

“Don’t Fence Me In”: Connecting Irony to Power in the Scholarship of Charles E. Rosenberg

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ABSTRACT: Irony and contingency are central to Charles E. Rosenberg’s scholarship and theoretical stance. Irony is a way to speak through history both to power and to those who would contest power. The question becomes, What kind of politics is it? The limitations of Rosenberg’s ironic trope and its world weariness that can provide critique but no way to change is analyzed. **KEYWORDS:** irony, history of medicine, Charles E. Rosenberg, politics of history.

HISTORIANS often have a complicated relationship to politics and power. Some of us overtly hope that our carefully collected facts and thoughtful tropes will influence change. Others just see themselves as laying out a narrative and analysis that is about the past, and assume no responsibility for what is done with it.

As one of the “young turks” in this field three decades ago, and as part of the process of defining my own political/historical position, I approached the work of Charles Rosenberg with both awe

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and criticism.¹ When David Rosner and I wrote the essay, “Beyond the Great Doctors,” as the introduction for our 1979 edited collection *Health Care in America*, we laid out a call for well-contextualized and non-presentist histories that could provide a sense of “origins and the possibilities to affect change.” We concluded in our last sentence, in our veiled yet intentional critique of Rosenberg’s work, “Without this kind of history, the future appears full of chance, inevitability, or irony.”²

It was the keyword “irony” I thought then as the depolitical center of Rosenberg’s work, perhaps reflecting the insight of the narrator in Joseph Conrad’s *Under Western Eyes*: “that women, children and revolutionists hate irony, which is the negation of all saving instincts, of all faith, of all devotion, of all action.”³ I want to revisit my more youthful sense of the limited politics of Rosenberg’s irony trope because I think too many of us use it in unreflective ways. In taking this approach, I have no intention of casting myself as one of the Athenian judges who deemed Socrates’ reliance on irony dangerous enough to the body politic to warrant a death sentence. Rather, I hope to take up, from a differing political perspective, Thomas Mann’s query in his *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man*: “But ‘ironic’ politics? The word combination seems all too strange and especially all too frivolous for one ever to find it valid . . .”⁴

For in placing Rosenberg (if I may) with Mann and Socrates, and perhaps above all philosopher Richard Rorty, I think that his use of the trope of irony, so critical to much of his work, does suggest a politics and ethics. It is a way of speaking through history

1. I am part of the extended family, not a direct descendent in the Rosenberg intellectual line. Diana Long, then at Boston University, introduced us. In the days before e-mail, I always described our relationship as a “Xerox” one in which we sent one another finds from various archives, and then later became friends. And having come back to history from years in “the movement” and in lefty health policy/health activist circles, I always thought my work more directly engaged in politics than his.

2. Susan Reverby and David Rosner, “Beyond ‘The Great Doctors,’” in *Health Care in America: Essays in Social History*, ed. Reverby and Rosner (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979), 12. On an historical note, both Rosenberg and Gerald Grob were the referees who approved the book for publication. Neither David Rosner nor I were Rosenberg students. David worked with Barbara Rosenkrantz at Harvard and I was a student of Diana Long and Sam Bass Warner, Jr. at Boston University.

3. Joseph Conrad, *Under Western Eyes* (New York: Penguin Class Edition, 1997), xxiv.

4. Quoted in Daniel W. Conway and John E. Seery, “Introduction,” in *The Politics of Irony: Essays in Self-Betrayal*, ed. Conway and Seery (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992), 1.

both to power and to those who would contest power. The question becomes: What kind of politics is it?⁵

There is unfortunately no concordance (yet) to Rosenberg's multitudinous works that allows me to find every instance of his use of irony. But searching for it hither and yon, I was struck again with how often it is the over-arching trope in his work stretching from his essay on eugenics, where he examines Davenport's social commitments that overcame his belief in his own scientific objectivity, to the work on bioethics in *Daedalus* where he claims "practitioners of history and bioethics should, finally, be similarly aware of the importance of irony and contingency, of the gap between theory and practice, conscious intent and unforeseeable outcome."⁶

Rosenberg's use, again and again, of the ironic trope is not in some ways unexpected. Contingency and nuance are the historian's stock and trade; identifying untoward consequences and delving into their contours is the culturally assigned task of the contemporary liberal historian, as Hayden White has noted.⁷ And just as Vico identified the use of irony as a response to the loss of faith in religion, I think the historian of health care's use of irony reflects a more questioning stance toward our culture's secular beliefs in scientific infallibility.⁸

For intentions do go awry, categories do not work, ironies in our histories abound. Our historians' insistence on the truths that facts lead us to provides the bedrock for an ironic position. For a health-care historian especially to be heard in a field that still assumes it speaks in the language of scientific objectivity, irony becomes a way in. It gives us the rhetorical form that allows us to juxtapose

5. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989). Rorty argues that ironists can form solidarity. Indeed, he concludes: "I have been urging in this book that we try *not* to want something which stands beyond history and institutions." Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, 189.

6. Charles E. Rosenberg, "Meanings, Politics and Medicine: On the Bioethical Enterprise and History," *Daedalus*, Fall 1999, 128.

7. Allan M. Brandt, "From Analysis to Advocacy: Crossing Boundaries as a Historian of Health Policy," in *Locating Medical History: The Stories and Their Meanings*, ed. Frank Huisman and John Harley Warner (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 467; Ewa Domanska, "Hayden White: Beyond Irony," *Hist. Theory*, May 1998, 37, 173–81.

8. James W. Fernandez and Mary Taylor Huber, "The Anthropology of Irony—Introduction," in *The Anthropology of Irony*, ed. Fernandez and Huber (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 1.

assumptions and context, to provide a way to see the powers that shape a field. "In the face of uncertainty and the 'unwelcome contradictions' of life," as two scholars writing about anthropology and irony have argued, "many people have found irony a valuable resource for inciting the moral and political imagination against whatever is given, assumed or imposed."⁹

For Rosenberg, the use of irony is an art form both at the level of the historian's task and in the analysis he provides. He demonstrates at the highest level the assessment of southern historian C. Vann Woodward that "the qualifications of the ironic historian are pretty hard to come by."¹⁰ In his sophisticated and analytically compelling use of irony, Rosenberg's politics of historical writing tells those in power a cautionary tale. It is a reminder of the danger of hubris and of the conditional nature of success. In Rosenberg's hands, it is possible to see how moral, social, economic, and scientific concerns beget medicine's technological growth, which beget social questions, which beget bioethics, and so on. And once there we find "the perhaps illusory quality of our desire to routinize the humane, to formulate and safeguard timeless values in a world of ceaseless change, social inequality, and utopian laboratory expectations," as he writes.¹¹

It is this danger of the untoward that is central to Rosenberg's message. He reminds bioethicists, for example, that there is a "central irony" in their "success" in a "health-care system . . . that has consistently demonstrated the ability to incorporate the critically and morally oppositional and make it an aspect of the system itself."¹² Success, he admonishes the bioethicists, may indeed be their undoing. Or the ironies that greater scientific acumen could mean, as a New York physician Rosenberg quotes would say in 1836, that physicians were excelling at "explaining how men die but not how to cure them."¹³

9. *Ibid.*

10. C. Vann Woodward, "The Irony of Southern History," *J. Southern Hist.*, February 1953, 19, 3.

11. *Ibid.*, 10.

12. Charles E. Rosenberg, "Meanings, Policies and Medicine," 44.

13. *Ibid.*; Charles E. Rosenberg, "The Therapeutic Revolution: Medicine, Meaning and Social Change in Nineteenth Century America," *Perspect. Biol. Med.*, 1977, 20, 485-506.

Rosenberg's ironic linking of moral views and scientific beliefs is clear in his article on Florence Nightingale's moral universe.¹⁴ Rosenberg analyzed Nightingale's sanitarian beliefs of why foul odors, bad behaviors, and disordered nursing could cause infection. With such a worldview, he argued, it was impossible for her to accept the idea of germ theory and the arbitrariness of disease. Rather than just defining her in metaphoric terms, Rosenberg argued that Nightingale's statistical data and scientific acumen were not at odds with her moral stance. Nightingale, whom we see as responsible for so many of the changes in the modern hospital, refused to accept a theory of disease causation that was disordered and, to her, immoral.

Rosenberg's ironic stance thus provides us with a sophisticated historiography and even a moral stance, as with Rorty's ethics, in which our solidarity with others is based on an understanding of "the contingency of our own position in the world."¹⁵ For a generation like mine that was raised as much on Gramsci and Geertz as Sudhoff and Sigerist, Rosenberg provided a way to connect moral positions to cultural contexts and political interests, even if many of our concerns with the political were different from his. Having lived our lives with the civil rights struggles, the draft, the murders of our beloved leaders and musicians, the need to organize a women's and gay/lesbian liberation movement, the appeal of a history with contingency at its heart was overwhelming.

And yet (and this is a big "and yet") there is a way in which this ironic stance creates a sense of ennui—even nihilism—in those who would make change, enclosing everyone in the same discourse.¹⁶ In surrounding herself in irony, the historian who writes through this trope "gains," as the philosophers have noted, "a degree of subjective freedom from personal responsibility for the woes of the

14. Charles E. Rosenberg, "Florence Nightingale on Contagion: The Hospital as Moral Universe," in *Explaining Epidemics*, ed. Rosenberg (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 90–108. The article originally appeared in *Healing and History*, ed. Charles E. Rosenberg (New York: Science History Publications, 1979).

15. Simon Easson, "Explaining Ethics," in *The Philosophers' Magazine on the Internet*, 1, http://www.philosophers.co.uk/portal_article.php?id=672 (accessed 5 June 2004).

16. Yoon Sun Lee, *Nationalism and Irony: Burke, Scott, Carlyle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Rorty, *Contingency*.

world.”¹⁷ In appearing to be knowing and almost world weary, the ability to take that step into political real life is lost in an “on the one hand, on the other hand” mobius strip of historical commentary. It becomes difficult to name names or to provide a critique since irony rather than perfidiousness, or down right evil, or structural barriers cannot be named.¹⁸

In the end, the ironic trope often leaves us with no sense of a political stance from which a direction out of irony can go.¹⁹ The danger, as British historian Roger Cooter has argued, is that we will be fenced in or, in his signifying on Rosenberg’s terms, framed in.²⁰ Understanding of contingency and historical grounding can provide a nuanced history, but what of those who wish, unlike Rosenberg’s claim to the contrary in his bioethics article, to be an historian who “expects . . . to solve emergent social problems” or at least to suggest the ways to think about them?²¹

If irony, as David Rosner and I wrote several decades ago, is our only stance, what possibility is there for change? And in the end, will a historical trope of irony merely do what Rosenberg argues happens with bioethics: only be absorbed by the culture without providing any guidance for transformation and change?

I want, therefore, to consider if irony as our central trope can connect to a more transformative politics, to those who wish their narratives to at least point the way for those *not* in power. To do this we need then to track the limits of ironies, acknowledge their uses for resistance or acceptance, and suggest a political direction.

17. This formulation is Kierkegaard’s. See discussion in Fernandez and Huber, “Anthropology of Irony,” 15.

18. Christian Warren in his review of David Rosner and Gerry Markowitz’s book on lead and vinyl chloride argues that they need to acknowledge the extent of irony in the story rather than to see these industries as merely villainous. See Christian Warren, “Review of Gerald Markowitz and David Rosner, *Deceit and Denial*,” *Bull. Hist. Med.*, Summer 2004, 78, 507–9.

19. For a sense of how irony can work to sustain a conservative view of nationalism, see Lee, *Nationalism and Irony*.

20. Roger Cooter, “Framing’ the End of the Social History of Medicine,” in *Locating Medical History*, 309–37. Cooter critiques Rosenberg both for not allowing categories to be unstable and messy (too framed) and then for being too messy at the same time so that no one has any power (see 323 and 324). It is a reminder of sociologist Lise Vogel’s critique of liberal social science theory in which there is a train of many cars, but no locomotive. No one is therefore in charge of pulling things along.

21. Rosenberg, “Meanings,” 9.

Irony, of course, in the hands of those without power, is a way "to contest a political condition in which winners are those who project the greatest dogmatism in identity and belief... [and] a condition of entry for those excluded through ideologies of difference."²² There is a reason feminists have sought the use of mockery and irony and African American writers a signifying monkey to use as tropes of resistance and politics.

I conclude by trying to make this more concrete. I thought about ways I did this in my own work, however unconsciously. I tried to think about contingency in outcomes and to tie it to power and politics. When I wrote about nursing, for example, I searched for ways to explain that the politics of gender was ironically a new stranglehold on working-class nurses whose very claim on their own "character" kept them outside a professionalizing move. I hoped that this understanding of the divided class structure of nursing, and the dilemmas created by an "order to care in a society that refuses to value caring," would shift the blame away from the nursing profession. It would point toward an historical understanding of the limits of professionalism that failed to consider class contingencies and the endless instability of the nursing category. I was suggesting that this ironic stance on gender might be useful for resistance, but it could not become the basis for a sustained political assault.²³

In writing about the infamous Syphilis Study at Tuskegee, I have begun to search for ways to understand the irony that the Public Health Service's (PHS) efforts were continually undermined by the very people they thought had no agency at all. I am trying to avoid telling the story we think we know: the one in which medical scientists do what they think is right and an unhistoricized racism undergirds their efforts.²⁴

In deconstructing the moral universe that blinded researchers to what was in front of them, I am concerned with the ironies of how disease itself was studied and described and how a commitment to racial justice foundered on beliefs about the critical importance of

22. George Shulman, "The Politics of Irony: Essays in Self-Betrayal Book Review," *Am. Pol. Sci. Rev.*, December 1993, 87, 1001.

23. James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985).

24. Susan M. Reverby, *The Infamous Study: Stories of Tuskegee, Syphilis, and American Culture*, forthcoming.

an unquestioned commitment to research. I am attempting to parse out the ideas both within the PHS and at Tuskegee that existed about understandings of “racial” biological characteristics that provided the intellectual backbone for the study. The final irony, I am suggesting, is the way that Tuskegee has become a metaphor for a form of mistreatment that is much more complex than the simple black and white story we seem to always tell. In trying to understand what happened, I want to ask how we use the story now, what tale it tells in this century, not just the last, and why using it merely as warning about what not to do limits its power. When I stood in front of a congregation of family members of the study’s participants in the Shiloh Missionary Baptist Church in Notasulga, Alabama on 14 January 2007, for example, telling them that there was irony in the study’s story would not do. They wanted and expected an historian to find a way to justice.

Thus, while irony can be, as Rosenberg has ably demonstrated, a skillful form of history writing, leaving us with contingency is not enough. It is a place to start, but without creating a basis for a claim for justice we cannot end there. Without a sense of the political and material reasons why the ironies exist, irony does fence us in.

The old cowboy song, “Don’t fence me in,” allows the singer to croon about the need to be allowed to roam the wide-open spaces. This song is given different meanings when sung by Bing Crosby and the Andrews Sisters and then again by Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong as its arrangements reflect culture, politics, and time frame. Our writing about irony has to have multiple meanings, with the same kind of differences that made Fitzgerald’s phrasing and intonation so opposite from Crosby’s. Our best tribute to Rosenberg is to keep riding out there where there are no boundaries so that irony and justice can meet, their pairing shaped as much by the meanings of the actual words as the context for those who sing the tunes and write the historical lines.