

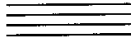
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Introduction: Approaches to Ethical Politics

**E**thical politics is neither a field nor a trend within scholarship. It is, rather, a focal point around which diverse modes of inquiry that are breaking with poststructuralism and cultural studies now tend to coalesce. It is the point where republicanism, socialism, communitarianism, feminism, and multiculturalism, as well as theories of the polis, civil society, public virtue, and the law, converge when they abandon negative hermeneutics and its denunciation of secularism, to take a worldly interest in ethical questions of justice and governance. What is ethical about these questions is precisely their constructive emphasis on *ethos*—the autonomous and collective constitution of a polity based on local, shared, and negotiable democratic values and practices. Viewed in this light, the most comprehensive expression of ethical conduct in a republic is citizenship.

Given this grid of ethico-political directions, when the editor of *SAQ* read my “Nomoscopic Analysis” (included here) and invited me to guest-edit a special issue based on its main ideas, I had a much better sense of the audience for such an issue than of its pool of prospective

writers. Thus I could not set out to cover an existing domain by including representative voices. Instead, I had to seek contributors whose work, regardless of period and provenance, exemplifies the best and most wide-ranging possibilities for this kind of inquiry. I began approaching colleagues in late 1994 with the following statement of purpose.



Over the last few years it has been increasingly acknowledged that identity politics has led interpretative research in the human and social sciences (not to mention debates in the public domain) to a dead end. The hope that the turn from an analysis of texts, events, lives, and facts to the study of culture would revitalize fields such as language and literature, history, sociology, or anthropology was only partially fulfilled. In the end, cultural studies, with its exclusive focus on identity and its representations, created a widespread sense of weariness or fatigue as a new generation of scholars specialized in competing narratives of suffering and resistance.

One reaction to the impasse of this particularism is the segregationist stance, determined to protect the interests of its own minority at all costs. Another is the postmodern emphasis on multiple identities—developed at the crosscurrents of oceans and the crossing posts of borders—that refuse singular categorization. However, in both cases the primary concern is still with subject positions and identity formation as well as their accompanying themes of oppression and redemption.

It seems that in order to overcome the monotony of cultural politics we need not a different approach to identity, be it essentialist or interstitial, but a historicist comprehension of its institutional, especially its legal, logic. Interest in identity has long been motivated by a strong attachment to group rights. The poststructuralist thematization of activism is predicated on the hypostatization of otherness and the pursuit of warrants for collective identity. The sense of exhaustion has been caused by the fragmentation of mass alliances and the proliferation of collectivities insisting on ever-expanding lists of rights for marginalized texts, canons, voices, diets, bodies, faiths, languages, practices, or communities. The current pursuit of social empowerment through judicial avenues is based on a formalist view more dedicated to compensatory benefits and advantages than to civil and political rights, the public good, or civic virtue.

It is conceivable, though, that the best interests (in fairness, equality,

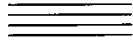
power, or ethics) of the recent ethnographic turn of theory to the study of minority cultures can be combined in a different configuration. The principle that cuts across these interests and gives them their ethical force is the latent idea of political justice. If we take identity and the narratives of victimization away from their engagement with discrimination and compensatory natural rights, we see that the ultimate commitment of theory belongs to the idea of justice as the reinstatement of proportional reciprocity when there are demands for representative apportioning.

In a remarkable convergence, many strands of recent European and American philosophy and political theory (the late Foucault, Derrida, Castoriadis, Lyotard, Habermas, Heller, MacIntyre, Rawls, Williams, Walzer, Mouffe, Nussbaum, Benhabib) seem to pursue an ethical inquiry into politics. Parallel trends can also be noticed in other areas, such as legal feminism and development economics. Cultural studies has not become interested in these rich investigations yet, but can orient itself toward ethical politics by adding to its ethnographic pursuits a topic which literary humanities has neglected for a very long time: the issue of governance.

Because of its fascination with the resistance practices of the new social movements and cultural communities, theory has basked in its ascetic morals and utopian projects while exhibiting a marked aversion toward questions of authority. However, an affirmative politics of citizenship and engagement requires a return to the oldest philosophical question, that of the openly self-governed community: How should we run our society? What values should we share, and what laws should we make? And how should we adjudicate among the competing principles of legitimacy, freedom, and conduct? Thus the commitment of theory to justice and civil rights can be extended to the ethical foundations of constitutional thought and public life. Literature of any period, place, or language is a vast repository of human experience which deserves intense exploration as we begin a new search for these foundations.

For a special issue of the *South Atlantic Quarterly* on ethical politics, we are interested in papers exploring the potential contribution of literary studies to a constructive analysis of political organization—papers which promote ethical values in a citizens' state through the analysis of poetry, fiction, theater, and related genres. We are not looking for deconstructions of representation or critiques of domination but for proposals of new laws, procedures, principles, or charters which can make for a more accountable

conduct of rule and a more equitable order of law. We are seeking literary scholarship which, drawing on criteria of virtue, purpose, and merit, deploys political ethics to examine how law and governance can serve justice. Such an approach could ultimately help to dissolve the most fateful differentiation of modernity, the separation of the just and the good. It could also give back to literary study the academic centrality and public relevance it has lost since the bankruptcy of the aesthetic ideology.



The essays collected here take up this challenge in a great variety of interesting, learned, productive, and sometimes complementary ways. They all have a basic starting or reference point in literature (e.g., lyric poetry, novel or novella, tragedy or comedy), but each expands into a broader domain, such as ethics, aesthetics, hermeneutics, law, statecraft, or warfare. They deal with political regimes as diverse as ancient and modern democracy, monarchy, communism, and the republic. They examine such constitutional matters as sovereignty, reason of state, the people, citizenship, freedom, violence, and revolution. Finally, they investigate the private and public morality of character, virtue, survival, resistance, recognition, and discourse, with questions of moral value and political autonomy looming large everywhere.

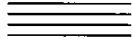
Had contributions been solicited from philosophers and political theorists, the task of putting together this issue would have been much easier. For some time now, tremendous work of great variety and high quality has been produced within the broader areas of ethics and politics beyond academic disciplines and specialized journals. My primary goal, however, was to find literary scholars who were also interested in moral theory and autonomy projects. I proposed that contributors establish an explicit, though quite flexible, literary starting point, if not a frame of reference, in order to counter the overwhelming enchantment of cultural studies with paraliterary forms of low culture from soaps to advertising. At the same time, I encouraged them to attempt the most demanding task, especially for literary scholars, of putting aside aesthetic understanding, that is, close, intrinsically interpretative readings. I made a point to exclude protest writing which substitutes experience for argument and draws its moral strength from other people's immoral actions. Thus the essays included here look

at the ethico-political work, rather than the artistic nature or cultural production, of what is commonly understood as literary writing.

Another task that these essays fulfill in many promising ways is to provide representative examples of analysis and indicate avenues of inquiry. Instead of creating a self-contained method or offering a model for instant adoption, they outline and exemplify a set of questions that may be raised in a study of ethical politics. Thus the issue as a whole does not constitute a survey of a given field or a manifesto for a new trend. It is much more tentative and provisional, content to express a strong discomfort with the present state of humanistic scholarship, sometimes examining its sources but more often providing glimpses of an entirely different agenda. The consensus seems to be that this is all that can be done for now. There is indeed a limit on this inquiry which all the contributors, more or less reluctantly, seem to acknowledge. I am referring to a kind of scholarship that would be directly and explicitly edifying, in that it would offer practical suggestions about the constitution, principles, values, rules, and institutions of a democratic ethical politics. Such suggestions about the regimes we should build and the laws we should make emanate these days from both conservative and progressive academic factions (such as the law and economics movement, on the one hand, and critical race studies, on the other). Literary and cultural studies, however, together with all the other interpretative and historicist disciplines, still find it quite impossible (and almost unconscionable) to engage actively with issues of governance. In these Hellenistic times, one might say, academic intellectuals—whether of a Cynic, Epicurean, or Stoic disposition—are still devoted to the practices of critique that condemn the decline of political culture but at the same time keep these intellectuals outside of the life of the polis, thus further contributing to the erosion of its values and institutions.

Nevertheless, it seems clear in the 1990s that ethical politics is going to continue exerting a strong influence on several disciplines and fields. In an era when the party politics of the 1950s is not just corrupt but bankrupt, when the social politics of the 1960s has become fragmented in separatist communities of interest and advocacy, and when the cultural politics of the 1980s has witnessed the collapse of both the Communist empire and the welfare state without giving rise to any alternatives, a politics endeavoring to integrate the achievements of emancipatory radicalism into a civic

ethics that has shed its antinomian legacy may represent the best democratic option for the future of public engagement. To that end, ethics can contribute a renewed sense of merit, virtue, and responsibility driven by the ideals of self-governance in a citizens' polity.



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