinism results when weak connections are ignored in favor of stronger connections, or connections we believe we can control. Determinism is thus a temporarily reductive form of overdeterminism, and a form that can be comprehended within overdeterminism, hence the philosophical superiority of the latter notion. Determinism, however, may be a sufficient notion to achieve clarity with respect to certain limited sets of problems.

If we could sneer at reductionism in general, we could afford to dismiss determinism outright, on philosophical grounds, but we can't consistently do that, since theorizing, even dialectical theorizing, itself contains a reductive kernel insofar as it succumbs to any notion of system. The reason that natural scientific discourses can be separated is that they discourse over, and adapt to, domains of data that are characterized by instruments and experiments which create a continually expanding data text with borders

provided by an agreement on permissible means of gathering data. Instruments break the connection between theory and observation in physical theory as a result of their physical interaction with the universe. In economics, or sociology, these divisions ultimately disappear because economics (or sociology) can only be artificially divided into subject areas. Ultimately, and this for me is the key to the Marxist approach, everything comes into the data domain of economic theory, including the history of social formations, so that economics loses any clear boundary separating it from other sciences, and can have only artificially separated data domains. What we get in economics is ultimately a wide domain with poor resolution, rather than a small domain with high instrumental resolution. The instrumentation in economics will always return more confusing data than the most precise instrumentation in certain areas of physics. The system builders, Hegel and Marx, knew that they couldn't explain everything. They were concerned to make clear only what was necessary for the plausibility of certain doctrines. In particular, they were out to establish more plausible and inclusive theoretical discourses from the plausible opinions which already

existed in the world around them. The starting point was to unfold into the concrete richness of theory under dialectical prodding.

Now I think what I want to say about essentialism is nearly obvious. Many people think that dialectical reason delivers easy doctrines, that one is free to think anything one wants to without worrying about contradiction. Far from it. From dialectical considerations one is forced to accept the view, for example, that there is a little bit of good, minimum, in every person and in every philosophy. To handle this hard doctrine, it may be necessary on practical grounds to make it a very tiny bit, but it can't be theoretically erased. Essentialism, reinterpreted to be sure, must be shown insofar as it is plausible to ultimately share the truth with more plausible forms of overdetermined theory. A general, even correct, establishment that essentialism is an impoverished form of determinism held only by people with very little good in their souls is quite compatible with a specific essentialist economic analysis containing more truth, more insight, than an as yet non-existent non-essentialist analysis. In short, essentialism requires battle on the terrain of concrete economic practice, not

at the level of epistemological theory. Essentialism must be caught up within an overdeterministic theory which shows both the initial plausibility of essentialism as well as its ultimate inadequacy in terms of a series of concrete analyses. An epistemology, by itself, has no consequences.[3] Essentialist analyses aren't bad because they are essentialistic; they are shown to be bad when some concrete and imporant fact eludes their analysis. Essentialist analyses can be good in that they trace the most important linkages in an economic structure. It is not enough that essentialists, even Marxist essentialists, be praised faintly for having provoked criticism leading to non-essentialist analyses. So much is compatible with the mere abstract negation of essentialism. A freely dialectical non-essentialist analysis must find an adequate place for plausible essentialist analyses, showing why they are plausible when taken by themselves, but placing that plausibility carefully within an altered understanding given by a fuller, and more concrete, non-essentialist analysis.

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Footnotes

1 One could keep both experiential statements, for example, because in the absence of reason they are not obviously contradictory. There is no a priori reason to privilege the third statement over the first, since it could be that this supposedly louder sound was in fact an auditory singularity, and a mistake. An approach that deems it obvious which sentences are to be privileged is deserting dialectic for dogma. Something beyond these three statements is required if we are to proceed.

2 Resnick, Stephen A., and Wolff, Richard D., "Marxist Epistemology: The Critique of Economic Determinism," Social Text #6 (Fall, 1982), p. 39. Let me record here the pleasure and stimulation that I have had in conversations with the suthors, and that any talk of insufficient dialectical play began with their crushing observation that I had privileged instrumental data over theory myself on one occasion in giving a talk on epistemology. It is with extreme gratitude that the favor is being returned here. The problem is not that the

dangers I cite must accompany their approach to theorizing, but that there is a persistent temptation to stop too soon when essentialism is sniffed out. That temptation can lead to a sadly mechanical style of theoretical practice, although I hope I will not be taken to have imputed any of this nonsense to Resnick and Wolff themselves.

3 At the conference, Steve Resnick asked a question about this sentence. The point is that an epistemology also results in a practice that can take a variety of directions. It is even possible to link an interesting practice to a scandalous epistemological position. I hope that I am not the one who may be guilty at times of abstracting an epistemology out of a practice and judging an investigator in terms of what may be quite murky self-intentions.