RESPONSE TO JASON SPRINGS

On *Healthy Conflict in Contemporary American Society*

Joseph Winters

ABSTRACT

Jason Springs's *Healthy Conflict in Contemporary American Society* is a masterful attempt to practice productive conflict and democratic dialogue in the face of static antagonisms and deep-seated divisions. In my response, I underscore Springs's insistence on mediating between the moral imagination of Richard Rorty and the prophetic critique of Cornel West. For the author of *Healthy Conflict*, any hope in the survival of democracy relies on balancing critique of domination with constructive proposals for a more just and equitable world. On the one hand, Springs rejects any strong distinction between moral imagination and socio-political critique; in fact, he argues for their intertwinement, especially in the work of West. At the same time, there are moments when he suggests an opposition between expanding the moral imagination and engaging in the critical enterprise, especially as he identifies the limits in Foucault regarding normativity and democratic struggle. I respond to this slippage by arguing that Foucault, and critical theory more broadly, open up possibilities for rethinking ethics, politics, and our relationship to the violence that sustains the order of things.

KEYWORDS: *Jason Springs, Cornel West, Richard Rorty, Michel Foucault, social critique, ethical transformation*

These are troubling times. But when isn't time/history marked by trouble, discordance, and relentless suppression of alternative possibilities and lines of flight? One way to describe the current situation in the United States is one of insurmountable conflict and MacIntyrean incommensurability. Disagreements and conflicts over politics, religion, the role of religion in the political domain, anti-black State violence, women's reproductive rights, and immigration (by black and brown people of course) appear to be interminable. Dialogue between democrats and republicans, as exhibited everyday on news programs and panels, does not even pretend to approach an overlapping consensus let alone an understanding of the adversary's assumptions, premises, and motivations. Principles of charity and generosity are difficult to discern in a political atmosphere based on caricatures, debunking strategies, hasty dismissals, and the refusal to listen

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to recalcitrant others. To add to the escalating malaise, we currently live under a Trump regime that has not only encouraged virulent forms of racism and sexism; but for some this administration has undermined a common faith in truth, law, and the possibility of working across difference and disagreement.

In response to the current state of things, Jason Springs intervenes with a sense of "healthy conflict" and agonistic democracy as a way to work through, and creatively use, deep-seated tensions and disagreements. As Springs puts it:

> Many approaches to conflict seek to resolve them by containing the differences in identities, passions, and commitments that fuel persistent conflict. The approach to "healthy conflict" developed here seeks instead to reframe and innovatively deploy the elements that give life to those conflicts. Instead of trying to solve the elements of persistent conflict, it reconceives them as resources than can be channeled to reduce violence and promote justice. (2018, 2)

Throughout the text, Springs asks the reader to avoid the false options of resolution and (static) antagonism. While the former strives to overcome and eliminate conflict, the latter remains stuck in a congealed opposition. The latter, in other words, reifies religious and racial conflict in a manner that is unproductive and stifling to democratic life. In this demanding and timely text, Springs practices what he argues. He performs a third, mediating way—healthy agon—in his engagement with various authors, texts, and topics. In bringing opposing viewpoints together, Springs is able to think through affinities, tensions, mutual limitations, and the alternative possibilities that emerge through friction and difference. In what follows, I am particularly interested in the juxtaposition and productive conflict between Richard Rorty and Cornel West, and to some extent Robert Brandom and Michel Foucault. These creative juxtapositions bring into focus a series of related tensions and contrasts: the prophet and the liberal philosopher; moral imagination and socio-theoretical critique; rhetorical excess and charity; expressive freedom and domination, fugitivity and organization. I respond to Springs's discussion of these matters in the spirit of healthy conflict.

Springs's project is situated somewhere between Rorty and West. Rorty is both indispensable to and insufficient for Springs's project, the latter's endeavor to transform antagonism and enmity into productive democratic dialogue. While Rorty has been accused of being a complacent bourgeois liberal, Springs rescues Rorty's insistence on expanding the moral imagination in response to suffering, inequality, and cruelty. This expansion is to some extent a subset of recognition politics, of extending the sphere of the human and human compassion to communities and populations that have historically been excluded from this domain. It is therefore an implicit acknowledgement that liberal democracies have always struggled with a kind of correctable failure to distribute recognition equitably. But as Springs points out, Rorty is hopeful about the prospects of moral imagination under the liberal democratic capitalist regime. Springs writes that

> Rorty devoted much of his social criticism to inveighing against conceptions of humanity that were too narrowly circumscribed . . . Rorty agreed that the best hope

for expanding the category of "people like us" was to render the basis for those divisions and exclusions increasingly irrelevant . . . The central challenge of moral imagination, and one crucial to defusing [racial, ethnic, and religious] oppositions, is to cultivate the capacity and desire to make oneself vulnerable to the experiences and condition of someone that one may be inclined to find repugnant, or perhaps worse, for whom one is utterly unconcerned. (2018, 14–15)

As is well known, Rorty does not think that we can rely on abstract moral principles but should always situate our moral imaginaries in particular practices and contexts. Similarly, our ethical engagements are never with some abstract Other but with concrete individuals and communities.

The specific location for Rorty's project is American liberal democracy, particularly the strand inspired by Thomas Jefferson's "principle of equality." On this principle, "mutual recognition and reciprocal accountability provide the grounds for hope in the progressive realization of equality and justice over time" (Springs 2018, 19). The "progressive realization" here is not inevitable; it relies on the struggles, practices, and achievements of ordinary people in their efforts to challenge current modes of power and domination. Consequently, the expansion of freedom, rights, and equality is for Rorty always fragile; the project of liberal democracy always exists between failure and self-correction. And ultimately Rorty follows Dewey in claiming that democracy at its best is a "spiritual and moral association" characterized by "mutual accountability, nondomination, and shared deliberation through discursive exchange" (Springs 2018, 19). For Rorty, as Springs points out, the best way to cultivate these democratic sensibilities is through education, literature, and "empathetic sentimentality." Book reading, film watching, and liberal education are practices that enhance our capacities to understand and show compassion for the oppressed and dejected. These practices, in other words, contribute to the goal of diminishing human suffering and increasing equality.

While Springs finds much that is appealing in Rorty's insistence on extending the circle of democracy in the effort to overcome divisions and conflicts, Springs also underscores the weaknesses in Rorty's project. By introducing Elaine Scarry's work, for instance, Springs reminds the reader that well-intentioned attempts to engage the other can often become an instance of narcissism, an occasion where the self only looks for what is familiar and identical in the unfamiliar and strange. More importantly, Springs expresses concerns about Rorty's unwillingness to critically interrogate the structural, or inveterate, quality of contemporary disagreements and modes of violence. According to Springs, Rorty's optimistic liberalism and his evasion of cultural critique (as too totalizing, pessimistic, and ineffective) "leads to an account of moral imagination that is too therapeutic, at times even glibly optimistic" (Springs 2018, 17). Rorty's project, the author concludes, "fails to cut to the structural roots and cultural hold of injustice . . . and fails to conceptualize the depth and persistence—indeed the inevitability—of conflict and opposition" (2018, 17). In other words, Rorty's democratic paradigm fails to balance moral imagination with persistent social/cultural critique; consequently, it refuses

to address the limits to mutual recognition and the violence that conditions liberal democratic regimes and the very domain of the Human.

One author who does a better job at maintaining a balance between moral imagination and cultural critique is Cornel West—even if he sometimes goes too far in the opposite direction of Rorty. According to Springs, West's formulation of prophetic pragmatism riffs on Rorty's anti-foundationalism but departs from Rorty's rejection of structural analysis and critique. In addition, West (like Rorty) sees hope as indispensable for democratic endeavors to contest empire, domination, and racial capitalism. Yet West's hope is suffused with a greater sense of the tragic. For West, as Springs points out, a "democratic enterprise requires monitoring and challenging systematically inscribed, institutionalized, and culturally pervasive manifestations of refused recognition, domination, and repression"(2018, 65). While Rorty is suspicious of authors like Marx and Foucault (or critical theory that renders power and exploitation so pervasive that piecemeal change seems fruitless), West's bricolage-style uses resources from critical theory to keep track of suffering. If democracy is invested in, among other things, combatting forms of domination, then West underscores the necessity of "fighting forms of marginalization that are predicated upon lines of race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and so forth" (Springs 2018, 66).

Of course, Rorty is also concerned about these matters; yet for West, this concern should prompt not only moral inquiry and the revision and expansion of our ethical concepts but "sustained interrogation of the *root causes* of misery and injustice" (Springs 2018, 71). Following Rorty, prophetic pragmatism claims to refuse the stance of the spectator, the theorist who observes and denounces social conditions from a non-involved distance. The prophetic, indebted to Judeo-Christian traditions and civil rights figures like Martin Luther King, Jr., names a mode of intimacy with the wretched of the earth (even as the prophet occasionally has to walk alone or be a fellow traveler alongside marginalized communities and populations). The prophetic combines moral indignation with a love ethic, demonstrated when West is being taken away in handcuffs by police officers at a protest and he urges other demonstrators to "pray for these officers." The prophetic stance also balances a sense of anguish regarding conditions that prevent wider flourishing with a hope against hope that everyday people can organize their energies to make the world a bit more livable.

By juxtaposing West and Rorty, Springs reminds us that expanding the moral imagination is not as transformative as Rorty suggests when our prevailing moral resources are formed within and tainted by conditions and arrangements that systemically exclude certain kinds of bodies and populations. West's interventions generate a series of questions: How does the extension of liberal democracy (private property, nation-state sovereignty, capital) or the project of achieving America work for indigenous peoples in the United States and Canada who see mutual recognition as a euphemism for subordination and ongoing occupation? In other words, how do we think about recognition in the face of those who the very domain of human recognition is defined over and against? Yet, for Springs, if Rorty's

liberal democratic framework contains problems and limitations, so does West's prophetic pragmatism. While Rorty can be too glib, complacent, and sanguine about systemic injustices, Springs worries that West's prophetic voice can verge toward the kind of unproductive sentiments and dispositions that Rorty exposes in *Achieving Our Country*. As the author rhetorically asks, "Given that prophetic pragmatism allots such a central role to power analysis – construed primarily in terms of socio-theoretical critique—and the theoretical framework that so fit that subject matter, how can it elude the specters of despair, self-loathing, and spectatorial contempt" (Springs 2018, 81). Even as West may have resources to combat despair and pessimism (blues, jazz, Jesus, Billie Holliday), Springs questions whether the critical theory part of prophetic pragmatism opens up more possibilities for transformation than it forecloses—especially since theory tends to foster elitism and alienation from the everyday.

In other words, can the critical part of West's project, that part that identifies and tracks structural forms of violence and terror, be harnessed and mobilized for a democratic project or does it cultivate affects, attitudes, and habits that are unproductive—despair, melancholy, shame, inertia, and the like? Similarly, Springs draws attention to the excesses of the prophetic/critical stance; this excess, he tells us, was demonstrated in West's public criticisms of Obama. At other times we experience this exorbitance when West renders the social world so doomed that only a radical rupture or fugitive break from the social order can give us hope. And as Springs points out in his discussion of West's indebtedness to Sheldon Wolin, the fugitive is never unmediated or untouched by organization and structure.

Springs's generous attempt to think between Rorty and West is informed by a commitment to balancing socio-theoretical critique and moral imagination. In fact, his argument throughout the book seems to pivot on this distinction. While he acknowledges that the two tasks are intertwined, there are moments when he indicates a strong distinction between the two. As I take it, critique is deconstructive and limit-focused. In other words, critical theory highlights how the social world is structured and organized in ways that are exclusive and confining for certain groups. The critical theorist supposedly searches for the deep patterns and tendencies within a social order that prevent power, value, and capital from being distributed equitably to blacks, women, the indigent, LGBTQ folk, migrant workers, and so forth. Critical theory focuses on the sources of inequality and domination, sources that are often hidden or difficult to detect (unless you have been trained and disciplined into the practices of social critique). Moral imagination, as I read it, is more constructive, generative, and agentive. Expanding the moral imagination involves narratives, practices, and sites that cultivate democratic goods and virtues; that broaden our capacities to understand and empathize with others; that provide us with the skills to work through conflict and disagreement; that develop our ability to make normative judgements regarding what is just, good, and beautiful; and that propel us to reform and change unjust arrangements. Obviously, the kind of moral imagination that Springs cares about would necessarily involve an ability to identify and challenge modes of domination that are

durable, entrenched, and constitutive of liberal democratic regimes. Yet focusing too much on these modes of domination or mis/describing them in an exaggerated manner can be inimical to democratic life and energy. There is also a concern about how critique leaves the normative/constructive proposal for a different kind of world implicit and unarticulated. Inversely, focusing on the moral imagination and the ability to remake the world without an analysis of power leads to complacency and glib optimism.

The reader sees Springs tirelessly working in between these two positions—moral imagination and power critique—in the Rorty and West comparison as well as the conversation that he constructs between Foucault and Brandom. This latter juxtaposition is developed in a chapter with a title that riffs on Audre Lorde's trope of dismantling the master's house. Springs contends that while Foucault offers insights for contemplating hidden modes of domination, he "remains liable to the potentially devastating criticism that the pervasive domination he describes leads to paralysis" (Springs 2018, 162). In addition, Foucault gives us no way to distinguish between good and bad forms of power and authority. Brandom, on the other hand, provides philosophical tools to reflect on expressive freedom, the interplay between freedom and constraint, and improvisation through norm use. For Brandom, freedom is a social practice. Similar to jazz, it requires participants who need to learn the rules of that practice before those rules and norms can be transformed. Brandom supplements Foucault's critical project with a normative and constructive project. Yet Brandom's work according to Springs is "politically quietist" and woefully unconcerned about power and domination. What is important about this chapter is that Springs underscores and rearticulates the thrust of the book's concern—"to draw into acute focus what lies at stake in the *opposition* between moral imagination and socio-analytical critique" (2018, 160). Here is where we need to pause and question the language of opposition. Even as Springs shows that these two dispositions are intertwined in someone like Cornel West, he also maintains in other moments that there is a noticeable contrast between moral imagination and social critique. I want to suggest that this very logic of opposition, which is indebted to Rorty, misses what is most transgressive about critical theory as well as black studies—or we might say, to riff on Lorde, the tools of the slave.

Let's briefly consider Foucault's work, for instance. Authors such as Nancy Fraser and Rorty contend that Foucault's notion of power is so pervasive and capacious that it can lead to inertia and paralysis. For Rorty, Foucault's power, similar to Heidegger's understanding of technology, functions like original sin, meaning that any intervention that is not a total rejection or rupture will simply reproduce the order of things. For Fraser, as Springs points out, defining power as all-pervasive and neutral does not prompt us to distinguish between good and bad forms of power, or make distinctions between democratic power and arbitrary power for example. These authors tend to find limited moral/ethical sources in Foucault's writings from the 1980s on the care of the self. Yet to suggest that Foucault introduces moral concerns only later in his life (when his moral imagination becomes more explicit and determinate) misses not only the richness of his corpus but the

ways in which his critical approach opens up new ethical possibilities and trajectories. Critics also ignore how Foucault confronts the limitations and erasures of traditional moral and ethical models.

A few examples might be helpful here. In *Madness and Civilization* (1965), Foucault attempts to think at the edge of reason and unreason, or order and madness. This text demands solicitude toward those bodies, populations, and desires that the prevailing order must contain, confine, and eliminate for the preservation of reason, normality, and social control. Throughout the text, Foucault gestures toward art, poetry, and literature as sites that imagine a more fluid and contaminable relationship between reason and unreason, or order and madness. In addition, Foucault contends that a kind of madness, expressed through art, "opens a void, a moment of silence, a question without answer, provokes a breach without reconciliation where the world is forced to question itself" (Foucault 1965, 288). This interruption, this moment of silence and radical questioning that art demands, makes possible alternative ways of relating to the world, the order of things, and that which falls by the wayside of this order. Another example of the ethical lines and paths propelled by Foucault's work can be found in *Discipline and Punish* (1978). In the introduction to this book, Foucault famously juxtaposes an example of spectacular torture associated with the ancien régime and the schedules that regulate bodies in modern prisons. This enables him to examine a general shift from a mode of punishment publicly directed toward the body to punishment aimed at correcting the soul, the subject behind the criminal act. For Foucault, this correctable soul is still the effect of a body politics, or a certain way of distributing power through bodies. As he puts it, "The soul is the effect and instrument of a political anatomy; the soul is the prison of the body" (Foucault 1978, 30). By highlighting the shifts and transitions in mechanisms of power that regulate and punish, Foucault indirectly refuses linear progress narratives that get mobilized to justify liberal democracy, modernity, and humanism; progress narratives that kill the dead twice by justifying violence in the name of progress and civilization and then through forgetfulness and erasure from public memory of the casualties of progress. Along these lines, Foucault refuses the notion that punishment has become more humane and less violent just because the violence is internalized in a double sense (within the individual and behind closed doors in prisons and cells).

Finally, we might think of Foucault's work on race in *Society Must Be Defended*. In this portion of his 1970s College of France lectures, Foucault defines racism as what enables the State to make a distinction between acceptable and unacceptable killing, between those who are worthy of life and those worthy of death (Foucault 2003, 254–55). This discussion of racism is part of a broader discussion concerning politics and war, politics as war, and the novel ways that political power holds sway over life and death within modernity. For Foucault, racism is always already attached to nation-state projects, war, and settler colonialism. In the realm of liberal democracy, where the State and its extensions are taken for granted as the legitimate agents of violence, where racism is seen as ancillary to or a deviation from liberal principles, Foucault's project offers fecund ethical and political

resources. To put it differently, the contrast between moral imagination and social critique does not hold in Foucault's work. If Foucault expands our imagination, our spheres of concern and care, he also shows how this expansion requires a kind of contraction, an interruption, and a heightened sense of the violence involved in our attachments to prevailing institutions and arrangements. Drawing on the work of Christina Sharpe (2016), I consider Foucault's work as always already gesturing toward an ethics of care and attunement. It takes a lot of imagination to be affected by the violence that has become so mundane and acceptable, to the terror and anguish that we are trained to become acclimated to.

By briefly thinking through Foucault's ethical and political project, I simply want to refuse the opposition between moral imagination and social critique, especially in the work of critical theorists. While Springs shows how these two modes of engagement are intertwined, there are moments when he could be read as underscoring the opposition between the two. The latter option seems more in line with Rorty's concerns and has become influential in certain circles within the academy. The contrast between social critique and moral imagination maps onto to other kinds of distinctions: melancholy and hope, pessimism and optimism, negativity and construction, and revolution and reform. Any stable opposition among these pairs does not help us understand the complexities of a James Baldwin (who speaks about the need for an upheaval in the social order as our only chance) or an Audre Lorde (who links a critique of the Master's house with the creation of new genres and ways of rewriting black womanhood and the world). Perhaps the "tools of the slave" subvert the Master's house from within and without.

I will end with an allusion to Springs's paradoxical conclusion in the chapter on Foucault, Brandom, and Lorde. He opens up the possibility that some antagonisms cannot be converted into healthy conflicts, that relationships of domination might withstand practices of mutual recognition. Or as he puts it, "Indeed in some conflicts what is at issue is considered non-negotiable; there may be a standing opposition between irreconcilable claims, where integrative mediation is impossible. What may emerge is a standing opposition that requires, nonetheless full efforts to overcome dynamics of domination of one person or party by another" (Springs 2018, 192). This concession is significant in light of the fact that authors associated with Afro-pessimism contend that the social order or the Master's house will always be defined by the structural eviction of the black and the indigenous subject (see Wilderson 2010). What if domination or antagonism is a structural feature of liberal democracy, racial capitalism, and the human? Even if this is the case, Springs offers invaluable resources to develop more generous and receptive practices within these structural constraints.

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