Reviews

'Rummaging in Words'

SHAWN W. ROSENBERG, *The Not So Common Sense: Differences in How People Judge Social and Political Life*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002. 424 pp. ISBN 0–300–08427–7 (hbk).

Rosenberg asks the compelling question: why do 'typical individuals [fail] to adjust to the social demands placed upon them, even when the cost of failing can be quite high' (p. 371)? Such failures, he posits, are ubiquitous rather than the anomaly that social and political theory assumes them to be. He proposes that from studying how some people fail where others succeed, we can learn about the qualities individuals have. Namely, we learn that 'thinking is structured' (p. 71). Different individuals perceive the same situation in qualitatively different ways and the same person perceives different situations in formally similar ways. Interviews with forty-eight subjects provide support for this dual claim. Hence, some people fail to adjust because they exhibit a less 'sophisticated' (p. 134) type of thinking. Rosenberg discusses in detail three thinking types—sequential, linear and systematic—which constitute the consecutive stages of a 'socially induced personal transformation process' (p. 59). Appropriately labeled 'reflexive abstraction', the Piagetian transformation mechanism entails that through social interaction individuals can learn the limits of their existing knowledge—a self-reflexive act—and, in a supportive context, actively reconstruct their knowledge towards 'a necessarily higher order of' (p. 65)—meaning more abstract—thinking. The *pragmatic structuralism* he develops examines how these individual-based structures work with social ones to jointly structure social action.

But is abstract thought really the culmination of human development? In fact, how adaptive are abstract ways of knowing? The title of this review summarizes my opinion. These words were spoken by Goethe's eminently erudite but disenchanted Faust before, through his social interactions (with Mephistopheles), he learned about the limits of 'grey' theory and developed to experience what William James approvingly called 'the fullness of living'. I agree with Rosenberg that good thinking beats bad thinking. I argue, however, that we can progress beyond abstract reasoning, in particular, and beyond the compulsion to reason in one particular way, in general. In a remarkable validation of Rosenberg's developmental stages, Friedrich Schiller's 'Ueber die aesthetische Erziehung des Menschen' in 1905 also argued that people progress from more concrete ways of knowing, such as Rosenberg's sequential and linear thought, to more abstract ways of knowing, such as Rosenberg's systematic thought. However, Schiller suggested that people can reach a third stage in which they draw more freely on all modes of knowing. Perhaps surprisingly, given Schiller's title, my co-authors and I observed such a more flexible approach to

THEORY & PSYCHOLOGY Copyright © 2004 SAGE Publications. VOL. 14(4): 562–568
DOI: 10.1177/0959354304044925 www.sagepublications.com

knowing in highly successful investment bankers and software engineers. The free interplay between conceptual and pre-conceptual or concrete ways of knowing is also the subject of pragmatic and phenomenological theory and, we believe, constitutes the kind of freedom social constructivism seeks to facilitate (Michel & Wortham, 2002). This is all to say that Rosenberg's developmental account is truncated and that it matters.

Rosenberg criticizes rationalist approaches, including liberal institutionalism and sociology, because they assume that people are fully rational. This disagreement concerns the degree of rationality. Ironically, from my reading of what a pragmatic perspective entails, Rosenberg's purportedly pragmatic approach looks rather rationalist itself. In 'The Sentiment of Rationality', James uses 'rationalist' in the sense of *Verstandesmensch*, someone who places a primacy on abstract ways of knowing. Where the *Verstandesmensch* traffics in concepts, the pragmatist addresses the fullness of human experience from which abstractions are derived. This disagreement concerns the relative importance of abstract knowing among other ways of knowing. The secondary status that the formal has in the pragmatist approach also questions the viability of Rosenberg's pragmatic *structuralism*, which asserts the primacy of the formal.

After an energizing theoretical discussion about adaptation, I expected that Rosenberg would investigate the thinking types with respect to their differential adaptive consequences. Instead of such a pragmatic focus on consequences, he enacts the primacy of the formal he talks about by focusing on the 'principles, "categories", [and] supposed necessities' that concern the rationalist (James, 1997, p. 98). Specifically, he discusses the attributes of each thinking type, which he derived from logical necessity and with only spare use of prior theory. These discussions—sometimes stretching over seventy pages—are examples for the theoretical generativity, elegance and discrimination that abstract thought, such as the systematic thought Rosenberg writes about, can attain. They also illustrate its potential shortcomings when used as a primary mode. For example, because there is no concrete empirical grounding until about page 300, I had to learn these types as I used to learn chemistry tables. This is a matter not of style but of face validity, which I count as a substantive criterion.

But I primarily advocate a focus on 'last things' because I believe that one understands more fully what these styles are by examining how they perform. Rosenberg did convince me that these thought types are empirically observable. What I do not believe is that these types matter greatly for explaining adaptation. Adaptation is about using the resources most suited to a specific situation. However, according to Rosenberg, *all* thought types work as cognitive habits. Exhibiting a cognitive habit means that one is compelled to supply it, independently of how suited it is to that concrete situation. Systematic reasoning—the most abstract and supposedly most sophisticated stage—is no exception. For example, the subject who exemplified it 'and the interviewer [did] not seem to be communicating quite as well' (Rosenberg, p. 346). Rosenberg attributed this distraction from the joint situation to fatigue. I would expect it as an intrinsic aspect of abstraction, which is defined as 'considering something apart from actual instances' and also as 'inattention and mental absorption' (*Webster's*, 1996). Consequently, I conclude that what matters for explaining adaptation is not the degree of abstraction, as Rosenberg implies, but the degree of flexibility with which one can use knowledge resources as

demanded by a specific situation (as opposed to one's habits). A more fruitful theoretical focus, therefore, should concentrate not on the developmental progress towards but on the progress beyond abstraction.

References

James, W. (1997). What Pragmatism means. In L. Menand (Ed.), *Pragmatism: A reader* (pp. 93–111). New York: Random House.

Michel, A.A., & Wortham, S.E.F. (2002). Clearing away the self. *Theory & Psychology*, *12*, 625–650.

Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary (1996). New York: Barnes & Noble.

A. Alexandra Michel
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

Ideology Theory Tackles the Post-September 11 World

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real.* London: Verso, 2002. 154 pp. ISBN 1–85984–421–9 (pbk).

Žižek, senior researcher at the Institute for Social Studies in Ljubljana, Slovenia, is a prominent figure in cultural studies, famous for his dazzling dialectical combinations of Hegel, Lacan, Marx, Adorno, popular film, European history and political jokes. Especially relevant to theoretical psychology are his works on the critique of ideology, for example *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, *For They Know Not What They Do*, *Tarrying with the Negative* and *The Ticklish Subject*. In such works, Žižek emphatically urges readers to follow him on dizzying rides guaranteed to cause intellectual whiplash. Just when one is beginning to become convinced by Žižek's argument about the fruitfulness of a particular slant on a psycho-political phenomenon, he tugs on the carpet and shows why that view would be insufficient. One of Žižek's primary aims, as I see it, is to demonstrate, in both the content and process of his work, the degree to which philosophy has failed to take into account the effects of the unconscious as described by Lacan, as an unbearable 'Real' that always escapes symbolization, but which nevertheless powerfully conditions human subjectivity. The nature of this 'Real' slips and slides around depending on Žižek's subject matter. In the work at hand, it is the perverse machine of globalizing capitalism that drives ideological processes in the United States.

Welcome to the Desert of the Real is Žižek's most accessible and globally relevant book to date—but it is still a difficult read. Invited by Verso Press, along with Jean Baudrillard and Paul Virilio, to examine the philosophical meaning of the events of September 11, 2001 and their aftermath, Žižek responded with a free-associative geopolitical tour. Along the way, he shares his concerns about the *mauvaise foi* of the contemporary left and ruminates on revolutionary ethics, Balkan politics, the Israel–Palestine conflict and the potential of Europe as a counterweight to US imperialism.

The book's title is borrowed from the film *The Matrix*, in which humans, like Plato's cave dwellers, live out their lives believing they grasp their fundamental situation, when in fact their world is basically an illusion created for them and