

**RENZI, KRISTEN L. AN ETHIC OF INNOCENCE: PRAGMATISM, MODERNITY, AND WOMEN'S CHOICE NOT TO KNOW. SUNY, 2019. PP. 298.**

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The epistemologies of the oppressed, including their pragmatist versions, often focus on the knowledge oppressed groups need to produce to pursue their struggles for emancipation. As Axel Honneth (2017) puts it, oppressed groups have an interest in generating knowledge that contributes to denaturalizing hegemonic norms that exclude them from full social participation. Miranda Fricker (2007) has put forward the idea that the oppressed depend on the availability of hermeneutic resources to be able to account for their own experiences of oppression (see also Medina 2013, Serrano Zamora 2021). To this we must add, as Emmanuel Renault (2021) argues drawing on Dewey's notion of inquiry, that social struggles often need to generate knowledge about the causes of oppression as well as about the means to effectively fight against it. In the same line, the Epistemologies of the South argue that oppressed groups have historically suffered from epistemic oppression (including epistemicide), and that we need to re-valuate non-Western and non-male knowledges and methods as part of a larger emancipatory project (Sousa Santos 2014).

Kristin L. Renzi's *Ethic of Innocence: Pragmatism, Modernity, and Women's Choice not to Know* aims at showing that the current focus on knowledge acquisition and production needs to be complemented by a serious consideration of the emancipatory potential of not-knowing. Hence, behind this focus on knowledge of critical and feminist epistemologies seems to hide the assumption that not-knowing corresponds to a lack of agency that is contrary to any emancipatory<sup>1</sup> project. In contrast to this assumption, Renzi's book represents a formidable study of

historical, literary, and other artistic sources around the idea that not-knowing can be an active form of epistemic agency working against oppression.

Renzi's analysis mainly focuses on the concrete forms of ignorance enacted by women representations at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Since in this context women's particular form of experiencing and enacting ignorance corresponded to a "literary conflation between knowing, sexual experience, public-sphere activity, infantilization, and idealized femininity within the Victorian and modern eras," (16) Renzi prefers to use the term "innocence" to talk about women's specific form of ignorance. The idea of an ethic of innocence should then point to the plurality of active ways in which women representations of that time made the choice to display innocence instead of knowledge. Among these ways Renzi includes forgetting, fantasizing, lying, refusing objective reality, and dreaming.

Renzi approaches women's ethic of innocence from the perspective of feminist pragmatism. Drawing on Shannon Sullivan, she argues that pragmatism and feminism can complement each other: while feminism can profit from pragmatism's "emphasis on real life or lived reality, a rejection of a neutral God-like point of view, and an inclusive and collaborative style of thinking, writing, and working" (14), feminism can further pluralize the ways in which pragmatism understands subject positions. The influence of pragmatism becomes particularly clear at least at three different moments of her analysis. First, her analysis of an ethics of innocence as a form of knowledge-practice profits from the central role pragmatism attributes to practices in the production of knowledge (see Renault 2021). This practice-based view makes possible an approach to women's display of innocence as fundamental part of an epistemology of oppression. Secondly, pragmatism influences her understanding of emancipatory project that is at the core of the book. Its central idea is that of creating new realities, for example, by imagining worlds with non-binary sexual division. This understanding is influenced by a Rortyan version of pragmatism. As I aim at showing, by drawing on Rorty, Renzi discards other available understandings

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<sup>1</sup> In her book Renzi does not use the terms "emancipatory" and "emancipation." In my view, this is due to her Rorty-inspired rejection of any positive social ideal situation as the goal of social struggle (see Rorty 2001). Here I will use those terms to refer to any political project of social transformation aiming at the reduction of oppression. Understood in this negative sense, I think Renzi's book can be viewed as contributing to an emancipatory project.

of pragmatism which have a different approach to emancipation. I believe that these available understandings of pragmatism – which, drawing on Honneth, I will call recognitional approaches – can also establish a fruitful dialogue with Renzi's book. Finally, and related to this previous point, Renzi's specific reading of pragmatism also influences her emphasis on the political ambivalence of women's ethic of innocence. Regarding this latter point, Renzi argues that

As such, if theorists or critics have feminist political or social goals in mind, reading the epistemics of innocence – the choice not to know – via a lens of pragmatism may not always work in service of these goals, in part because the pragmatist methodology of innocence this books explores can be used to express not only the human desire to progress forward and imagine differently, but also the very real and pragmatically valid desire to stay put (245).

Renzi's book is divided in two halves. This division is relevant to the extent that in each of the two halves the meaning of women's ethic of innocence for a pragmatist-feminist emancipatory project clearly differs. In the first half, Renzi mainly focuses on literary texts picturing women figures who actively choose not to know as a strategy to cope with their own life circumstances. Central to this first half is that these women do not display innocence with the aim of changing the social conditions that are responsible for these circumstances. The latter case constitutes the object of the second half of the book. Renzi's main aim in the first half is to contradict many hegemonic readings of these texts, including feminist readings, which depict those (represented) women as passive, or even as actively (and irrationally) contributing to their own situation of oppression. In contrast to these readings, Renzi reads various episodes of adoption of an ethics of innocence as the way those women could enhance their agency under serious cultural and structural limitations. Renzi's main message is that we should learn to see those women as active agents looking for their own freedom and/or happiness.

The first chapter of the book has a methodological orientation. More concretely, it draws on the figure of

Jane Addams as a model of how to approach women's ethic of innocence. Renzi's analysis focuses on a relevant episode of Addams' life during her years at the Hull House settlement in Chicago. It concerns the spread of the rumor that the Hull House was home of the Devil's child. This rumor quickly developed into different episodes involving large numbers of people visiting the house to see the child. Among those people were many poor, migrant women from the near neighborhoods, who in their visits also told fantasized stories about their own lives. What mostly interests Renzi is Addams way of dealing with the stories of these women. Hence, she sees Addams as set in a "pragmatist dilemma" concerning the way she should react to women's display of innocence: The dilemma consists in having to accept as valid either modern traditions of rational knowledge or the epistemic alternatives – which correspond to forms of "pre-modern" knowledge – these women enact. According to Renzi, Addams' interesting strategy consists in enduring the tension between these two kinds of knowledge in ways that are particularly productive. Hence, Addams realizes that only through telling fantastic stories belonging to the realm of innocence, women can tell things about their lives they would otherwise be unable to tell.

Regarding the emancipatory function of an ethic of innocence, we can say that Addams was able to understand that, by refusing to know, women can make public aspects of their life that would otherwise remain silenced. I find the claim convincing that we should not quickly dismiss women's voices as passive or self-oppressive, even when they display pre-modern, or non-rational forms of knowledge. However, one can identify an ambivalence in Renzi's analysis that would need further clarification in her book. Hence, it is not clear if Addams' position towards pre-modern knowledge is that of taking it as an alternative, but valuable form of rationality or if she merely attributes to these irrational stories the capacity to convey a rational message that would otherwise remain hidden (i.e., the real stories of these women). If the latter option is the case, one can wonder

if a clear-cut distinction between rational and non-rational/pre-modern knowledge is convincing, at least in some cases. Surely, the case of the Devil's baby women's stories concerns verifiably false fantasies whose irrationality can hardly be doubted. But what about other forms of knowledge, for example, traditional non-western forms knowledge of indigenous peoples? Should our strategy as listeners be to endure "irrational knowledge" to discover a hidden rational message? If this were the case, the possibilities of questioning the validity of our own notion of rational knowledge would be substantially reduced. In other words, as listeners we cannot take the question of the rationality of the other's stories for granted but must also remain open to revise our own understanding of rational knowledge by itself. I am not arguing that Renzi defends the idea of such a clear-cut distinction between rationality and irrationality, however I think that her book and the contribution it can make to an epistemology of the oppressed would benefit from a clarification of these issues

Drawing on several literary sources and different topics such as marriage or domestic violence, the following three chapters focus more directly on the reevaluation of women's choice of not knowing as part of a larger ethic of innocence. As said, Renzi's general point is that a pragmatist feminist project must be able to see the display of innocence of these women not as a form of passivity but as a successful form of active coping with the limited conditions provided by a white male-dominated world. Successful, because through these choices, women are able to preserve something they value like their personal freedom or happiness. In the second chapter, Renzi delves into three women figures depicted in naturalist novels from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In different ways, the figures of "Charity Rola, Maud Marth Brown, and Arway Henson use their performances of innocence in order to preserve and carve out something other than hopelessness for themselves." (100)

In the same line, in the third and fourth chapters, Renzi focuses on naturalist depictions of the cycle of domestic violence. According to her, we are deeply mis-

taken when we ask the following question: Why do so many women stay or return to their husbands even when they are victims of domestic violence? To make her point, Renzi draws on the idea of an ethic of innocence and develops an argument with two main steps: First, she shows that neither material-structuralist sociological nor psychological accounts can properly account for women's agency in cases of domestic violence. While psychological accounts tend to explain the cycle of violence by showing that women's choices to stay with their husbands are pathological, material and structural accounts portray women as social constructs who are unable to make choices as subjects. While this characterization of psychologist and "material-structural" views may concern many available approaches to domestic violence, Renzi does not seem to take into account that there are alternative sociological approaches available which do not reduce human agency to be a product of material circumstances nor of a pathological act of masochism. Here, John Dewey and George H. Mead-based sociological approaches such as the sociology of creative action of Hans Joas and what he calls constitution theories (*Konstitutionstheorien*) are good candidates for accounting for agency under conditions of material and structural limitations (see Joas 1996: 326-357)

In any case, showing the limitations of materialist-structural and psychological accounts gives Renzi an opportunity to show the methodological interest of literary analysis. As she argues "literature's sociological weakness – it presents, after all, characters, not people, stories, not lives – is its theoretical strength (113). This is so because through literature we can have access to woman's understanding of what are often, in the real domestic scenario, very private experiences that are not easily communicated – and whose ignorance makes us think of women as passive agents. But also, because it can motivate readers to reflect on our sympathies with those women and on the interpretative habits with which we read their stories.

Renzi's main point is that when we ask why women stay with their husbands in cases of domestic violence, we

are easily prompted to see women as willingly participating in their own abuse. This becomes particularly clear in the psychological narrative of the masochist woman, who depicts women as actively and willingly contributing to their own suffering. For Renzi, women's display of an ethic of ignorance – which here takes the form of not acknowledging the abuses of their husbands – means making a choice within the limits imposed by society. Instead of asking why they stay, we should then the question about what should be changed so that women do not find it a reasonable option to stay. This constitutes the core message underlying the first part of the book. Hence, Renzi warns those who are interested in the emancipation of the oppressed from dismissing too quickly women's apparent passivity and self-induced harm as irrational. I believe that this appeal can perfectly combine with certain sociological approaches of the kind I have previously mentioned. Surely, literary analysis has a particular contribution to offer to this project of revindicating agency – namely, exploring intimate reasons of women and making us reflect about our habitual ways of “reading” the behavior of these characters – but non-reductivist, agency-centered sociological views can also help to revindicate women's agency also in difficult cases of domestic violence. Moreover, there is a risk of moving too quickly from sociology to literature since it may negatively affect sociology's possibility to reflect on the means to ameliorate its own research methods. Here the figure of Jane Addams as a social worker and researcher can be of unvaluable use (Miras Boronat 2021). Hence, the acknowledgment of an ethic of innocence can stimulate incorporating Addams methods into creative methodologies of sociological action research.

In the second half of the book Renzi analyses different kinds of “textual” materials such as women's artistic performances, social protests, writers, films, and, again, literary figures. While in the first half women's ethics of innocence is displayed within certain boundaries, the women of the second half clearly aim at exploding those boundaries. But how do they do it? Precisely through the display of an ethic of innocence in which women refuse

to know – or to act as if they did. Here is where Renzi's pragmatist understanding of the social-emancipatory project of feminism comes to the fore. Central to this second half of the book is Renzi's adoption of Rortyan lens to read the contribution women's ethic of innocence make to an emancipatory project. Central to Rorty's view is the idea that the social struggles of women are not merely struggles for recognition – at least if we understand them as struggles for being recognized as belonging to a hegemonic social category, for example, the hegemonic definition of person or human being. Rather, struggling for emancipation is about *creating* non-hegemonic forms of personhood by the use of imagination. This creative moment is necessary since the logic of recognition tends to be oppressive: “the ways in which [women] are considered to be people serve not to empower but rather, contradictorily, to hamper and restrict them.” (188) Finally, a central aspect to this view is that this creative moment consists in an imaginative engagement with ontological potentialities that have not been year realized by the hegemonic social order. This often involves that those members of oppressed groups that display non-hegemonic possibilities of being will be taken to be crazy (Rorty 2001) by society until these possibilities come to be accepted.

Let me briefly focus on Renzi's (and Rorty's) point that the struggle for recognition as persons or subjects cannot be experienced by women as liberating. This view clearly differs from Axel Honneth's understanding of a struggle for recognition (1996) as well as of a recognition-based reading of John Dewey's *Lectures in China* (Särkelä 2013). According to Honneth's view, societies are permeated by a moral grammar that includes normative ideals that constitute the normative expectations of individuals. These general normative ideals or principles are instantiated by hegemonic interpretations that exclude certain social groups. However, in their struggles for recognition, oppressed groups reinterpret normative ideals in non-hegemonic ways and struggle for the public acceptance of these new interpretations. In other words, the struggle for recognition of the oppressed does not

consist in uncritically appropriating hegemonic categories but in transforming (reinterpreting) the latter so that the specific features of the oppressed groups can be properly recognized as valuable. Surely, the struggle for recognition includes a subversive and creative moment, but it draws from an existing moral grammar whose potential always remains partially unrealized. This means then that recognition does not mean subjugation, as Rorty and Renzi would have it, but a deep transformation of the normative categories that articulate the normative orders of society.

It is important here to note that most of the examples Renzi studies refer either to preconditions or to realizations of Rorty-inspired activity of emancipatory creation of women's personhood. In other words, an ethics of innocence is put here at the service of the larger emancipatory project of *creating* (and not recognizing) woman's personhood. So, one can wonder how a different, recognition-based approach to emancipation would affect Renzi's analysis. I will consider this question at the end of this review. In any case, it is from a Rortyan perspective that Renzi proposes to interpret the political struggle of the suffragists in chapter five. In the two examples she analyses, Mary Richardson's famous attack on Velasquez's *Rokeby Venus* and Alice Duers Miller's columns and poetry, what she identifies are first attempts at "creating the female person" (187). The ethics of innocence both historical figures display – by attacking Velasquez's work and by using absurd language respectively – aims precisely at doing that: it consists in women's active engagement with the problem of female subjecthood. This problem is particularly acute for the suffragettes who often come to be considered "criminal, lunatics, and illogical, defective, or child-like adults," (171) in other words, as not fully human.

According to Renzi, however, the political relevance of Richardson's and Miller's cases is only limited. They are prophetic in the sense that they that they protest subjugation to social oppression and limit themselves to pointing to the possibility of alternative social realities. A further step to emancipation is provided by the literary

sources analyzed in chapter six: Virginia Woolf's *Orlando: A Biography*, Sherwood Anderson's "The Man Who Became a Woman," and Katharine Burdekin *Proud Man*. Renzi provides a rich analysis of these texts whose goal is to show that women's ethic of innocence is being displayed at the service of a process of liberation from the "reality of binary bodies." (194) In a progressive way, the figures depicted in these literary texts show ways of liberation involving "sex change, sex loss, mourning, melancholia, and moments of happiness" (226). In the three texts, the point of the display of an ethic of innocence is to maintain the hope that there are other possibilities of being that are not yet recognized by society, but which can be.

Finally, chapter seven turns to the role community for emancipation and argues that communal agreement is condition for the kind of social change involved in the creation of personhood previously analyzed women's figures attempted. For this reason, Renzi proposes to move the analysis from individuals to the "communities that surround these 'innocent' individuals." (230). Here it is worth noting that Renzi has in mind the power of a community's imaginative abilities and the need to cultivate this power. To make her point she focuses on Recca West's novella *The Return of the Soldier* and Nancy's Oliver and Craight Gilespie's film *Lars and the Real Girl*. Both in the novel and in the film – which is much more recent – we find depictions of males who refuse to know, but whose refusal is largely sustained by a community of women who "'play' along with the delusions of the central male characters" (234). Renzi's idea is that these text display an ethic of innocence as community-dependent, which means that our imaginative and creative capacities – and, hence, our ability to promote social change – are largely determined by the community in which individuals live. Change, at this basic level of the individuals capacity to create new realities is accordingly, community dependent, which makes the project of emancipation an ambiguous and difficult one, since emancipation does not only fully depend on those who have an interest in it.

In my final remarks let me just briefly turn to the question about the adoption of a Rortyan approach to the feminist struggle against oppression and how it affects Renzi's book. Hence, I believe that the pragmatist recognition-paradigm could also have contributed to a productive analysis of the ethics of innocence that modifies one central aspects of Renzi's analysis, namely the role she provides to social suffering as the motivating force of social struggle. According to Rorty, oppressed groups are often only able to perceive injustice when somebody (imaginatively) creates new realities that unveil that some possibilities of social being are not possible. This means that social suffering emerges only when individuals use their creative imagination: "this voice she [i.e. the struggling woman] in a new language must describe not the wrongs that she has suffered based on her so-called natural rights but rather her 'previously unplayed role,' a future creation she imagines but is currently prohibited from embodying." (175) This contrasts with the view of a theory of recognition, for which injustice can be sensed – if not be fully articulated – by oppressed group thanks to the normative potential of the ideals that constitute the normative grammar of society. This explains why perceiving an injustice is possible also under conditions of hegemony: hegemonic interpretations do not exhaust the meaning of the general categories of a society. Social creativity is important because it is part of a collective labor of reinterpretation of norms and categories, but the sense of being wronged and the suffering it generates can appear earlier than when a future possibility can be imagined by members of oppressed groups. Indeed, it is the often not fully articulated suffering of the victims of oppression, which shows that basic normative principles are not being adequately institutionalized, and which initiates social struggle. In my view, parting from a recognitional paradigm would mean that an ethic of innocence is not only to be put at the service of the creation of new realities but also about the rejection of certain specifications of universal categories and principles. I believe that this would make the emancipatory signification of a pragma-

tist approach to the ethics of innocence less ambivalent than what Renzi believes it to be. Hence, social struggle and the emancipatory display of an ethic of innocence would be anchored not only to the possibility of imagining a different world but to the – more or less articulated – experiences of social wrongs oppressed groups often experience as negative.

In these few pages it has not been possible to be fair to the richness and subtleties of Renzi's analysis, which clearly shows how much literary studies can contribute to understanding mechanisms of social oppression and strategies of resistance and social change. The aim of my criticisms has not been to reject Renzi's core idea, namely, that we must see women's choices not to know as reflecting different rational strategies by which women become agents of their lives – via coping with limited social circumstances or by exploding the boundaries of what is possible in a world permeated by class, gender, and racial domination. However, my aim has been to show that Renzi could have explored another understanding of pragmatism and its view on emancipation. Hence, as I have briefly argued, a Rortyan view does not explain satisfactorily why an individual would "wish to have" (175) certain rights since it does not connect them to people's social suffering. At the same time, a recognition-based approach, has also a lot to learn from Renzi's analysis to avoid falling back to an exaggerated focus on knowledge as the only way to provide critical perspectives on social reality and the norms that sustain the status quo. Hence, a pragmatist approach to an ethic of innocence could explain that not-knowing can be inserted into a more general strategy of oppressed groups for denying the validity of hegemonic and oppressive interpretations of the principles that regulate social life.

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- (Renautl 2021 and Boronat 2021 are contributions to this special issue)