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Liberalism and the Problem of Knowledge, A New Rhetoric or Modern Democracy

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to other sociologists of the important work done in this area. Although the book is primarily intended for students, clinical sociologists will be challenged by it to "explore new ways to use their sociological skills in solving problems" (p. *xi*).

Liberalism and the Problem of Knowledge, A New Rhetoric for Modern Democracy, by Charles Arthur Willard. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996. 344 pp. Cloth. $55.00. ISBN 0-226-89845; Paper $17.95. ISBN 0-226-89846-6
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Charles Willard is Chair of the Department of Communication at the University of Louisville. And he is troubled by a pandemic of ethnic and nationalist violence, political tyranny, and what he sees as an inherent problem with liberal political philosophy, particularly its hope in the redemptive powers of an educated public. His solution to this problem is a bold argument for the need to replace the traditional rhetoric of liberalism with one he calls epistemics. It almost works.

Willard draws his inspiration from the work of Richard Rorty who questions attempts to "eternalize" powerful discourses as natural, timeless and beyond history. Privileged ways of talking are, like all human experience, historical and institutional; and no one discourse, to paraphrase Lord Acton, is fit to govern. It is Willard's goal in this book to introduce another, *better*, way of talking about human communities. His idea of better is borrowed from Rorty's evocative claim that knowledge can be thought of as either a reflection of the nature of the world or as a less momentous but perhaps more useful resource to help us cope with reality. Rorty opts for the latter, more pragmatic, view of knowledge. So does Willard.

Liberalism and the Problem of Knowledge is an argument for the political and philosophical inability of liberalism to accommodate the demands of an increasing number of important public issues that require the interplay of complicated arenas of expert knowledge. Contemporary political issues cross many fields of knowledge, but individual expertise can cross only a few. Thus we often face a knotty tangle of knowledge claims that no one person can straighten into a coherent, acceptable rhetoric for political action. The result is a profound sense of chaos. "Any nation that bequeaths its children a nuclear arsenal and ancient clichés to administer it," Willard observes wryly, "deserves the rebellion it gets" (p.23).

A case is made for *epistemics* as a new way of apprehending modern political troubles that should reduce the chances for popular uprisings. Drawing on Geertz, Burke, and Wittgenstein, among others, epistemics is envisioned as a style of thinking that crosses disciplinary boundaries. The focus is not on a particular knowledge, but on the interplay of multiple ways of knowing. Epistemics eschews specialization for hybridization. It is self-consciously heterogeneous. The complexity of a nuclear arsenal nicely illustrates this point. Any reasonable discussion of this issue must include, at a minimum, the expertise of nuclear engineering, nuclear waste management, short and long-term military strategy, managing state secrecy, civil defense, and the contemporary domestic political landscape, not to mention the art of international diplomacy.

To Willard's credit, an emphasis on epistemics does not preclude the participation of the public, or more properly, publics. While it would be too simplistic to see the American public (whatever that means) offering an expert opinion on an issue, it is true that modern social movements are likely to argue in the language of technical expertise to resolve a particular issue: reproductive technology and the women's movement, drug testing and the AIDS movement, toxicology and the environmental health movement, and so on. A particular public can thus become a source of expert knowledge to be added to and considered among the other sources that are necessary to make sense of a complex problem. This neo-Deweyan optimism is a source of concern.

Few people who read this book will agree with all of its twists and turns. What I find disturbing is his almost studied avoidance of the question of power. Foucault is discussed at length, for example, on the issue of critiquing discourses, but his insights into the capacity of powerful organizations to create knowledge that becomes both self-legitimating and controlling are ignored. It is true that complex problems called for multiple ways of knowing, but it is also true that ways of knowing are embedded in organizations and statuses that enjoy unequal access to centers of decision making. A biochemist developing a potentially profitable synthetic banana, for example, is likely to enjoy more access to decision makers than the lower-paid ecologist working in the basement who is tracking hazardous wastes produced in synthetic banana production—assuming the firm hired an ecologist, which is not likely. The power/knowledge issue examined by Foucault, the later Marx, and many of the contemporary post-structuralists, deserves a hearing in Willard's complex argument.

Liberalism and the Problem of Knowledge reminds me of a Hollywood blockbuster movie, with one important exception: It manages to combine dazzling special effects with important and timely substance. While I find the premise of this tale sociologically naive, I both enjoyed and learned from the read.