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Humanistic Criticism, Prophetic Pragmatism, and the Question of Antifoundationalism – Remarks on Edward Said and Cornel West

Abstract: One of the most important aspects of Edward Said’s literary and cultural theory is undoubtedly that he always attempted to return criticism to the world. In spite of numerous attacks on worldly theorizing by proponents of formalist criticism, it seems that the notion of a worldly and oppositional criticism still is crucial for leftist literary and cultural theory. However, this is not enough. This article wants to direct attention to the significance of what could be termed an antifoundationalist and anti-essentialist worldly and oppositional leftist criticism. It is argued that while Said has prepared the ground for the development of a sophisticated worldly criticism, the black philosopher and cultural critic Cornel West illustrates even more clearly the complexity and suggestiveness of the phrase antifoundationalist worldly criticism. The pragmatist West has understood the lessons of antifoundationalism and antirealism, yet at the same time he makes clear that a radicalization of neopragnatist antifoundationalism is less productive than dialectically using it as a kind of corrective of still prevailing vulgarizations of oppositional theory. While it is argued that both versions of worldly and oppositional criticism, Said’s as well as West’s, are valuable and useful with regard to contemporary counterhegemonic theory, this article also underscores that a sophisticated worldly criticism ought to prove that it is capable of entering into a dialogue with other theoretical approaches.

After the prevalence of theory on the academic and intellectual scene in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, American neopragmatists and antifoundationalists like Stanley Fish and Richard Rorty have argued for a move ‘against theory.’ This strong reaction against theory is only natural in view of the theory boom of the last three decades, but unfortunately it has produced only a few interesting and fruitful results. The Rortyan demand that we should move against theory and toward narrative (or conversation or even sentimental storytelling), and Fish’s insight that we simply do not need theory since everything we need is offered by the world of practice, are provocative and stimulating gestures, but they do not adequately describe the potential and the complexity of what they vehemently reject. Fish has underscored numerous times that while antifoundationalism teaches us a lot, we should not expect too much of it. Above all, we are not supposed to expect any consequences of it. Antifoundationalism is a thesis about how epistemological foundations emerge; it tells a story in which it becomes obvious that those foundations are not simply out there, something natural, transhistori-
tical, and neutral waiting to be found, but that they have been established by rhetorical persuasion. Foundations are part of our final vocabularies, they are cultural and contextual since they are made by us language-users (see Schulenberg 2003). Anti-foundationalism as an account of how we got our beliefs, as a new belief about beliefs, will never free us from these beliefs or cause us to question them. Our practice is always already principled, and theory thus has to remain without consequences. It is simply not needed. For our purposes, it is crucial to realize that Fish declares theory an impossible project, a nonstarter, a project which will never succeed. He defines theory as an attempt to govern practice. There are two senses in which theory tries to do this. First, it attempts to guide practice from a position above or outside it, that is, it wishes to define itself as transcendental and transhistorical. Second, theory tries to reform practice by neutralizing interest, by substituting for the parochial perspective of some local or partisan point of view the perspective of a general rationality to which the individual subordinates his contextually conditioned opinions and beliefs. (Fish 1989, 319)

Fish, as a localist without principles and a lover of rules of thumb, advances the argument that the project of theory is doomed from the start.

Considering that even Derridean deconstruction has become somewhat more ‘worldly’ since the early 1990s, the question arises as to whether this move toward worldliness has more positive than negative consequences for a counter-hegemonic literary and cultural criticism. In this article, I shall argue that the notion of a worldly and oppositional criticism still is crucial for leftist literary and cultural theory. However, this is not enough. A worldly and oppositional literary and cultural criticism has not necessarily to appear as somewhat old-fashioned or even obsolete, but it can also present itself as antifoundationalist and antiessentialist. Thus, in my article I want to underscore the significance of what could be termed an antifoundationalist and antiessentialist worldly and oppositional leftist criticism.

First, I shall discuss Said’s understanding of the function of a worldly and oppositional criticism, and of humanistic criticism in general. It is crucial to recognize that I read Said as a leftist critic. Always a self-proclaimed conservative as far as his literary and cultural tastes were concerned, Said’s contention was that criticism ought to be understood as an act of political and social engagement. I think of Said as a critic on the Left not because he presented himself as a Marxist, a socialist, an adherent of Communism, a defender of class politics, or as someone who sought to abolish the late-capitalist system in its entirety – all this was of course completely alien to him. However, there are only a few thinkers who have reflected upon the crucial nature of notions such as resistance, opposition, history, hope, antithetical knowledge, dialectical criticism, demystification, noncoercive knowledge, future change, and the idea of critique as a technique of trouble, all central to leftist thinking, with the same rigor and tension-ridden complexity as Said. In addition, in an almost Adornian manner, Said always maintained that every theoretical approach had to be self-critical, that is, he warned against vul-
garizations of oppositional thinking and thereby strengthened it. As a critic influenced by Gramsci, Lukács, Adorno, Chomsky, and Williams, he did this not as a conservative, a moderate liberal, or a traditional humanist (in the sense of someone exclusively governed by the ideas of philological humanists and Romance scholars such as Erich Auerbach, Leo Spitzer, and Ernst Robert Curtius), but as someone who never unequivocally identified himself with leftist thought, yet who always called attention to the fact that his position was more towards the Left than the Right. Hence, one purpose of this article is to argue that Said’s literary and cultural criticism may have been more important for the formation of leftist cultural criticism than hitherto acknowledged.

While Said partly demonstrates the impact of antifoundationalism on a worldly kind of theorizing, I shall argue in the second part that Cornel West’s version of pragmatism illustrates even more clearly the complexity and suggestiveness of the phrase antifoundationalist worldly criticism. In other words, in his best texts, West goes further than Said in his thinking. West is a philosopher and cultural critic who is influenced by pragmatism and postanalytic philosophy and who has therefore learned the lessons of antifoundationalism, antiessentialism, antirepresentationalism, and antirealism, yet at the same time he makes clear that a radicalization of neopragmatist antifoundationalism is less productive than using it dialectically as a kind of indispensable corrective of still prevailing vulgarizations of oppositional theory.

What Edward Said teaches us, among other things, is that any kind of dogmatic and monologic theory has to be radically questioned. This also applies to worldly criticism, of course. It seems that the idea of a worldly and oppositional criticism sometimes appears as somewhat clumsy, inelegant, or anemic because it is often associated with materialist thinking in its most vulgar form (think of Georg Lukács’ so-called middle period in this context). The program of a worldly criticism has survived various versions of formalist critique, from New Criticism and structuralism to de Manian deconstruction and the most esoteric poststructuralisms, but I think for it to remain an effective force in the field of contemporary theory it has to prove that it is capable of entering into a dialogue with other theoretical approaches. For that reason, I want to contribute to the elucidation of that dialogue by discussing the possibility of a conceptual mediation between a worldly and oppositional leftist criticism and neopragmatist antifoundationalism.

1. Worldly Gestures – Edward Said’s Oppositional Criticism

From The World, the Text, and the Critic (1983) to Representations of the Intellectual (1994) and Humanism and Democratic Criticism (2004), the question of the function of criticism, and of the worldliness of the critic or public intellectual, was one of Edward Said’s primary concerns. The best way to approach his understanding of the function of criticism is surely by discussing his most important theoretical text, The World, the Text, and the Critic. In this collection of essays
Said develops his notion of a worldly and oppositional criticism. It is not easy to specify Said’s vantage point in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* since he fights on numerous fronts. He argues against the idea of critical noninterference and a philosophy of pure textuality. In other words, he attacks any kind of formalist, functionalist and technical criticism which utterly ignores political and social responsibility. Moreover, he underscores the depoliticization of French poststructuralism in American deconstruction (e.g., de Man), and he maintains that leftist literary studies in the U.S. are no longer oppositional but on the contrary tend to confirm prevailing values, structures, and institutions. Following Said, a clear break can be detected between the American radical movement that ended with the McCarthy era, for which the passionate rhetoric and decidedly leftist political position governing F.O. Matthiessen’s “The Responsibilities of the Critic” was typical, and the obvious incapability, or rather unwillingness, of contemporary critics to develop an oppositional, worldly, and revisionist critique of American capitalist culture. However, not only does he criticize the American ‘new New Criticism’ for its shortcomings and inadequacies, he also argues against the notorious hypostatizations of Foucault and Derrida: power and writing/textuality.

At the end of his discussion of Derrida’s texts in “Criticism Between Culture and System,” Said states: “My interest is to reinvest critical discourse with something more than contemplative effort or an appreciative technical reading method for texts as undecidable objects.” On a more general level he explicates: “Criticism cannot assume that its province is merely the text, not even the great literary text. It must see itself, with other discourse, inhabiting a much contested cultural space” (Said 1983, 224 and 225). From this it already becomes obvious that the essays collected in *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, which were written from 1969 to 1981, should be seen as an attempt at a redefinition of the role, the forms, and the tasks of literary and cultural criticism. Undoubtedly, this is a truly demanding project. In order to tackle the issue of criticism’s function and role, Said of course cannot avoid the question of the status of theory. I argued in my introduction that Stanley Fish claims that theory is simply not needed since our practice is always already principled and that the project of theory is a non-starter because its goals are illusionary. In contrast, Said does not subscribe to this radical neopragmatist dismissal of theory.

Concerning his attitude toward theory, his essay “Traveling Theory” is particularly valuable. Said elucidates his notion of traveling theory by discussing Georg Lukács’ *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) and Lucien Goldmann’s *Le Dieu caché* (1955), as well as texts by Raymond Williams and Michel Foucault. On Said’s account, Lukács’ early and most important text illuminates what happens when consciousness moves from the capitalist world of reified objects into the world of theory. That is, when it leaves behind the world of isolated empirical givens, it frees itself from the power of capitalist reification and commodification, and thereby starts comprehending history and society as a whole. This also concerns the centrality of the concept of totality for Lukács’ text, of
course (think of Fredric Jameson’s reading of Lukács in this context). For our purposes, however, it is crucial to recognize that Said interprets this refusal of consciousness to be confined to the reified and fragmented world of objects as an “insurrectionary act.” The will and the desire to go beyond empiricity, to leave the world of practice and its distortions, and to seek the plane of theory is “an act of political insurgency.” Said writes: “To attain to theory is to threaten reification, as well as the entire bourgeois system on which reification depends, with destruction” (Said 1983, 233). As regards the early Lukács, and Said’s suggestions are pertinent here, the act of theorizing can be termed an act of resistance.

Theory for Lukács “was what consciousness produced, not as an avoidance of reality but as a revolutionary will completely committed to worldliness and change” (Said 1983, 234). This commitment to worldliness and change is precisely what Said was missing in the American theoretical landscape of the 1980s, and what he was desperately missing with regard to the state of literary and cultural criticism in general. It is important to understand that Said does not advocate abstract and totalizing theory in this essay (grand theory as the straw man of many neopragmatists), but that he, on the contrary, underlines that “theory must never lose touch with its origins in politics, society, and economy” and that it moreover ought to be regarded as “a response to a specific social and historical situation” (235 and 237). In contrast to a materialist theorist such as Jameson, who often comes close to presenting himself as a paradigmatic grand theorist, Said, not identifying himself as a Marxist, draws attention to what could be called a certain theoretical modesty (on Jameson, cf. Schulenberg 2001). Although “we certainly need theory,” he emphasizes “that there is no theory capable of covering, closing off, predicting all the situations in which it might be useful.” Theory, in other words, “can never be complete” (Said 1983, 241). Differentiating between theory and critical consciousness, Said argues that the latter is synonymous with an awareness of the resistances to theory. Critical consciousness prevents theory from losing contact with the time and place from which it emerges, it situates theory, historicizes it, and measures its effectiveness and limitations with regard to certain situations and tasks. As far as the job of the worldly critic is concerned, Said explicitly states that this is

   to provide resistances to theory, to open it up toward historical reality, toward society, toward human needs and interests, to point up those concrete instances drawn from everyday reality that lie outside or just beyond the interpretive area necessarily designated in advance and thereafter circumscribed by every theory. (242)

Instead of clinging to basic dichotomies such as foundational vs. non-foundational theory, Said seeks to demarcate a discursive space which can function as a kind of mediation between theory and practice. Theory is necessary, but theoretical closure (system-building as an extreme form) has to be anathematized. Said radically historicizes theory, opens it up toward historical reality and contingency, and thereby illustrates that theory, pace Fish, Walter Benn Michaels, and Steven Knapp, does not always necessarily intend to govern and dominate practice from an external position but that it can also present itself, in a Westian manner, as re-
visable, provisional, fallible, and heuristic (see Knapp and Michaels 1985). In spite of the fact that Said was not influenced by antifoundationalism, antinessentialism, antirepresentationalism, or antirealism to the same degree as Cornel West, their gesture of holding on to theory and their simultaneous awareness of its productive limitations are similar. In addition, both return the text of criticism to the world by demonstrating its situatedness and by stressing that the critic has to operate within various networks of worldly affiliations, just like the literary text. Criticism, as Said and West make clear, is an act of political and social engagement that takes place in the world and that tries to prepare the ground for future change.

In the context of his discussion and critique of Foucault’s somewhat excessive and partly undifferentiated use of the term *pouvoir*, Said offers an interesting opportunity to contrast his worldly criticism with Fish’s thought. Whereas Fish holds that we are governed by our interpretive communities or systems of intelligibility, and that we are incapable of reaching an outside to these systems with their rigid norms and standards, Said repeatedly underscores in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* that the theorizing of resistance and difference, that is, the allowance for counterhegemony, is possible because there is such an outside. Leftist worldly and oppositional criticism needs to demarcate precisely this outside to hegemonic systems in order to articulate its notion of resistance and its desire for change. Said points out:

> In human history there is always something beyond the reach of dominating systems, no matter how deeply they saturate society, and this is obviously what makes change possible, limits power in Foucault’s sense, and hobbles the theory of that power. (246-7)

This indicates that Said’s oppositional criticism seeks to revitalize concepts such as resistance, social change, and hope (in a non-Rortyan sense) in order to initiate the resuscitation of leftist critique in the U.S. and late capitalism in general. Resistance, for instance, is “a matter of central relevance” to his argument in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (27; cf. also Said 1993, 252-65 and 288-340). In this context, it is interesting to note that the act, and theorizing, of resistance is also an important aspect of *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, where Said elaborates on the fact that his version of a worldly and oppositional humanism cannot be imagined without the concept of resistance (see Said 2004, 70-8). It is crucial to consider the status of my suggestions: I am not primarily asking whether Said’s notions of (local) resistance and social change ought to be considered as potentially effective means of a radical cultural politics. Also, I am not elaborating on theory’s ‘real’ chances of connecting with and opening up toward historical reality and society. It goes without saying that these are incredibly complex questions that ask for book-length studies. For my purposes in this article, I simply wish to call attention to Said’s gesture of holding on to the venerable concepts of resistance, hope, and social change. This gesture, within a dialogical, nondogmatic, and dialectical theoretical framework, is still of importance, I propose, with respect to the contemporary situation of theory in the U.S. One
should also think of the interchanges between the fields of American Studies, postcolonial studies, and transnational cultural studies in this context (cf. Rowe 2004). The aforementioned gesture could be seen as a common point of reference for these fields.

Said’s understanding of worldly criticism becomes especially obvious in the first two essays in *The World, the Text, and the Critic:* “Secular Criticism” and “The World, the Text, and the Critic.” He repeatedly underscores the literary text’s worldliness and circumstantiality, as well as its historical embeddedness and contingency. All this is incorporated in the text. In other words, “texts have ways of existing that even in their most rarefied form are always enmeshed in circumstance, time, place, and society – in short, they are in the world, and hence worldly” (Said 1983, 35). Said maintains that one must avoid isolating literature and literary studies from the world, and that one instead ought to accentuate the materiality of those strands which link the literary text to society, author, culture, and historical circumstances. Instead of focusing on the text’s undecidability, self-referentiality, its allegedly self-reflective and autotelic nature, the critic is supposed to recreate or reconstruct the historical, institutional, and social circumstances from which the text arose. Strongly influenced by Raymond Williams’ version of cultural materialism (cf. 177), Said’s contention is that literary texts, in their worldliness, are, to a certain degree, “events, and, even when they appear to deny it, they are nevertheless a part of the social world, human life, and of course the historical moments in which they are located and interpreted” (4). Regarding the worldliness of the literary text, the beginning of “Secular Criticism” contains a passage which is worth quoting in full length since it nicely summarizes Said’s ontology of the text, as it were:

Each essay in this book affirms the connection between texts and the existential actualities of human life, politics, societies, and events. The realities of power and authority – as well as the resistances offered by men, women, and social movements to institutions, authorities, and orthodoxies – are the realities that make texts possible, that deliver them to their readers, that solicit the attention of critics. I propose that these realities are what should be taken account of by criticism and the critical consciousness. (5)

Undoubtedly, this program for literary studies forces us to historicize the insights and suggestions of the radical historicist Said. While radical formalist deconstruction, pure philology and a philosophy of pure textuality, that is, of critical noninterference, were clearly dominant in the late 1970s and early 1980s, they are no longer of central importance for today’s theoretical discourses. Nonetheless, while his opponents have lost their influence and power, I would suggest that the position Said developed by fighting against them is still of value for contemporary counterhegemonic theory. If we follow Said, worldly texts ask for worldly criticism. While he advocates an interdisciplinary and transcultural analysis of the complex links which materially connect texts to authors, societies, histories, and cultures, he is radically opposed to all forms of orthodoxy, authority, dogma, refinement, reverence, noninterference, totalization, system-building, and political quietism. Said, as a leftist theorist who is influenced not so
much by Marxism but rather by Marxists and who is an ironist in a non-Rortyan sense, unequivocally states that his version of literary and cultural criticism, as a secular version of criticism driven by the idea of amateurism, has to be understood as oppositional:

Were I to use one word consistently along with criticism (not as a modification but as an emphatic) it would be oppositional. If criticism is reducible neither to a doctrine nor to a political position on a particular question, and if it is to be in the world and self-aware simultaneously, then its identity is its difference from other cultural activities and from systems of thought or of method. (29; cf. Said 1994, xvii-xviii, and Denning 2004, 187-91)

There is one crucial point which I would like to call attention to in this context. In view of the above, one could argue, and many (anti-)theorists have done so, that neopragmatism as an (anti-)philosophy of little steps, of small patchwork solutions, temporary stopgaps, and small experimental ways of problem-solving is all we actually need and that we therefore had better stop all this somewhat old-fashioned talk about resistance, counterhegemony, and oppositional criticism. This temptation certainly cannot be ignored. However, although leftist thought needs (neopragmatist) antifoundationalism, it should not get stuck in its radicalization, but should rather strive to go beyond it by dialectically using it as a kind of corrective. What makes Said’s literary and cultural criticism valuable for leftist thinking, among other things, is that he radically dismisses vulgarizations and simplifications of left theory and at the same time feels free to hold on to some traditional (humanist) notions of critique. He writes, for instance, that criticism must think of itself as life-enhancing and constitutively opposed to every form of tyranny, domination, and abuse; its social goals are noncoercive knowledge produced in the interests of human freedom. (Said 1983, 29; cf. Bayoumi and Rubin 2000, 433-5)

Said has prepared the ground for the development of an antifoundationalist worldly criticism or a fallible and antiessentialist humanism. Cornel West, one may insinuate, would subscribe to the Saidian understanding of humanistic criticism without hesitation.

Said’s emphasis on the contemporary relevance and future of humanism becomes especially obvious in Humanism and Democratic Criticism. In this book, the last one he completed before his death, he contends that it is possible to fashion a different kind of humanism, free of Eurocentrism, nationalism, and feelings of exceptionalism. Said, in a very typical formulation, states that the core of humanism is the secular notion that the historical world is made by men and women, and not by God, and that it can be understood rationally according to the principle formulated by Vico in New Science, that we can really know only what we make or, to put it differently, we can know things according to the way they were made. (Said 2004, 11)

Said sees humanism “as a process of unending disclosure, discovery, self-criticism, and liberation” (21-2). Further, he holds that one ought to attempt to “situat[e] critique at the very heart of humanism,” and he maintains that the worldly prac-
tice of humanism should be considered “a technique of trouble” (47 and 77). At the same time, and this leads us to Cornel West’s version of pragmatism, the Vichian Said underscores that one must not try to turn humanism into some kind of neutral science which delivers absolute and transhistorical truths, objective knowledge, and firm certainties. Said, it can be said, urges us to see the link between humanism and fallibilism:

So there is always something radically incomplete, insufficient, provisional, disputable, and arguable about humanistic knowledge that Vico never loses sight of and that, as I said, gives the whole idea of humanism a tragic flaw that is constitutive to it and cannot be removed. (12)

2. Cornel West’s Prophetic Pragmatism, or, Toward an Antifoundationalist Worldly Criticism

In *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, Cornel West’s contention is that the American evasion of philosophy, that is, the pragmatists’ radical critique and evasion of epistemology-centered philosophy, has led to a profound change in the conception of philosophy. Because of this evasion, philosophy has slowly but steadily turned into a kind of cultural criticism in which the meaning of America is continually questioned and debated. What this means is that this swerve away from epistemology or abstract pure philosophy in general has led not to a radical dismissal of philosophy but to its reconception as a form of cultural criticism which is politically engaged and, at least in its Westian version, can be understood as a kind of American leftist critique. By emphasizing the political and moral aspects of American pragmatism, West illustrates that he regards his genealogical account as an explicitly political endeavor. To put it differently, his cultural commentary wants to explain America to itself from a decidedly leftist vantage point. *The American Evasion of Philosophy* is an attempt to resuscitate radical politics in the U.S.

In a Deweyan manner, the radical historicist and fallibilist West rejects a spectator theory of knowledge, the quest for certainty, and the search for immutable foundations, and attempts to contribute to the promotion of an Emersonian culture of creative democracy. It is important to note, however, that West’s neo-pragmatism strives to go beyond the tradition of pragmatism, that is, it builds on the tradition which reaches from Emerson to Rorty and, at the same time, radicalizes it. Combining insights of theorists as varied as Emerson, James, Dewey, Du Bois, Hook, Mills, Niebuhr, and Trilling, West argues that his prophetic pragmatism makes the “political motivation and political substance of the American evasion of philosophy explicit” (West 1989, 213). Four main characteristics of West’s prophetic pragmatism should be mentioned. Firstly, it is a form of cultural and social criticism. Secondly, it sees itself as part of an emancipatory political project and as an emancipatory social experimentalism. Thirdly, it is religiously inspired, that is, strongly influenced by the Christian tradition and by African-American liberation theology (cf. West 2002, 101-12 and 131-47). Hence, it has
a mediating function between Protestant Christianity and leftist romanticism. Finally, it presents itself as a form of tragic thought. Since his early texts, West’s blues sensibility has been a crucial aspect of his thinking. Firmly rooted in the tradition of African-American liberation theology and its understanding of suffering, pain, resistance, and struggle, he emphasizes that there is always hope and the possibility of human (collective) agency in the confrontation with the tragic. As a form of “third-wave left romanticism,” West’s prophetic pragmatism “tempers its utopian impulse with a profound sense of the tragic character of life and history” (West 1989, 228).

However, it does not succumb to this tragic character, but rather presents itself as a philosophy of struggle, a philosophy of praxis – a cultural criticism that draws its strength from an American and African-American tradition of leftist resistance. With respect to the notion of struggle, West points out: “Human struggle sits at the center of prophetic pragmatism, a struggle guided by a democratic and libertarian vision, sustained by moral courage and existential integrity, and tempered by the recognition of human finitude and frailty” (229). As far as the utopian and revolutionary gestures underlying prophetic pragmatism are concerned, West maintains: “It calls for utopian energies and tragic actions, energies and actions that yield permanent and perennial revolutionary, rebellious, and reformist strategies that oppose the status quo of our day” (229). West drives his point home when he concisely explicates that “the praxis of prophetic pragmatism is tragic action with revolutionary intent, usually reformist consequences, and always visionary outlook” (229). The vehemence and intensity of West’s sentences remind one of his most radical book to date, Prophesy Deliverance!: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity (1982). Although he speaks of ‘reformist consequences’ in the last quotation, these passages unequivocally indicate that pragmatism and liberalism do not necessarily have to go hand in hand, that they do not always have to be intimately interwoven. What we read here are not the words of a nonchalant bourgeois pragmatist who desperately tries to rhetorically convince us that we had better refrain from wanting anything other than a late-capitalist liberal bourgeois society. Rather, it becomes repeatedly obvious in his text that West intends to build coalitions that involve various oppositional social movements ranging from racial, ethnic, religious, class, and gender to gay and lesbian movements. Within the theoretical framework of his post-universalistic cosmopolitanism, West attempts to prepare the ground for the coming together of various leftist groups (a discursive space where difference and particularity could be articulated freely).

Many proponents of de Manian deconstruction and many disciples of Fish’s version of neopragmatism have advanced the argument that rhetoric goes all the way down. Inevitably, this has affected their understanding of the materiality of praxis. While Said constantly underscored the materiality of the literary text, which differs profoundly from that of de Man, West stresses that his prophetic pragmatism as oppositional cultural criticism desires to be “a material force for individuality and democracy.” By this he means “a practice that has some po-
tency and effect or makes a difference in the world” (West 1989, 232). In other words, West refuses to reduce the political to a rhetorical agon and instead constantly forces his readers not to ignore “the irreducible predicament of unique individuals who undergo dread, despair, disillusionment, disease, and death and the institutional forms of oppression that dehumanize people” (228). The antifoundationalist and radical historicist West knows about the importance of rhetoric. Moreover, presumably nobody would think that this lay preacher and frequent lecturer is rhetorically innocent and that he is not well aware of the power of rhetorical persuasion. In contrast to the above-mentioned theorists, West does not hypostatize the power of rhetoric. He, in a sense, proposes a more moderate and worldly version of pragmatism. A conception of pragmatism, that is, which demonstrates the crucial nature of antifoundationalism, antiessentialism, conventionalism, and contextualism, but which refuses to radicalize these concepts to a degree that would render this kind of thinking utterly ineffective in the field of the political. Prophetic pragmatism is critique and praxis, theory and practice, rhetoric and struggle or resistance, and it is the attempt to create adequate mediations between these poles. Sophisticated (anti-)theory, in West’s case, does not preclude the possibility of moral (collective) action, acts of liberation, and gestures of political resistance.

In The American Evasion of Philosophy, West Americanizes leftist theory and practice; he seeks “to accent the specificity of American left possibilities” (West 2001, 358). Prophetic pragmatism, as West makes clear, considers itself the culmination of the major American progressive tradition of cultural criticism, and it is shaped by the American intellectual and political situation of the 1980s. Relating prophetic pragmatism’s American roots and the question of postmodern difference, West writes:

Prophetic pragmatism arrives on the scene as a particular American intervention conscious and critical of its roots, and radically historical and political in its outlook. Furthermore, it gives prominence to the plight of those peoples who embody and enact the “postmodern” themes of degraded otherness, subjected alienness, and subaltern marginality, that is, the wretched of the earth (poor peoples of color, women, workers). (West 1989, 237)

Prophetic pragmatism, as mentioned above, wants to contribute to the resuscitation of left politics in the U.S., and it tries to function as a means of empowering formerly marginalized voices in postmodern times. Clearly, it is strongly influenced by European theories such as Marxism, structuralism, discourse analysis, and to a certain extent poststructuralism, but “it remains in the American grain” (239).

It is interesting to see that West uses Richard Rorty’s brand of neopragmatism in order to further outline his own version of prophetic pragmatism (cf. 194-210). By illustrating the alleged weaknesses and inadequacies of Rorty’s thought, West can present his own theory as being capable of plugging these gaps and of driving (neo)pragmatism back to the radical emancipatory potential of Deweyan pragmatism. West’s prophetic pragmatism, in contrast to Rorty’s neopragmatism, does have, or rather strives to have, political, ethical, and social consequences,
and it moreover seeks to connect with black, feminist, single-issue, and third-world oppositional social movements. This means that neopragmatists as prophetic pragmatists should build on the insights of antifoundationalism, historicism, antirealism, and the antimetaphysical gesture of avant-garde (anti-)theory in general by conjoining them to the best of recent refinements in social theory, cultural criticism, and historiography and rooting them in possible social movements or social motion, those with efficacious strategies and tactics for fundamental social change. (210)

Although the themes of social change, (creative) democracy, freedom, and liberation lie at the core of West’s cultural and social criticism, he does not advocate the idea that a radical dismissal of theory is necessary in order to reach these goals. He is thus highly critical of Rorty’s turn against theory and toward narrative. Rorty’s distrust of theory, West contends, is damaging to the idea of pragmatism; equally problematic is his “preoccupation with transient vocabularies” (209). West unequivocally states that pragmatism’s antifoundationalism does not necessarily have to entail a resistance to theory. He convincingly differentiates between grand theory and provisional or revisable theories which carefully attempt to analyze differences, alterities, and particularities and which aim at an understanding of experience within a historicist and genealogical framework. Abstract and totalizing theory must be radically criticized, because theory, trying to effect change, ought to be concerned with concrete political and social events. In “Theory, Pragmatisms, and Politics,” West comments on his attitude toward theory as follows:

On the level of theory, to be against theory per se is to be against inquiry into heuristic posits regarding the institutional and individual causes of alterable forms of human misery and human suffering, just as uncritical allegiance to grand theories can blind one from seeing and examining kinds of human oppression. Therefore I adopt strategic attitudes toward the use and deployment of theory, a position more charitable toward grand theory than are the ultratheorists and more suspicious of grand theory than are the grand theorists themselves. (West 1991, 36)

The subversive worldliness of West’s thinking marks pragmatism as a discursive space in which theory is given the possibility of attacking nondiscursive operations of power and in which it thus contributes to the development of effective oppositional strategies and tactics. In contrast to Rorty and Fish, it seems, West does not ignore those nondiscursive operations of power (“such as modes of production, state apparatuses, and bureaucratic institutions” (West 1989, 209)). He is too much influenced by Lukács and above all Gramsci to forget about the demands of a philosophy of praxis. Here it would be interesting to ask whether Said would have agreed with West as far as those nondiscursive operations of power are concerned. If one recalls Foucault’s influence on Said, primarily in Orientalism, one might advance the argument that such a notion of nondiscursivity would have been problematized by the latter. Due to limitations of space, however, this question cannot be discussed in this article. The last sentences of his article “The Limits of Neopragmatism” nicely summarize West’s warnings and hopes with regard to contemporary versions of pragmatism:
The tradition of pragmatism is in need of a mode of cultural criticism that keeps track of social misery, solicits and channels moral outrage to alleviate it and projects a future in which the potentialities of ordinary people flourish and flower. The first wave of pragmatism foundered on the rocks of cultural conservatism and corporate liberalism. Its defeat was tragic. Let us not permit the second wave of pragmatism to end as farce. (West 1990, 187)

Especially West’s 1980s texts were governed by the attempt to mediate between pragmatism, progressive Marxism, and prophetic Christian thought. Fearing reductionism, premature closure, and intellectual stasis, West showed that leftist theory had to be dialogical, experimental, nondogmatic, and open to changes of purpose and direction. As a neopragmatist, West knows very well that dogmatic and monologic (leftist) theory will never be capable of adequately understanding and conceptually grasping the contingency and historicity of our lives, the fragility of human constructs in general, and the multilayered complexity of our narratives and vocabularies. You need many tools to do this. In the new preface to the twentieth anniversary edition of *Prophesy Deliverance!*, West states that his “self-styled allegiance to American pragmatism and American jazz is first and foremost a commitment to polyphonic inquiry and improvisational conversation.” He also underscores that the centrality of dialogue in his texts has always put “a premium on imaginative narratives and dynamic stories that connect subversive memories and inseparable traditions to lived experiences” (West 2002, 8). In the introduction to *The Cornel West Reader*, the mediator, as a storyteller, describes himself as a genuinely modern thinker who “weave[s] disparate narratives in ways that result in novel forms of self-exploration and self-experimentation” (West 1999, xvii). There is indeed a jazz-like quality to the polyphony of voices in West’s texts. He wants to organize, or orchestrate, these varied groups/voices so that they all strive after the goal of a multiracial creative democracy. As far as the crucial question of mediation is concerned, it seems that West’s insights are somewhat more fruitful than Said’s. It does not seem far-fetched to maintain that Said never showed a profound interest in the use of the conceptual instrument of mediation. One reason for this is surely his critical attitude toward Marxism. Another could be that he associated mediation with the process of Hegelian sublation and hence with theoretical closure and system-building. This apparent lack of mediation is one of the central weaknesses of the Saidian theoretical framework. Many elements of his theoretical approach, and this has been repeatedly pointed out, had to remain unmediated.

3. Conclusion

It should have become clear in this article that both versions of worldly criticism, Edward Said’s as well as Cornel West’s, are still valuable and useful with regard to contemporary left theory. Although West turned into a tame defender of American liberalism in the late 1990s (see West and Unger, *The Future of American Progressivism: An Initiative for Political and Economic Reform*, 1998),
he went further in his thinking than Said in the 1980s. This is due to the fact that as a thinker influenced by pragmatism and postanalytic philosophy, he understood the lessons of antifoundationalism, antirepresentationalism, and antirealism, yet at the same time felt the necessity of propagating the idea of a worldly and oppositional criticism. To put this somewhat differently, in his best texts West demonstrates the power and complexity of an antifoundationalist worldly and oppositional criticism. Both Said and West have underlined on several occasions that their worldly criticism is strongly opposed to theoretical closure.

Although the Lukácsian West, in contrast to most of today’s non-Marxist theorists, is not willing to radically reject the concept of totality and still has use for a modified understanding of totality, he insists at the same time that his synthesis of various theoretical approaches must not be seen as a gesture of Hegelian closure. Rather, he prefers to speak of “an articulated assemblage of analytical outlooks” which furthers “more morally principled and politically effective forms of action to ameliorate the plight of the wretched of the earth” (West 1991, 36). The term ‘bricolage’ could be applied to this assemblage if it did not sound a bit too playful. Because we have to realize what we are talking about here – the Westian discursive space where mediation acts is “a dramatic site of dialogical contestations and clashing narratives over which blood, sweat, and tears flow” (West 2001, 352). As a Chekhovian Christian, a Pascalian, and a Kierkegaardian, West’s attempt at mediation is not only a conceptual, theoretical, and political, but also a deeply existential gesture.

Mediation in West’s thought is dialogical, experimental, open-ended, and future-oriented. Further, it is a precarious, constantly endangered, and provisional theoretical endeavor. Mediation in West, in other words, is a genuinely American theoretical activity. In contrast to Jameson, who is a master of mediation but who is also a strong Hegelian, West, it seems, shows us the power of American mediations. To be American, following West,

is to be part of a dialogical and democratic operation that grapples with the challenge of being human in an open-ended and experimental manner. Although America is a romantic project in which a paradise, a land of dreams, is fanned and fueled with a religion of vast possibility, it is, more fundamentally, a fragile experiment – precious yet precarious – of dialogical and democratic human endeavor that yields forms of modern self-making and self-creating unprecedented in human history. (West 1999, xviii)

Clearly, this comes close to another version of American exceptionalism. However, West never forgets the dark side of (American) modernity, his vision is a tragic one. But, at the same time, he demonstrates that conceptual mediation between different theories is a crucial component of this fragile experiment which centers on the ideas of self-making, self-creation, self-experimentation, and self-transformation. West does not stop there since his ultimate goal is the establishment of an Emersonian creative democracy. Hence, his ultimate concerns are communal concerns. If one is not willing to accept a neopragmatist radical dismissal of theory, in its Fishian version or in the form of Rorty’s private-public split which consigns theory to the realm of our private idiosyncratic fantasies (e.g., the ‘En-
vois’ section of Derrida’s *The Post Card*), one could argue with Said and West that leftist theory is still of central importance in the attempt to achieve this goal of a creative and multiracial democracy. The idea of an antifoundationalist worldly criticism will hopefully play a crucial role in this endeavor in the future.

**Works Cited**


