

# **Roundtable: Mark Redhead's *Reasoning with Who We Are: Democratic Theory for a Not So Liberal Era***

## **Editor's Introduction**

*Ruth Abbey*

Mark Redhead's *Reasoning with Who We Are: Democratic Theory for a Not So Liberal Era* is an ambitious and adventurous work. Drawing from the thought of Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, Hannah Arendt, Seyla Benhabib, Michel Foucault, and William Connolly, it strives to articulate a richer but more realistic concept of public reason than the neo-Kantian one which currently dominates Anglo-American political theory. With the exception of Arendt and Benhabib, these thinkers are not necessarily associated, first and foremost, with debates about public reason. In defense of his choice of interlocutors, Redhead posits that "public reason is a rich concept that deserves to be freed from a seemingly exclusive attachment to one influential genre of contemporary political theory" (3). Redhead uses the diverse resources he finds within these six thinkers to insist that "effective public deliberation involves finding manners to engage rather than mutually tolerating those differences which distinguish participants in a given political activity from one another" (4). To make such differences clear and such debate more effective, Redhead coins and develops the idea of "reasoning through baggage" which allows individuals to actively wrestle with, rather than seeking to bracket, the religious, linguistic, national, ethnic, and other identities we inevitably bring into the public realm. The Kantian-inspired approaches of John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas, by contrast, aspire to public reasoning "apart from baggage" (6).

Ignoring the negative connotations that the baggage metaphor often carries, Redhead sees baggage as being inevitable in the way people reason with and about ourselves and one another. Convinced that it is more productive to acknowledge and work with our carry-ons than to evade or bracket them, Redhead encourages his readers to become aware of the effects of our baggage in multiple ways. Baggage shapes our own identities, aspirations, and goals just as it shapes the claims we make on others. Conversely, baggage powerfully affects how we receive and respond to the identities, aspirations, and goals of others and the claims they make on us. Interestingly, though, Redhead does not aspire to jettison the dominant

model of public reason altogether. Reasoning through baggage is intended to complement and supplement, rather than supplant, the dominant model (18).

This symposium convenes respondents to Redhead's project who are steeped in the work of the theorists who have inspired and informed it. Alasdair MacIntyre and Bill Connolly offer commentaries on Redhead's use of their ideas.<sup>1</sup> In "The Particularities of Political Conversations," MacIntyre contends that Redhead appropriates his thought too selectively, occluding his crucial emphasis on the common good. MacIntyre observes that Redhead ignores the central, if often tacit, role that a conception of the common good plays in all forms of shared life, from the family to the state. MacIntyre implies that Redhead has bought too readily into the existing public reason paradigm by focusing on deliberation in conditions of pluralism and paying too little attention to the values that can be affirmed by all participants once they become aware of the reality and value of common goods.

Connolly's reflections in "Creed, Spirituality, and Bicameralism" on Redhead's use of his work bring out just how indebted Redhead's whole thinking is to Connolly's influence. Connolly's notion of agonistic respect as a civic virtue permeates Redhead's global ideal of reasoning through baggage, well beyond his chapter "William Connolly and the Practice of Deep Pluralism." Agonistic respect is for Connolly "the civic virtue to cultivate between constituencies who already have a place in public life" (p. 649). With such respect, "each party expresses its faith while listening respectfully to expressions from others, and... absorbs an element of agony that comes with close contact between these different expressions" (p. 649). Connolly deems agonistic respect to be "a civic virtue of deep, multidimensional pluralism because such reciprocal virtues enable a positive ethos of engagement to emerge from which collective settlements can be negotiated" (p. 649). Such deep, multidimensional pluralism that still enables negotiation of collective settlements is exactly what Redhead's book strives to promote. Yet in his chapter dedicated to Connolly's work, Redhead suggests that Connolly needs more practice at deep pluralism. He expresses some concern that Connolly himself is not as receptive to the positions of, and challenges for, theists who bring their baggage into the public realm as his ethos would mandate. In his reply, Connolly takes issue with some of this criticism but concludes with a generous openness to Redhead's identification of possible baggage that he has brought to the debate which he is only just claiming for the first time.

Nancy Luxon, Mary Dietz, and Ruth Abbey react to Redhead's deployment of Foucault, Arendt, and Taylor respectively.

In "Foucault on Freedom and Trust," Luxon poses questions to Redhead's use of Foucault and his concept of parrhesia, or speaking the truth. She finds that Redhead "raises these questions of public reason and democratic

<sup>1</sup>Taylor and Benhabib were also invited to contribute but were unable.

legitimation from the vantage of the norm" and contends that this distinguishes his approach from Foucault's, which was offered from "the vantage of exclusion" (p. 655). One consequence of adopting the vantage of exclusion is that it becomes harder to align the inwardness of marginalized subjects with the outward norms of the political imaginary and public reasoning. As Luxon reads Foucault, he shows us that "those living on the margins often refuse affirmation by dominant norms and hierarchies altogether and instead launch a wholesale critique of the order these norms sustain" (p. 655). Overall Luxon contends that Foucault poses a more radical challenge to liberal democracy than Redhead acknowledges. She concludes that Foucault's most valuable but perhaps least understood offering to debates about freedom and truth telling revolves around the urgent and difficult challenge of building social trust in a diverse world. If so, Luxon's Foucault remains an important contributor to and interlocutor for Redhead's project.

Mary Dietz objects to the way Redhead appropriates Hannah Arendt's work and reads Arendt in a way that resists her recruitment into Redhead's larger project. Offering a different, albeit compressed, account of the place of plurality in Arendt's thought, Dietz further suggests that Redhead's criticisms of her work miss the mark. She also fears that Redhead's focus on reason simply reinstates the priority of philosophy over the practical that Arendt herself rejected and was vigilant in exposing and critiquing. But rather than conclude that Arendt has nothing to offer Redhead's project, Dietz points him in a direction that she believes would have been more fruitful for including Arendt among his interlocutors, by underlining her notion of common-sense reasoning.

In commenting on Redhead's engagement of Taylor, I observe how indebted the whole idea of reasoning through baggage is to Taylor's example. I question Redhead's focus on Taylor's more recent writings such as *A Secular Age*, and return to a number of earlier texts that are more obviously works of political theory. Those essays provide fecund resources for Redhead's thought yet receive little or no attention in his chapter on Taylor. My response effectively mirrors that of Dietz on Arendt by questioning why Redhead identified the particular resources from a thinker's corpus that he did, and then asking whether the appropriation would have been different and perhaps more productive if a different set of resources had been selected. Also mirroring Dietz's comments on Arendt, I wonder whether Redhead's critique of Taylor would have been different if different resources were deployed in the first place.

In the symposium's last entry, Redhead responds graciously to his respondents. He concedes some of the criticisms while also clarifying larger points of difference in his readings of the key figures in his book.