
JOHN RAWLS AND JEAN-FRANÇOIS LYOTARD ON PLURALISM: THEMES OF CONVERGENCE AND DIVERGENCE

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The subject of this article is pluralism as spelled out in the social theories of John Rawls of the USA and Jean Lyotard of France. Despite their differing perspectives, these prominent social thinkers of our time share some similar views on the issue of pluralism. Both contend that contemporary societies are inherently pluralistic because they are characterized by the proliferation of incommensurable narratives/doctrines. Rawls considers pluralism as the positive outcome of the expansion of civil society; Lyotard, on the other hand, aligns pluralism with the demise of grand narratives that he believes hopelessly suffer from the problems of overextension. Moreover, both insist that it is equally wrong to assume the possibility of an overarching paradigm that acts as the politics of all and sundry. These remarks are interesting in light of the fact that Rawls and Lyotard belong to two distinct intellectual traditions. Whereas Rawls adheres to liberalism in its political form, Lyotard adopts a postmodernist stance on politics. Rawls, from a postmodern perspective, is paradigmatic of modernism in its social and political manifestations. Lyotard, in contrast, is opposed to the Enlightenment project—a project at the hubs of which are the themes of synchronization and progress.

However, although their theories converge on the subject of consensus and pluralism, they have also made diametrically opposite observations. While Rawls is of the opinion that an “overlapping consensus,” above and beyond comprehensive doctrines, is possible, Lyotard considers any form of consensus as

obsolete at best and dangerous at worst. Consensus, according to Lyotard, is suspect and outmoded because it can but be a tool of authorities. Rawls, on the other hand, believes that an overlapping consensus that is not premised on any of the existing doctrines is one of the ways by which contemporary societies can address the problem of social stability. Hence, whereas Rawls adhering to a *continuum hypothesis* contends the need for crowning pluralism with an overlapping consensus, Lyotard, on the basis of a *break-in-continuity thesis*, insists that the rupture between pluralism and consensus is concluded and the same process marks the postmodern condition.

Interestingly enough, both Lyotard and Rawls have Immanuel Kant, the German philosopher, as their intellectual hero. Certainly, from a Lyotardian perspective, Kant's social theory meets the measures of a grand narrative. Yet in Kant (especially his *Critique of Pure Judgment*), Lyotard sees the intellectual foundation for the fundamental themes of the postmodern perspective (See Piche, 1992; Clarke, 1994). Like Kant's notion of aesthetic appreciation in which the singularity of the subject of contemplation prevails, under contemporary societies characterized by radical pluralism, judgments are made without pre-existing criteria. Besides, Kant's compartmentalization of epistemology, ethics, and aesthetics is suggestive of the incommensurability of narratives. Thus, in the absence of pre-existing criteria and the incommensurability of narratives, the political will to consensus, according to Lyotard, has become suspect. Rawls, on the other hand, heavily relied on Kant's theory of morality and politics. Indeed, his "*Theory of Justice*" is, among other things, intended to refute the utilitarian position on morality. Yet the new political liberalism of Rawls is not grounded in the axiological arguments of Kant, although the themes of the latter might be in congruence with the thesis of the former. Rather, Kant's social theory is considered merely as one of the contending comprehensive doctrines in contemporary societies.

In light of the foregoing annotations, an examination of Rawls' and Lyotard' positions on pluralism is worth pursuing. Accordingly, the objective of this article is, by way of critical exegesis, to review the areas of intersection and variation implicitly or explicitly stated in the arguments of both contemporary social theorists. The presentation is formatted as follows: I will first offer a bird's eye survey of Rawls and Lyotard's social theory as presented in their major works (Lyotard, 1984; Rawls, 1996). This is followed by a critical discussion of themes of convergence and divergence regarding their views of pluralism. Finally, focusing on the subject of social stability I will conclude by making some remarks on their treatment of the subject under discussion. Here the relative worth of the arguments of Rawls and Lyotard will be noted.

JOHN RAWLS' POLITICAL LIBERALISM

Political liberalism, as recently spelled out by John Rawls (1993/1996 [herein-under (Rawls, 1996)]), embodies a host of concepts including reasonable pluralism, overlapping consensus, burdens of judgment, public reason, and political constructivism. These concepts are intended to deal with one of the problems of social theory: the problem of social stability. This problem, Rawls believes, although an important problem in its own right, has not been given adequate attention by social thinkers. Even Rawls acknowledges that he too has paid little attention to the problem in his earlier work, *Theory of Justice* (Rawls, 1971).

The contemporary world as we know it today, according to Rawls, is characterized by a multitude of incommensurable comprehensive doctrines that exist side by side. Their comprehensiveness resides in providing a general conception of life. "A doctrine is fully comprehensive when it covers all recognized values and virtues within one rather precisely articulated scheme of thought ... " (Rawls, 1996: 175). Those that are partially comprehensive are less coherent and deal with nonpolitical values and virtues inexhaustibly. The realities of the modern condition have also

shown that none of the fully comprehensive doctrines can attain the status of an all-embracing meta-doctrine. Insofar as each doctrine defends its substantive arguments on the basis of distinctive epistemological grounds, it is inconceivable to imagine a narrative space in which all doctrines are synthesized in a totalized moment. In fact comprehensive doctrines that claim universality can but “become oppressive and stifling” (Rawls, 1996: 4). Rawls is suggesting here that the proliferation of multiple religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines is *not* a catastrophe that people of the modern world have to be apprehensive about. This pluralism is the natural extension of the full exercise of human reason, “the characteristic work of practical reason over time under enduring free institutions” (Rawls, 1996: 135). Indeed, pluralism is a condition that prevails in democratic societies; it is not a mere historical accident that will phase out over time. Democratic societies cannot dissociate themselves from the state of pluralism unless they degenerate into some form of totalitarianism. The degree of a democratic society, accordingly, is, among other things, measured by the extent of pluralism it allows.

Considering pluralism and seeking a “remedy” in the light of an overarching doctrine may appear as the best alternative. This approach is unsound because the overarching doctrine itself becomes one among existing rival comprehensive doctrines. The mere addition of another doctrine does contribute to the problem rather than resolving it. If one insists on an overarching doctrine, rule by force becomes the order of the day. “If we think of political society as a community united in affirming one and the same comprehensive doctrine, then the oppressive use of state power is necessary for political community” (Rawls, 1996: 37). Without the sanctions of state power no comprehensive doctrine, however judicious and coherent, can win in maintaining itself as a unifying element of society. Transcending pluralism is, thus, both futile and dangerous.

Besides, even under conditions where each comprehensive doctrine is allowed to assert itself, there are causes or sources that lead to reasonable disagreements among individuals upholding them. This is not merely because people are irrational or have different interests. Even without these simple explanations, according to Rawls, there are burdens of judgment that lead to disagreements. Burdens of judgment are “hazards” that individuals face in their ordinary political life while they attempt to make reasonable and rational decisions. These hazards could prevail, for instance, when the existing evidence is so intricate that it is hard to make an easy assessment, or, when the normative dimensions of an issue are equally sound as a result of which making a decision becomes difficult. Hence, in so far as pluralism is an inherent attribute of democratic societies, considering it as a problem and thereby thinking in terms of “remedy” is logically flawed at worst and unfair at best.

Given the permanent nature of the fact of pluralism in democratic societies, a pivotal issue that needs to be addressed is how a “well-ordered society,” a society based on the mutual consent of its members, is possible? Rawls formulates the problem thus: “How is it possible that there may exist over time a stable and just society of free and equal citizens profoundly divided by reasonable though incompatible religious, moral and philosophical doctrines?” (Rawls, 1996: xviii). A political theory, as mentioned earlier, premised on a single comprehensive doctrine falls short of a reliable solution, for it becomes a doctrine unto itself rivaling other doctrines. Hence, Rawls addressed the issue from a double-pronged perspective. On the one hand, the existence of multiple doctrines is not considered as a problem; that is, the proliferation of doctrines is to be respected. Yet, civil society is not to be based on any of these comprehensive doctrines. The basic principles of civil society, thus, become less philosophical, and more political. In this sense, Rawls’ political liberalism follows a “discontinuous strategy” (Jones, 1995). That is to say, Rawls is here spelling out a political conception of liberalism that is independent of the

principles and conceptions of the good that comprehensive doctrines espouse. Whether Rawls has succeeded in attaining this goal remains to be seen.

The political nature of the basic principles of civil society resides in three notions. First, they deal with the “basic structure of society,” comprising economic, political and social institutions. For instance, they are not “intended for much or all of our conduct,” including “benevolence, courage, charity, or prudence” (Baier, 1989: 772). Second, they are “freestanding” in the sense of being independent of individual doctrines, without, of course, taking up the task of critically evaluating other doctrines. It is possible, however, that members of civil society could find continuity between their comprehensive doctrines and political liberalism, although this is not a necessary condition for the existence of a stable society. Finally, the source of these principles resides in the public culture of a democratic society. According to Rawls, democratic societies have over time adopted a principle of tolerance by which most of its members abide. These characteristics, by and large, give the public ample ground to accept that the prevailing political society, which is premised on a non-committed political theory, is legitimate. However, it must be noted that in a well-ordered society all comprehensive doctrines are not reasonable. The salient features of reasonable comprehensive doctrines include: the religious, philosophical, and moral dimensions of life are articulated in a coherent manner; they are an exercise of practical reason in the sense of offering a balanced presentation of values and identifying the most important ones; they are relatively stable; finally, no reasonable doctrine tries to impose its principles on others by force (Rawls, 1996: 59-61). Thus, what makes reasonable doctrines reasonable is that they do not reject the essentials of a democratic regime. By contrast, unreasonable (or mad) doctrines fail to abide by the principles of fair terms of cooperation, and are interested in imposing their dictums as the truth of all and sundry, rather than being tolerant of other doctrines.

Although political liberalism is a freestanding political conception, its principles may contradict the principles of a comprehensive doctrine and the conflict thereof may lead to instability. Rawls, accordingly, suggests the idea of an “overlapping consensus” as a way out to the problems that society may face in this respect. An overlapping consensus is fair in relation to the active members of political society and not to the contending comprehensive doctrines. That is to say, an overlapping consensus is not intended to strike a balance between comprehensive doctrines. On the contrary, it is based on a “pro tanto justification of the political conception” (Rawls, 1996: 386), that is, a justification which stands independent of comprehensive doctrines (Beem, 1998). However, an overlapping consensus may be congruent with the existing comprehensive doctrines, or at least not in conflict with them.

Another question that deserves attention is how the basic principles of political liberalism are to be executed. This takes us to the concept of public reason. Public reason, which includes “substantive concepts of justice” and “guidelines of inquiry” (Rawls, 1996: 224), is one of the salient features of a democratic society. In non-democratic societies, the public has a minimal role in deciding on issues pertaining to the good of society; the role of rulers takes precedence over the participation of the rank and file. In democratic societies public reason is public for three reasons: “it is the reason of the public; its subject is the good of the public and matters of fundamental justice; and its nature and content is public, being given by the ideals and principles expressed by society’s conception of political justice, and conducted open to view on that basis” (Rawls, 1996: 213). Hence, in deciding on matters of grave importance to society comprehensive doctrines are not consulted; rather the public is the ultimate decision-maker. This, however, does not preclude the possibility that the use of public reason may be congruent with some of the contents of (at least some) comprehensive doctrines. Rawls makes this clear in his discussion of religious and political ideas and their use by the abolitionists and Martin Luther King respectively (Rawls, 1996:

249-250). The religious basis of abolitionism is clear, although its adherents justified their cause by means of political values and considerations. Likewise, while Martin Luther King's underlying values were religious by nature, they were also in accord with constitutional values and public reason.

Public reason, however, is not the only form of discourse that prevails in democratic societies. In these societies, there are non-public reasons (one public reason but many non-public reasons) as well. Among the areas where non-public reasons prevail include associations and organizations like churches and universities, scientific societies and professional groups (Rawls, 1996: 220). Also, the personal lives of citizens are dominated by nonpublic reasons, which in most cases are extensions of their comprehensive doctrines and the principles of the associations to which they belong. Citizens, however, are expected to confine their nonpublic reasons within the framework of the nonpublic domain. In matters of voting, for instance, they will use their public reason; otherwise, the fabric of political society will be disturbed, for failure to do so amounts to violating the liberal principles of legitimacy.

Moreover, the principles of political liberalism are not handed out to members of a well-ordered society as absolute principles. Rather, they emanate from the rational deliberation regarding the requisite issues that members encounter in their society. Furthermore, the principles of political liberalism are "transcendental," because they deal with the problems of what ought to be rather than merely giving an account of what is. Hence, the fundamental principles that regulate the basic structures of society are constructed instead of being discovered as ready-made principles. In all of these processes, what is at stake is not truth but reasonableness. The former entails reliance on one or more existing comprehensive doctrine/s, in the latter the fair terms of social cooperation are sought.

JEAN-FRANÇOIS LYOTARD AND THE POSTMODERN CONDITION

An explicit view of Lyotard's perspective is found in his 1979/1984 book [herein under (Lyotard, 1984)], *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. In this book, among other things, Lyotard offers, "a plausible account of the directionality of history" (Browning, 2000: 21). Accordingly, Lyotard is primarily interested in the developments that took place in contemporary western societies, in post-industrial societies where the computerization process has gained prominence. Lyotard, however, explicitly states that the postmodern world is not postcapitalist. He believes that still the development of technology and knowledge is closely knit with "the flow of money" (Lyotard, 1984:6). Moreover, unlike other postmodernists such as Jean Baudrillard (1994) who make a sharp distinction between the pre-modern, the modern, and the post-modern, Lyotard does not believe in a complete rupture between the modern and the postmodern. With him, the postmodern is the process of re-inscribing the fundamental assumptions of the modern, most importantly "modernity's claim to ground its legitimacy on the project of liberating humanity as a whole through science and technology" (Lyotard, 1991: 34).

The status of knowledge under the postmodern condition is one of the major questions of interest to Lyotard. Knowledge, according to him, since the end of the 1950s has attained a new form as societies and their cultures enter "the postmodern age" (Lyotard, 1984: 3). In this age, the characteristics of knowledge has changed to the extent that it has lost its, to use Marx's expression, "use value." Knowledge is now a means to an end. The instrumental value of knowledge has outweighed the idea of having knowledge as an end in itself. In the postmodern world, the content of knowledge is also different from the type of knowledge that we have under modernity. Modernity is characterized by its "explicit appeal to some grand narrative such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or

working subject, or the creation of wealth” (Lyotard, 1984: xxiii). Modernity, thus, has been the age of grand narratives. The “nostalgia of the whole and the one” (Lyotard, 1984: 81) is what defines grand narratives. That is to say, grand narratives are intended to give a totalizing account of the subject matter with which they are concerned. Often, a phenomenon that involves an intricate process is reduced to a single cause believed to be pivotal. What is more, grand narratives because of their disregard for differences lay the ground for a totalitarian social system. To the extent that they silence multiple voices in favor of a single voice, grand-narratives are terroristic by nature.

In the modern world, according to Lyotard, Functionalism and Critical Theory are the two “modernist epistemes” (Benhabib, 1992) that have exerted the greatest mark on social theory. Functionalism, especially as spelled out by sociologist Talcott Parsons, conceives of society as a self-regulating system within which functional and dysfunctional processes play the role of integration and disintegration respectively. Critical theory, on the other hand, rests on the principle of dualism. This dualistic orientation, for instance, is inherent in Marx’s notion of class struggle, a notion premised on the dialectics of opposites. Originally, Critical Theory, in its Neo-Marxist form, emerged as a reaction to “the processes of capitalism’s encroachment upon traditional civil society” (Lyotard, 1984: 12-13). Over time, however, critical theory has lost its relentless edge and has become a “token protest” poised in defense of higher order principles, viz., Man, Reason, Creativity et al.

The Postmodern, on the other hand, as an emergent episteme is markedly different because of its strict critique of grand narratives. Lyotard, accordingly, defines the postmodern, as “incredulity to metanarratives” (Lyotard, 1984: xxiv). As a result, the game rules for all intellectual ventures have changed; paralogy has replaced homology. Paralogy as the salient feature of postmodern episteme is at variance with the episteme of modernity, which is premised

on the principles of homogeneity, consensus, and efficiency. Paralogy, in comparison, favors pluralism and heterodoxy. From this perspective, the postmodern narrative “is not simply a tool of authorities,” rather, “it refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable” (Lyotard, 1984: xxv). The importance of paralogy, thus, lies both in the political and aesthetic sense of the word. Aesthetically, it augments our inventiveness, for it is in dissent that the free play of multiple narratives is made possible. Politically, it makes us tolerant of other narratives, narratives that we need not necessarily endorse.

Hence, postmodern knowledge allows us not only to recognize multiple discourses, but it also augments our sensitivity concerning the incommensurable nature of narratives. Each discourse involves a language game wherein sets of rules operate. In so far as they abide by their respective rules, language games do not intersect. None of these language games, however, occupies a privileged status. Lyotard insists that there is nothing we can do to this “discursive species” (Lyotard, 1984:26) of language games but look in wonderment. To seek consensus would be to violate the incommensurable nature of language games. Indeed, “consensus” can only be possible when one of the language games asserts a privileged status at the expense of others. Consensus, thus, can be no more than situational and provisional, “any consensus on the rules defining a game and the ‘moves’ playable within it must be local, in other words agreed on by its present players and subject to eventual cancellation” (Lyotard, 1984: 66). In this sense, consensus cannot be an end, it is rather a moment in a state of discourse. Lyotard, accordingly, prefers “little narratives” (Lyotard, 1984: 60) to narratives with a wide-encompassing ambition. These little narratives are bound to their own local “discursive rules” and their “evaluative logic” is less epistemic and more social (McLennan, 1989: 76; See also Lyotard, 1988).

In the light of the foregoing discussion, an important issue that deserves consideration is the problem of the relationship between

self and society. The demise of grand narratives seems to suggest that society is disintegrating into “a mass of individual atoms thrown into the absurdity of Brownian motion” (Lyotard, 1984: 15). However, according to Lyotard, this is not what is happening in the postmodern world. The role of the self has changed, but there is nothing that suggests that its demise is imminent. The self has now become an intersection in the language games that it partakes in. The self, therefore, is not an entity existing unto itself; rather its existence is bound up with the intricate social interaction within which it exists. “A *self* does not amount to much, but no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before” (Lyotard, 1984:15). In essence, Lyotard’s view of the self as an intersection of language games is similar to Gadamer’s contention that human experience is effectively linguistic (Rorty, 1982/1997).

The participation of the self in a fabric of relations does not merely involve a smooth process. On the contrary, the self is caught in the midst of struggle and conflict. The utterance that the self makes is a statement in favor of or against what is available within the framework of social interaction. Every move that it makes involves a duel. Lyotard states the matter thus: “the first principle underlying our method as a whole ... [is] to speak is to fight, in the sense of playing and speech acts fall within the domain of a general agonistics” (Lyotard, 1984:10). By and large, Lyotard is opposed to any kind of theoretical system that would reduce the self to a passive agency determined by some form of structure.

Finally, Lyotard’s view of justice under the postmodern condition is worth considering. Lyotard is opposed to the idea of associating the issue of consensus with the practice of justice. Yet he believes that under the postmodern it is possible to have a politics in which the desire for justice and the unknown is honored (Lyotard, 1984:66-67; Smart, 1998). Certainly, within the framework of the postmodern condition, justice could not be based on overarching principles, for that would be at variance with paralogy. Lyotard,

accordingly, speaks of a state or condition in which judgment is made in spite of a benchmark of whatsoever kind. Paganism is the name that Lyotard gave to this process of judging “without criteria” (Lyotard and Thebaud, 1985:16). To the degree that it is characterized by spontaneity and positive transcendence, paganism has an advantage over other frames of understanding (Rojeck, 1998:12). With the paganist frame, judgments are made in spite of considering the reactions that they might bolster. Because it is anti-foundational, paganism also creates a narrative space in which all kinds of thoughts are entertained without limits being set against them. Here, Lyotard’s argument is similar to Immanuel Kant’s view of aesthetic appreciation. Lyotard contends that just as in aesthetic appreciation the individual is confronted by the singularity of the sense data presented to him or her, under the postmodern condition judgments on social issues are made without preexisting rules or doctrines.

THEMES OF CONVERGENCE AND DIVERGENCE

A cursory look at the social thoughts of Rawls and Lyotard may suggest that they can but have little in common. Indeed, if we place social thinkers along a modern-postmodern continuum, on the issue of pluralism these two prominent figures would fall into diametrically opposite ends. To the extent that their similitude is concealed, the underlying assumptions of the social theories of Lyotard and Rawls are at variance with one another. Interestingly enough, on the subject of pluralism Lyotard and Rawls have much in common, especially when we consider the implications of their arguments. The subject of discussion in the following pages, accordingly, will be the points of convergence and divergence in the social thoughts of Rawls and Lyotard.

Themes of Convergence

In both Lyotard’s and Rawls’ social theory pluralism occupies a central place. Pluralism is considered as one of the salient

characteristics of contemporary societies. Lyotard sees postindustrial society as the society of multiple narratives. There is nothing, Lyotard contends, we can do with regard to the proliferation of these narratives except gaze at the process in a manner similar to the observations that we make to animal and plant species. Each narrative, according to Lyotard, abides by a set of rules limited within the framework of the locality that it finds itself. Lyotard is against a narrative that claims universality. All the same, he sets no criteria to determine the range of narratives. This poses a serious problem as a narrative might provide a local account, but might be comprehensive in scope. Its account has certainly implications beyond the subject matter with which it is concerned. Hence, a local narrative could be an aspiring grand doctrine. Similarly, for Rawls, present day societies are marked by their ability to accommodate multiple comprehensive doctrines. The existence of these doctrines is bound up with the democratic institutions of their respective social formations. Under such social systems, the multiplication of doctrines is inevitable as every member is allowed to participate in the exercise of reason within the arrangement of free narrative space.

Hence, Rawls goes further than Lyotard in providing the reasons why pluralism is one of the marks of contemporary societies. An important question can be raised here: If pluralism is the mark of contemporary societies, does it mean that we have entered into a new era, the kind of era that the postmodernists are very much interested in? But Rawls' argument falls short of delineating a distinction between the new and the old historical eras. His discussion is confined within the limits of modernity; yet he champions the need for a new political liberalism commensurate with new developments (Scheffler, 1994). Lyotard by comparison is silent on the issue. Despite his insistence on the incommensurability of narratives, he does not discuss the social causes of pluralism in relation to the developments that have taken place among postindustrial societies. Rather, he places the causes of pluralism within the logic of the new type of understanding. To

the extent that in the postmodern world nothing dramatic has taken place as far as economic relations are concerned, Lyotard focuses on the intellectual transformation from the modern to the postmodern episteme. He thinks that the proliferation of local narratives squares with the nature of postmodern knowledge. This form of emergent understanding has no place for grand narratives because, Lyotard contends, the latter intrinsically suffer from the problems of overextension. The postmodern is the age of mini-narratives. However, Lyotard does not specify how this phenomenon is the unique characteristics of the postmodern. Language games have always existed, unless Lyotard insists that the proliferation of local narratives is an emergent trait of the postmodern condition. Thus, despite his interest in computerized societies, Lyotard's distinction between the modern and postmodern rests on epistemological grounds. His discussion of the developments in the computerized societies is not tied to the implications that it might have in respect to the new discursive formation.

Hence, to the extent that they do not see the day when the age of pluralism will be a bygone, both Rawls and Lyotard acknowledge pluralism as legitimate. Pluralism is not considered as a fly by phenomenon that will die sometime in the future. Once it asserts itself, it remains part of the political culture of the society within which it exists. What is more, Rawls and Lyotard do not see pluralism as a problem. Both see it as a positive good—Rawls, as the inevitable outcome of democratic societies, and Lyotard as the condition of multiple language games. Their perspectives are thus opposed to an assimilationist stance that recommends a single model which all have to follow. The stance against a unified perspective in both cases emanates from their view of narratives/doctrines as incompatible and incommensurate. We can draw from Lyotard's critique of metanarratives that narratives with a grand scope are inherently problematic. Because they are premised on transcending the incommensurability of narratives, grand narratives hopelessly suffer from the problems of overextension. In their

attempt to totalize reality, meta-narratives take a crack at swallowing or at least conferring a subordinate status to other narratives. Each metanarrative endeavors to be an overarching paradigm that would present a unified version of reality. In point of fact, however, according to Lyotard, narratives are set apart without the possibility of reconciliation. Reconciliation, as noted earlier, is dangerous at best and terroristic at worst.

Rawls also sees the incommensurability of doctrines. Each doctrine has its own set of ideas that differentiates it from the others. Reconciling differences that exist between doctrines can not be possible without one of them losing its identity, for one of the contending doctrines has to be sacrificed for the benefit of compatibility. But Rawls differs from Lyotard in recognizing the possibilities of having an overlapping consensus; a consensus based on the commonality of comprehensive doctrines, which at the same time acts as a social condition for the very existence of same doctrines. However, this argument seems to put Rawls' stance in a precarious situation. It is not clear how an overlapping consensus can be epistemologically independent when it is in the nature of comprehensive doctrines, which themselves are epistemologically grounded, to endorse its existence. On the other hand, Lyotard would consider the search for an overlapping consensus as a futile endeavor. Ironically, this is close to how he describes the "self": If the self exists as an intersection of language games, as he claims, it seems that the self is an overlapping consensus of language games. Such a phenomena would keep the self from severe contradiction, incoherence, and fragmentation. Given the role that Lyotard assigns to the self one wonders how language games would be incommensurable. If the movement of the self among language games is possible, it seems that language games are not intellectual monads. Again an equally interesting question is whether the self has been an intersection in language games all the time? If the answer is in the positive, what is the relevance of Lyotard's assertion on the self in light of his position on the new (the postmodern) era?

In both Lyotard and Rawls' theories tolerance occupies an important place. Tolerance is the underlying premise of Rawls' notion of an overlapping consensus. Since comprehensive doctrines are incommensurable, the only way for them to coexist together is by way of accommodation. A comprehensive doctrine, which refuses to respect the conditions of tolerance, violates the requirements of public reason. Citizens who uphold reasonable doctrines may also violate the rules of tolerance when they are carried away by the dictums of their doctrines while making a decision within the realm of politics. That is to say, citizens are expected to refrain from making political decisions solely on the basis of their comprehensive doctrines. Extending ones comprehensive doctrine into the realm of politics disturbs the very principle on which the institutions of a democratic society are founded. Rawls, however, is not contending here that citizens should self-censor themselves for the benefit of stability. Rather he is in favor of the "strategy of engagement" (Macedo, 1995:491); an engagement in which all and sundry are allowed to bring their views reasonably and respectfully. But what guarantee do we have that individuals will detach their political judgments from their respective comprehensive doctrines? Often comprehensive doctrines act as social frames by which social issues are understood (Goffman, 1974). It is not clear how individuals could dissociate themselves from these frames while making political decisions of vital importance to them. Moreover, it may be in the interest of groups to extend their comprehensive doctrines to the realm of politics. Rawls wrongly assumes as though individuals can always make axiologically neutral decisions/judgments.

Lyotard also arrives at the view of tolerance, although his argument has a characteristic of its own. First, according to him, one of the basic attributes of postmodern knowledge is that it cultivates our sense of appreciating differences, and "reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable" (Lyotard, 1984: xxv). Postmodern knowledge thus helps us to understand that differences are not to be overcome; rather they are facts of the postindustrial way of

life. Besides, since language games are governed by a localized set of rules, tolerance of diversity is what is expected of members of society. The incommensurable nature of narratives leaves us to appreciate variety rather than see it as part of a problematic situation that seeks resolution. However, Lyotard does not consider the possibilities of intersection that may arise between language games. Again, in so far as the self is not an isolated entity, there is room to believe that the issue of intersection is worth considering. Indeed, without the possibility of intersection, the self would be constrained in its mobility from one language game to another.

What happens to society in the absence of tolerance? Rawls recognizes that the only way one of the existing doctrines can maintain the status of an overarching doctrine is when the group upholding it uses force. Otherwise, the possibility for one of the doctrines to be the political or philosophical doctrine of society at large is next to impossible. Force is antithetical to the incommensurable nature of doctrines. The option left to us is to seek a social condition wherein the incompatibility of doctrines is respected rather than considering the existence of multiple doctrines as a problem that needs to be transcended. Religious wars, for instance, emanate from this lack of understanding. Lyotard's criticism of metanarratives is also premised on the same assumption. Metanarratives are terroristic because they ultimately rest on getting rid of differences, "silencing of voices". Recognizing differences is inherently against the nature of metanarratives since they prefer to explain everything monolithically. Those who uphold metanarratives as the narrative of all and sundry ultimately resort to force in order to attain their goals. This is because metanarratives speak in terms of "Truth." To speak in terms of "Truth" is to abrogate the possibilities for the existence of other versions of reality, for the latter's position upsets the claims taken for granted by the former. It is worth noting here that Lyotard fails to make a distinction between grand narratives. Grand narratives that claim the whole Truth may not necessarily be engaged in an intellectual terror. It could be in the nature of a

grand narrative to recognize other narratives as legitimate while at the same time claiming that they can provide a total account of major dimensions of social life.

Although both Lyotard and Rawls are in favor of pluralism, there are doctrines/narratives that their theoretical systems do not accommodate. Here their arguments converge in so far as both are interested in safeguarding pluralism from intellectual elements that they believe disturb its existence. Whereas Rawls is against unreasonable doctrines, Lyotard is against metanarratives of all sorts. Unreasonable doctrines are excluded from Rawls' political liberalism because their principles contradict the fair terms of cooperation requisite for a society based on justice as fairness. Unreasonable doctrines are not only intolerant of other doctrines but they also go so far as to get rid of them. From the perspective of the unreasonable, the "other" is absurd and does not deserve a life of its own. This distinction between reasonable and unreasonable doctrines fails to note that doctrines could be unreasonable in the eyes of other doctrines, even if they act under a fair terms of cooperation. Certainly, two accounts of abortion are intended to refute each other's underlying premises; hence each is unreasonable to the other. Likewise, Lyotard's conception of pluralism is also exclusive. Lyotard is against any process that obstructs the development of narratives. All the same, metanarratives are not allowed to enjoy the benefits of such process. Metanarratives are excluded from the realm of discourse because they abrogate the necessary condition for the free play of differences. Little narratives, on the other hand, do not aspire to be transcendental. The postmodern age, accordingly, is the age of little narratives, narratives whose language games are bound to localized sets of principles.

Themes of Divergence

The first thing that comes to mind in considering the points of divergence between Rawls and Lyotard is their views regarding

politics. Whereas Rawls is politically committed, Lyotard is not a politician in the traditional sense of the word. Lyotard's "principles for political action are vague, or even nonexistent, ultimately resulting in the absence of politics at all" (Denzin, 1991:35; See also Hammer, 1997; Drolet, 1994). Hence, Lyotard is not interested in setting normative political principles that would serve as the guideline of civil society. That would mean committing the sins of metanarratives at the basis of which is the notion of totality. If Lyotard has a postmodern position on politics, it is that he is in favor of the flourishing of local narratives. He, therefore, has to abandon politics in so far as it entails judging between "genres" (Jordan, 1995; Lyotard and Thebuad 1985). Yet Lyotard speaks of the possibility of "a politics that would respect both the desire for justice and the desire for the unknown" (Lyotard, 1984: 67). However, he does not make it clear how justice would be possible in the absence of consensus, at least a dynamic/thin one. Besides, his remark on critical theory seems to suggest that he is lamenting the fact that critical theory has lost its discerning edge in the postmodern age. Indeed if the postmodern is not a post-capitalist society, the need for a reasoned political perspective isn't over. But this would violate Lyotard's principle of judging in spite of standards.

Rawls, on the other hand, is very much involved in formulating a political liberalism, which will act as the political program of a democratic society. He even goes to the extent of stating that his political liberalism is more political and less based on nonpolitical features that define comprehensive doctrines. Yet, although interested in a politically based conception of political liberalism, Rawls favors a "thin" political theory as opposed to a "thick" one, that is, one based on a comprehensive doctrine of justice. Whereas comprehensive doctrines have epistemological standards by which they make judgments on truth, beauty, and justice, the new political liberalism of Rawls proceeds without religious, metaphysical and moral doctrines and presents itself as freestanding save only when doctrines violate the basic principles of a democratic society

(Rawls, 1996: 375). Hence, in so far as he insists on a freestanding politics, Rawls' position is antithetical to Lyotard's position on politics. With Lyotard the political is local and hence is always dependent on the cultural logic of a specific language game. Hence, the political with Rawls becomes too abstract and independent of pluralistic perspectives regarding the existence of which Rawls' liberalism is supposed to favor. Besides, Rawls does not provide a plausible argument as to how a freestanding political liberalism would be in a position to make judgments on unreasonable doctrines without relying on a comprehensive doctrine of sorts. Thus, by trying to determine the unreasonableness of doctrines, political liberalism becomes itself one among the many comprehensive doctrines that abound in contemporary societies.

Also, Rawls and Lyotard differ in their views regarding the relationship between pluralism and the nature of contemporary societies. Although both show interest in the industrialized West, Rawls does not, like Lyotard, discuss the problems or the implications of postindustrial developments. The background for his theory is the existence of democratic institutions, and his theory is prompted by the irreversible proliferation of multiple perspectives. Yet the implications that post industrialization may have for these institutions are not considered. He makes a distinction between the ancients and the moderns, but he does not state that a new age has emerged as a result of the transformations that took place after modernity. A postmodernist would easily categorize Rawls' political liberalism as part of the Enlightenment project, specifically as the latest installment on social contract theory. However, although not stated explicitly, Rawls' argument seems to presuppose a new social existence wherein incommensurable doctrines coexist side by side. Lyotard, on the other hand, shows much interest in the implications of postmodern developments that are taking place in the post-industrialized West. Computerized society is the primary focus of his attention. This development, among other things, has brought a change in the status of knowledge. His focus on the status of knowledge has led him

to seriously brood over the nature of knowledge, especially why knowledge has lost its intrinsic value. The importance that Lyotard confers on knowledge is seen in the distinction that he makes between the modern and postmodern on epistemological grounds, in terms of the absence and presence of metanarratives. From Lyotard's perspective the postmodern is the process of rewriting the modern on the basis of everyday and restricted narratives. In so far as the postmodern is premised on a paralogy that encourages dissent and inventiveness, the postmodern era is essentially a pluralist epoch. Despite this compelling remark about the postmodern, it is still not clear how the postmodern constitutes a markedly distinct era. Even Marx has noted that modernity cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing itself (Marx and Engels, 1967). Hence, we can speak of a postmodern society only when the processes of re-inscribing modernity bring a qualitatively distinct social system. Moreover, the process of re-inscribing modernity at least implies the existence of minimal standard to make judgments on relevant issues. Lyotard should have insisted on the need for dynamic and critical standards instead of completely rejecting them.

On the basis of the epistemological distinction that he makes between the modern and the postmodern, Lyotard considered metanarratives as intrinsically problematic. Rawls, on the other hand, does not see a problem if doctrines claim the whole truth, but he is against any comprehensive doctrine that tries to be the political doctrine of society at large. According to him, a political society based on a single comprehensive doctrine will face more challenges than it is in a position to resolve. Nevertheless, Rawls does not see contemporary developments marking the end of meta-narratives. Indeed, his theory is based on recognition of the existence of doctrines, which from a Lyotardian perspective are meta-narratives. If meta-narratives were dead, Rawls' political liberalism would be superfluous. Lyotard, on the other hand, is against any narrative that claims the whole truth even if it does not aspire to be the political doctrine of society at large. It would be

inconsistent to find a metanarrative which is restrictive in its ambitions and explanations of the nature of society or truth. Hence, metanarratives are rejected in toto. “The grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation” (Lyotard, 1984: 37).

Lyotard, therefore, unlike Rawls, does not distinguish between narratives that are politically harmful and those that are not. The distinction rests on those that claim universality and those that are localized. Whereas the later are tolerated, the former are forced to go underground to escape “Lyotard’s Thought Police” (Kellner, 1988: 255). Rawls’ theory, thus, accommodates more metanarratives than Lyotard’s does. As long as they do not violate the fair terms of cooperation, Rawls does not see a problem with metanarratives. Moreover, Rawls is less interested in mini narratives, since they fail to meet the requirements for what he calls fully comprehensive doctrines.

In this interesting distinction between mini/grand narratives and reasonable/unreasonable doctrines we observe areas that deserve reexamination in the arguments of both Rawls and Lyotard. Lyotard completely dismisses all grand narratives in favor of mini narratives. He might insist that mini narratives, in contrast to grand narratives, avoid the problems of overextension, because they are limited in scope. Yet, as noted earlier, the accounts that mini narratives provide have implications for other subject matters about which they may not be directly related, or they may have an underlying philosophy as a background to their accounts—although this may not be explicitly stated. In this sense, mini narratives are potentially grand. Rawls, on the other hand, dismisses partially comprehensive doctrines as of lesser importance. Partially comprehensive doctrines may be limited in scope, yet they might provide an interesting perspective within the bounds of the areas they focus on. For instance, several social movements have abandoned grand narratives in favor of accounts related to the local.

And their success has emanated as a result of this interest in the processes of decentralization.

The major difference between Rawls and Lyotard lies in their views of consensus. Lyotard sees consensus as a never-to-be reached horizon. "Auschwitz," "Solidarity," "May 1968," "The Prague Spring," testify that history is not the outcome of "unifying teleology" (Veerman, 1988: 274). To Lyotard, therefore, consensus can only be reached by violating our sense of heterogeneity and the incommensurable nature of narratives. In addition, Lyotard thinks that consensus is arrived at for the benefit of efficiency, "consensus is a component of the system, which manipulates it in order to maintain and improve its performance" (Lyotard, 1984:60). In essence, Lyotard is here saying no to Rawls' claim that it is possible to have consensus even on a pro tanto basis. Thus, Lyotard is not only rejecting coerced consensus but "unforced consensus" as well, for the latter is a contradiction in terms. In contrast, Rawls insists that the argument in favor of an overlapping consensus is plausible. The basis of an overlapping consensus is the reasonable deliberation of citizens. From Lyotard's perspective, Rawls, via his overlapping consensus, is trying to create, like Habermas, a meta-discourse universally valid for all language games. Habermas himself acknowledges that the difference between his view and that of Rawls is confined within the bounds of "familial dispute" (Habermas, 1995:110; See also Poster, 1992). Both Rawls and Habermas are against the view that under the postmodern condition in most walks of social life permanent institutions are being supplanted by "temporary contracts."

Thus, in light of the issue of the relation between pluralism and consensus, the respective positions of Lyotard and Rawls could be stated thus: Lyotard is in favor of what could be referred to as a *break-in-continuity* view of pluralism and consensus. With him, consensus is obsolete and suspect. From his perspective, if one has to define the postmodern it would be the era of the rupture between pluralism and consensus. Yet he has failed to consistently

adhere to this stance in so far as he acknowledges tolerance as the basis for the coexistence of multiple language games, for tolerance implies at least rudimentary consensus. Rawls, on the other hand, adheres to what could be referred to as the *continuum hypothesis*. He believes that we can have consensus as an extension to pluralism. He maintains that pluralism has to be crowned with an overlapping consensus. From his perspective, in the absence of consensus society would be in disarray. Pluralism thus is inconceivable without consensus. This puts him at loggerheads with Lyotard. Yet in his notion of an overlapping consensus, Rawls has failed to consider the role of power relations in its articulation and construction.

CONCLUSION

The two positions on pluralism held by Rawls and Lyotard reflect their interest/disinterest in dealing with the problem of social stability. The dilemma here is whether the question of social stability is a problem requiring a solution of some kind. In answering this question, we can be in a position to evaluate the comparative worth of the two thinkers and their contributions. The position of Lyotard and Rawls on the issue is clear. Whereas Lyotard, although he does not explicitly state his interest in the subject, prefers social stability to come in spite of consensus; Rawls' political liberalism is intended to offer a satisfactory solution to the problem of social stability. And, as we have seen, in Rawls' political program consensus is at center stage. Lyotard's remark that "[w]e must arrive at an idea and practice of justice that is not linked to that of consensus" (Lyotard, 1984: 66) shows that he is on an entirely different plane.

In regards to Lyotard's statement, one may remark that the outmoded-ness of consensus is highly exaggerated. Consensus at a grand scale may be out of commission and suspect. However, a dynamic consensus (at least at a local level) in which reference is made to agreed principles to settle differences by contending groups

is still a possibility. Where there is a dynamic consensus agreed principles are not unvarying; rather, they are subject to revision when deemed necessary by the parties involved. Yet Lyotard assumes that the death of grand narratives at the same time entails that society has become an arena in which mini narratives reign supreme. The implication of this contention is that society is more likely to be stable with mini narratives than with grand narratives, which, because of their inclination to suppress and dominate, essentially create the reign of terror. It goes without saying that Lyotard is here making an important point regarding group relations. Indeed, the history of many nation-states is replete with policies and assumptions that harbor no place for the politics of difference. Nonetheless, one may point out that Lyotard is oversimplifying the matter for the following reasons. First, mini narratives may not be as terroristic as grand narratives, but there is no guarantee that these narratives would merely confine themselves within the domain of their locality. They may also become terroristic within their sphere, for absolute consensus even within the province of the most restricted is not possible. Moreover, as long as narratives exist within the bounds of a given social context, there will always be a tug of war between different narratives for, among other things, symbolic supremacy. So even within the reign of mini narratives the room for at least “intellectual terrorism” is not completely eliminated. Secondly, despite the claim of Lyotard and other postmodernists there is good reason to believe that metanarratives have not become a bygone, although these narratives, to use Lyotard’s expression, have become outmoded and suspect.

The existence of metanarratives, therefore, puts the issue of social stability at the center stage of contemporary societies, especially in societies marked by the proliferation of multiple perspectives and doctrines. Rawls, therefore, has a sound rationale to suggest that the issue of social stability be of utmost importance in the discourse of maintaining a pluralistic society, a society wherein none of the doctrines involved exercise the upper hand. The issue

of social stability, consequently, is a matter of considerable concern. Rawls' views of an overlapping consensus and public reason are formulated to deal with the problem of legitimate social stability. Indeed, pluralistic societies have to deal with the problem as long as people live under the nation-state. The idea of having an overlapping consensus seems to be a step forward in the process of addressing the problem of social stability. The advantage of having an overlapping consensus is that society is in favor of pluralism while at the same time creating the ground in which multiple doctrines/narratives can coexist peacefully and respectfully (Cohen, 1993). However, this overlapping consensus needs to be dynamic. One of the advantages of a dynamic consensus is that it disallows a single group or few groups from having a disproportionate say in the articulation and construction of consensus. An overlapping dynamic consensus creates the necessary social space wherein individuals/groups are capable of offering their inputs with less restriction.

Consequently, there is an important issue that is not dealt with by Rawls, viz., the role of different groups in the construction and maintenance of an overlapping consensus. The problem is whether all social groups have the same power in the development and maintenance of an overlapping consensus. The answer, of course, on the part of Rawls is in the positive. But this positive answer remains at the theoretical level. In reality, groups do not have only different doctrines, but their power to impose and maintain their versions of reality is markedly different from one another. There is no guarantee, thus, that those who have the economic and intellectual power at their disposal will merely abide by the requirements of reasonableness. There is no doubt that some by virtue of their access to economic, political, and intellectual powers are capable of exerting a disproportionate influence. Rawls mistakenly assumes that all parties will have equal access in the definition of an overlapping consensus. The issue of interpretation of constitutional essentials, for instance, cannot be done on the basis of reasonableness alone. Hence, there has to be a social

mechanism by which the intellectual, political, and economic excesses of the powerful do not extend to the realm of an overlapping consensus.

In conclusion, the criticism against both Lyotard and Rawls briefly stated amounts to this: Whereas Lyotard refuses to deal with the relevance of consensus (when even language games at a local level entail some form of consensus), Rawls has failed to deal with the role of economic and political power in the articulation and construction of an overlapping consensus. Likewise, Lyotard, although he has stated that the postmodern is not a post-capitalist society, seems to ignore the problem under discussion. The role of power in the age of mini narratives is not clearly stated. Yet he talks about how speech is a form of resistance. But this resistance at least presupposes the need for a dynamic consensus in which social issues, including the issue of power, are addressed. Dynamic consensus may not render all forms of resistance meaningless, but it creates the social space for the exercise of different perspectives. Indeed there is no “free play of differences” in so far as power is differentially distributed in society. Hence, considering the fact that power is at the core of social relations, the notion of a dynamic consensus, a consensus renewed at every opportune moment, is a plausible addition in the discussion of the problem of pluralism and social stability. A dynamic consensus, among other things, empowers members of society to engage in their respective social affairs effectively and on an equal basis.

Thus, one can hardly fail to notice how social-political systems are not possible without some form of consensus, at least a thin one—especially given the very existence of nation-states. This observation also holds true at a global level. The methods of the United Nations might be unacceptable, yet its principles are worth pursuing. In this sense, Rawls’ take, although limited in some ways, is worthy of serious consideration. Lyotard’s position, on the other hand, despite its noteworthy merits, as it now stands fails to address issues of pivotal importance to pluralist societies. Hence,

as a point of departure for further discussion, the author of this article believes that the relationship between consensus and pluralism needs to be stated as follows: First, the break-in-continuity view of consensus and pluralism needs to be reexamined. Consensus is a precondition for pluralism. However, it is worth reiterating that consensus needs to be dynamic. The advantage of a dynamic consensus is that it disallows a single group or a few groups from having a disproportionate influence in the articulation and construction of consensus. Dynamic consensus also minimizes the problems that “thick” consensus might entail. By and large, dynamic consensus makes the existence of a transparent social-political arrangement between individuals who have entered into a social contract without coercion. Finally, Lyotard and Rawls need to be commended for rightly accenting the fact that consensus based on a grand narrative or a comprehensive doctrine that claims absolute Truth is dangerous. It does silence multiple voices.

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