

Pride and Self-Respect in Unjust Social Orders

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In her recent book, *No Angel in the Classroom*, Berenice Fisher writes:

At the beginning of a new century, there is nothing self-evident about how to pursue social justice.... A common world needs to be created and re-created rather than taken for granted. It is a fragile project that can quickly disintegrate under the pressures of fear, greed, hatred, and ignorance. We teachers committed to teaching social justice have a lot of work ahead of us without any guarantees of success.¹

In her essay Nisha Gupta shows us how much work we still have “ahead of us” if we want to foster the self-respect that Charles Taylor and Will Klymicka consider a vital good for citizens in a liberal democracy. To develop self-respect instead of self-hatred among members of oppressed and marginalized groups is no simple matter, as she demonstrates. Gupta looks in particular at the challenges entailed in “the development of [a] sense of pride...and emotional feeling of ‘pride’ in being a member of...a specific, minority identity group.” She calls for more educational focus on cultural groups as one way to develop this sense of pride. I agree with Gupta that as educators we do need to “address both structural injustice” and also what she calls “self-esteem dimensions.”

I want to continue with Gupta’s focus on the “development of this sense of pride.” When I reflect on what it might mean to foster a “sense of pride,” “self-esteem,” and/or “self-respect,” I run into certain questions and ambiguities: Is there any difference between “self-respect” and “self-esteem?” And how does “pride” connect with either of these?

In his essay “Self-Respect: Theory and Practice,” Laurence Thomas distinguishes between “self-respect” and “self-esteem.” He writes:

A person has self-respect, I shall say, if and only if he has the conviction that he is deserving of full moral status, and so the basic rights of that status, simply in virtue of the fact that he is a person. Having self-respect, then, is... a way of viewing oneself vis á vis others from the moral point of view. Everyone, including oneself, is equally deserving of full moral status and so of being treated in accordance with the basic rights that come with that status. And the reason for this is that one is a person... understood in this way, self-respect makes no reference at all to the abilities of persons, since a person is no less that in view of what her abilities are.²

In contrast to “self-respect” as a moral notion, Thomas defines “self-esteem” in line with William James’s psychological view that “self-esteem” equals the “ratio of a person’s successes to their aspirations.” Using this distinction, Thomas finds it reasonable to expect social institutions to guarantee conditions for self-respect, but not self-esteem.

I find Thomas’s distinction a helpful one to bear in mind as I think about pride. With Adrienne Rich, I find pride to be “a tricky, glorious, double-edged feeling.” Thus, I want to explore some different meanings of pride by looking at Rich’s reflections on what it means for her, as a woman, to be Jewish.

Rich starts out by saying:

I feel proud to be identified as a Jew among Jews, not simply a progressive among progressives, a feminist among feminists. And I ask myself, What does that mean? What is pride in tribe, family, culture, heritage? Is it a feeling of being better than those outside the tribe? As a woman, I reject such hierarchies.

Then, is pride merely a cloak I pull around me in the face of anti-Semitism, in the face of the contempt and suspicion of others? Do I invoke pride as a shield against my enemies, or do I find its sources deeper in my being, where I define myself for myself?³

Rich's enumeration here of possible interpretations for the pride she feels in her ethnic identity point both to some advantages and also to potential dangers of establishing an ethnic-identified curriculum. One advantage, for example, comes from the creation of protected, "shielded" spaces, which afford opportunities for self-definition. On the other hand, one danger of ethnic-identified curricula is they run the risk of generating new hierarchies and exclusivities. If we consider Thomas's distinction between self-respect and self-esteem, it seems to me that the types of pride, in ethnic-identified curricula, which focus on group aspirations and achievements tend to align with self-esteem rather than with self-respect. And, following Thomas, I wonder whether we might expect schools to guarantee conditions for self-respect, but not for self-esteem.

Returning now to Rich's investigations, she moves on to talk next about what I see as the pride of self-respect:

Difficult questions for any people who for centuries have met with derogation of identity. Pride is often born in the place where we refuse to be victims, where we experience our own humanity under pressure, where we understand that we are not the hateful projections of others but intrinsically ourselves. Where does this take us? It helps us fight for survival, first of all, because we know, from somewhere, we deserve to survive.⁴

As Thomas would say, every person "is deserving of full moral status" simply because s/he is a person.

But Rich does not end here; and neither should we. She makes two more points which I consider crucial. The first point calls our attention to the way certain forms of pride connect with love. Rich writes:

"I am not an inferior life form" becomes "There is sacred life, energy, plentitude in me and in those like me you are trying to destroy." And if, in the example of others like me, I learn not only survival but the plentitude of life, if I feel linked by a texture of values, history, words, passions to people long dead or whom I have never met, if I celebrate these linkages, is this what I mean by pride? Or am I really talking about love?⁵

The texture of Rich's intermingling of pride and love comes across in an example Patricia Hill Collins gives from her own experience. Collins had been leading a seminar as part of a national summer institute for teachers and other school personnel. She writes:

After my Chicago workshop, an older Black woman participant whispered to me, "Honey, I'm real *proud* of you. Some folks don't want to see you up there [in the front of the classroom] but you belong there. Go back to school and get your Ph.D. and then they won't be able to tell you nothing!"⁶

Collins also cites Marita Golden's account of how when she rode the bus to attend her college classes "black women domestic workers... gazed *proudly* at me, nodding

at the books in my lap. The spirit of those women sat with me in every class I took.”⁷ Collins’s examples show us “proud love” in the context of current linkages among one’s own people.

Rich further extends her analysis to ask what it means to love one’s own legacy: “I don’t feel proud of everything Jews have done or thought, nor of everything women have done or thought.”⁸ Rich then goes on to ask how to sort out

[a] legacy without spurning any of it, a legacy that includes both courage and ardor, and the shrinking of the soul under oppression, the damages suffered. In any one like me, I have to see mirrored my own shrinkings of soul, my own damages.

Yet I must make my choices, take my positions according to my conscience and vision now. To separate from parts of a legacy in a conscious, loving, and responsible way in order to say “This is frayed and needs repair; that no longer serves us; this is still vital and usable” is not to spurn tradition, but to take it very seriously. Those who refuse to make distinctions—and making distinctions has been a very Jewish preoccupation — those who suppress criticism of the Jewish legacy suppress further creation.⁹

Thus Rich shows us the aspects of a pride that can open up creative spaces for new directions. This is a pride that can “make distinctions,” can acknowledge the damages of oppression and the shortcomings of one’s own legacy. It can do so without self-hatred, because this pride is connected with love for one’s people and grounded in self-respect.

1. Berenice Malka Fisher, *No Angel in the Classroom* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), 220.

2. Laurence Thomas, “Self-Respect: Theory and Practice” in *Philosophy Born of Struggle*, ed. Leonard Harris (Dubuque, Ia.: Kendall Hunt, 1983), 175-76.

3. Adrienne Rich, “If Not with Others, How?” in *Blood, Bread, and Poetry* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1986), 203-4.

4. *Ibid.*, 204.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 97-98.

7. Marita Golden, *Migrations of the Heart* (New York: Ballantine, 1983), 21.

8. Rich, “If Not with Others, How?” 204.

9. *Ibid.*, 204-5.