Our Town

by Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers

Truth & Progress: Philosophical Papers
by Richard Rorty Cambridge University Press 350 pp $18.95 April

Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought In Twentieth-Century America
by Richard Rorty Harvard University Press 154 pp $18.95 April

In the mid-1960s, Richard Rorty earned tenure in the Princeton University philosophy department as a self-described "thrusting young analytical philosopher," best known for his materialist philosophy of mind and his appreciation of philosophy's "linguistic turn." Within a decade, however, he had grown deeply impatient with the projects of professional philosophy and what he had come to regard as its sheer pretense. Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (1979) mapped an alternative intellectual program. In it Rorty argued that we should replace the traditional image of human beings as disconnected spectators of the world ("mirrors of nature") and of the mind as our device for producing accurate representations with a conception of humans as historically situated agents and ideas as instruments for helping us cope. Making a classic insider-outsider argument, he claimed to find support for these views in "the dialectic within analytic philosophy," even as he urged a less privileged role for philosophy in their future exploration.

Pursuing this program, Rorty has reinvented himself as a distinct, and distinctly welcome, voice in American intellectual life. Part philosophical kibitzer, part cultural commentator, part intellectual bad boy, he combines profound hopefulness about human possibility with a loping appreciation of its achievements, and a generous "let's mix it up" intellectual pugilism that disdains clubbiness and often identifies common ground among the hermetic or hostile.

As philosopher, Rorty is the leading American exponent of pragmatism. With John Dewey, he thinks we should regard our theories as problem-solving tools rather than efforts to represent "the world as it really is." If Rorty had his way, "true" would stay in our vocabulary but simply as a compliment paid to utterances
we agree with; "objective" would be shorthand for "intersubjectively agreed to."
More substantive understandings of truth and objectivity—as correspondence to
reality, for example—would be jettisoned as more trouble than they're worth.

As cultural commentator, Rorty walks the talk of his view that philosophy has no
inside track on truth. Drawing from social science, journalism, fiction, and
pop-Darwinism, he engages feminism, postmodern aesthetics, and literary
criticism, and wanders into a fair number of political debates. Most recently, he
has cast himself as avuncular adviser to cultural leftists in the academy,
encouraging them to rejoin the rest of society and embrace his own patriotic brand
of liberal egalitarianism.

As intellectual bad boy, Rorty delights in sweeping intellectual gestures, breezy
summary (often brilliant, sometimes irritatingly inaccurate), and endless tweaking
of his many interlocutors. His signature style is world weary and thick with
in-your-face irony. On the academic left's political project: "Recent attempts to
subvert social institutions by problematizing concepts have produced a few very
good books. They have also produced many thousands of books which represent
scholastic philosophizing at its worst." On the life quest of his former colleagues
in philosophy: "[T]he whole project of distinguishing between what exists in itself
and what exists in relation to human minds—the project shared by Aristotle,
Locke, Kant, and Searle—is no longer worth pursuing."

Rorty's two most recent books clarify his pragmatic philosophy and his leftist
politics. While very different in style and focus—Truth and Progress is a
collection of philosophical essays; Achieving Our Country is a call to action—both
books project a strikingly large role for pragmatism in public affairs. In essence,
Rorty suggests that his pragmatism could serve as the basis of political unity for a
revived left and as the common cultural outlook for the society he hopes that left
will produce. In this, he vastly overreaches. It is unreasonable to expect that any
comprehensive philosophical view—that is, one that takes positions on such
contested metaphysical issues as truth, objectivity, and the nature of reason—could
provide a shared outlook and the terms of political argument in a pluralist
democracy.

Truth and Progress gathers Rorty's recent papers on truth, moral progress, and the
nature of philosophy. Showing his continuing engagement with core philosophical
issues—consider his treatments of Donald Davidson and Crispin Wright on truth,
Hiary Putnam on relativism, and John Searle on objectivity—and the breadth of
his intellectual imagination—consider his improbable but inviting proposals to
unite feminism with pragmatism and Habermas with Derrida—their chief
contribution is to refine Rorty's own pragmatism. More clearly than his earlier
work, these essays recommend pragmatism as a philosophical-cultural outlook
suited to an ideal society, rather than on straightforwardly philosophical grounds.
Rorty does not reject pragmatism's intellectual competitors as meaningless, false,
or incoherent; nor does he claim that they violate deeply held philosophical
intuitions. Such conventional strategies of philosophical argument, Rorty believes,
rest on metaphysical assumptions that we are better off "dropping." He aims
instead to defend pragmatism by showing the appeal of the society it (as Hegel
liked to put it) "apprehends in thought."

Imagine a society whose members were not burdened by the anxiety bequeathed to us "by Greek metaphysics and by monotheism" to "get the world right." Imagine that "the rhetoric, the common sense, and the self-image of their community" encouraged them instead to worry about collectively solving problems and fostered experimentation with any idea (or other tool) that's around. Rorty believes that this society—with its shared pragmatist outlook—would be more tolerant, imaginative, supple, and accepting of human differences than our own. He defends pragmatism, then, on the ground that that it will "nudge" us toward that happier place and help us live there once we arrive.

_Achieving Our Country_—Harvard's Massey Lectures in the History of American Civilization delivered by Rorty last year—suggests some nudging for the United States. Progress in this country, Rorty believes, requires a revived American left, which in turn requires that the academic left reconnect emotionally to the rest of the country and make peace with the older "reformist" left from which it has been divided since Vietnam.

Rorty further believes that the currency of reconnection and reunion on the left is a sense of "national pride"—specifically, the kind of patriotism he finds in Dewey and Walt Whitman. The former took aim chiefly at "selfishness" (inequity) in American society, the latter at its "sadism" (intolerance). But as Rorty interprets them, they shared a sense of America as the antifoundationalist's dream country: a place defined not by history, tradition, blood, ethos, or antecedent principles, but by self-authorship, experimentation, and infinite promise. Resolute secularists, they wanted "America to replace God as the unconditional object of desire." And they understood both "America" and "democracy" to be shorthand for "a new conception of what it is to be human—which has no room for obedience to a nonhuman authority, and in which nothing save freely achieved consensus among human beings has any authority at all."

Rorty believes that this understanding of America has animated all great democratic struggles in the United States and that it remains widely appealing to the general public. Sufficiency antifoundationalist to pass muster with the postmoderns, this vision would enable academic leftists to keep their epistemology while finding some new friends. But he also thinks that the academic left and its allies—historically more concerned with "sadism" than with "selfishness"—need to change. Given punishing increases in economic inequality, they need to talk more about selfishness, even if it means talking less about sadism. And that requires that they stop treating diversity as the terminus of politics, and the country as simply a place between Juneau and Miami where a bunch of oppressed groups happen to live. Without disrespecting diversity, they should again promote the idea that we Americans are all "in this together," the plural authors of shared social projects. Like the characters in the "Platoon" movies Rorty offers as metaphor, we should ask ourselves: "What do our differences matter, compared to our commonality as fellow Americans?"

As an insider's critique of cultural leftists in the academy, _Achieving Our Country_
is engaging, useful, and on target. The academic left should be criticized for its political disengagement; its members should stop pretending that the arc of the moral universe has simply bypassed the United States; and a shift in focus from identity politics to economic justice is long overdue. But if Rorty is after bigger game—if he means to reach beyond the ranks of tenured humanities professors—then his argument is much less compelling, for political and philosophical reasons.

Let's start with national pride. Though characteristically evasive, Rorty seems to believe that national pride is necessary to political action—that it is impossible to move people to improve their country if they don't take pride in it. But this claim seems either trivially true or wrong. True, but trivial, if pride amounts simply to the belief that life in the country can be improved. Wrong, if pride means anything more than that.

After all, people are routinely moved to concerted political action by all sorts of motives. A simple sense of injustice—at children's suffering, imprisoned innocents, subhuman wages, dangerous working conditions, or a night of terror imposed on other peoples—often suffices. So can a perception of material interest. While hatred of one's country and its institutions may demobilize, and pride may spur efforts at reform, it is also possible simply to care about and act on injustice or cruelty because it hurts persons (not "peoples") and violates principles (not "nations"). Patriotic appeals need not figure. Indeed, the preening self-involvement of some of Rorty's own patriotic appeals—"America will create the taste by which it will be judged;" Americans are "the greatest poem because we put ourselves in the place of God"—may repel. Why, given his desire to improve the country, does Rorty restrict the grounds for doing so?

These observations about national pride in general apply with even greater force to Rorty's particular antifoundationalist brand of patriotism. Although its pragmatic ethos may have some appeal to the 1990s cultural left, and historic resonance with Legal Realists and New Deal staffers, it is very far from the view of those who "achieved" this country. The abolitionists opposed slavery not because it cramped "social learning" but because they thought slaves were human beings and that it was morally wrong to enslave human beings. The Congress of Industrial Organizations was formed not to foster "experimental diversity" but to get workers dignity on the job and greater equality in dealing with bosses. The civil rights movement was inspired not by a faith in "social invention" but by absolutist moral beliefs in human equality. The women's movement was originally fired not by interests in "reinvention" but by the outrage that women were "human beings in truth but not in social reality" (a remark of Catharine MacKinnon's that Rorty finds disappointingly "ahistoricist"). Throw away all the American struggles animated by ideas about human equality, and you don't have much of a democratic history left to tell.

Of course, you might say that all these struggles were animated by national pride because they sought to realize the value of equality expressed in the Declaration of Independence. But then, it can also be argued that the Declaration's appeal comes from its forceful articulation of that value rather than from its status as the
nation's founding document. So, again, why insist on putting things in terms of national pride? By the criteria of Rorty's own pragmatism—"if it creates more problems than it solves, drop it"—his insistence that we all jump on the Dewey/Whitman bandwagon should join the droppings.

Rorty's criticism of the "cultural" left—defined by obsessions with stigma and sadism—is equally limited. His argument is directed to cultural leftists in the academy, whom he rightly criticizes for their disengaged ("spectatorial") approach to national problems. But much of the cultural left—comprising thousands of activists and organizations outside the academy—is decidedly engaged. And while it, too, should give more attention to economic inequality and seek greater unity with organizations more concerned with that issue, neither will come from getting Frederic Jameson on the phone to John Sweeney. The cultural and economic lefts are distinguished not by the extent of their activity but by the content of their commitments and by competing organizational imperatives. Overcoming that problem, however—as it were, getting David Geffen, Larry Kramer, Pat Ireland, Urvashi Vaid, Eugene Rivers, and Sweeney in the same room—is something about which Rorty has almost nothing to say.

A common ground of principle might help start the needed conversation. But Rorty does not offer any. Instead, he trots out an old-fashioned "socialism or barbarism" disaster scenario—the gist of which is that if the cultural types don't do something fast about economic inequality they risk being overwhelmed by a new sadistic fascism in which anxious workers embrace a culturally revanchist "strongman": "Jocular contempt for women will come back into fashion. The words 'nigger' and 'kike' will once again be heard in the workplace...All the resentment which badly educated Americans feel about having their manners dictated to them by college graduates will find an outlet." But this sketch has limited force as political argument, and even less as political rhetoric. The last twenty-five years of falling working-class living standards and rising tolerance do not support the view that noncollege-educated American workers, even white male ones, are fascists waiting to happen.

Rorty might instead have argued directly for the view that the antiselfish and antisa
distic, no less than the diverse members of the antisadism camp, are indeed "in this together"—that they stand on the common ground provided by a commitment to equality, and that "oppression on the basis of race, class, sexual preference, and gender are so many instances of a general failure to treat equals equally." But he resists this idea as "fruitless." As though forgetting the history of American democratic struggle, he seems to think that only a philosopher locked in pre-Hegelian darkness and given to useless generalities could embrace the proposition that all people are created equal, think that proposition practically important, and see selfishness and sadism as but different ways of denying that equality. Which is really too bad. A concern for equality gives the left compelling reason to be both antisadistic and antiselfish. Given that joint focus, the recent dramatic rise in economic inequality—coincident with dramatically increased tolerance—recommends more attention to selfishness. Rorty could have served up more than disaster scenarios in making his case.
Finally, what is common to all these limitations in *Achieving*--the problems with the appeal to an antifoundationalist notion of national pride no less than the treatment of cultural politics--is something pretty deep, and wrong, in Rorty's view of the political role of philosophy in a pluralistic society.

In *Political Liberalism*, John Rawls says that the "political culture of a democratic society is always marked by a diversity of opposing and irreconcilable religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines" and that this diversity is "the inevitable long-run result of the powers of human reason at work within the background of enduring free institutions." Given these conflicting doctrines, with their roots in the powers of reason, we have both moral and practical reasons to present public, political arguments in ways that are acceptable to a range of conflicting views about truth, objectivity, human nature, and the best way to live a human life. Our common public reason should be framed in terms acceptable to the adherents of a variety of comprehensive philosophies--from Roman Catholicism to secular Kantianism--with no group of adherents permitted to require that public debate be carried out on the terms of its particular view or forced to deny its own fundamental philosophical and religious axioms as a condition of participating in that debate. The political idea of equality meets this condition. Each of a wide range of doctrines--religious, secular-cosmopolitan, and nationalist--has a different underlying rationale for endorsing a principle of equality: because we are all created in God's image; because we are all endowed with a capacity to regulate our own conduct; because our country is founded on this principle. But the principle itself can provide (and has provided) a common point of reference.

Rorty's pragmatism, understood as a shared cultural outlook, fails this basic test. Rooted in romantic ideals of self-creation, it is not simply a political view but a broader philosophical doctrine. As such, it is not silent on, but dismissive of, concerns about whether our beliefs fit the world as it really is, whether our conduct conforms to moral standards given in advance of human choice, and whether there is a God to whom we owe obedience. But within the framework of "enduring free institutions" that define a pluralist democracy, reasonable citizens can be expected to disagree about the right attitude toward these concerns. So it is unlikely that pragmatism could ever be the shared outlook of its members.

Whatever its merits as a philosophical position, pragmatism is a nonstarter for American democratic revival, and rebuilding the left around its philosophical secularism is a recipe for continued isolation.

None of this is to deny that equality and experimentation should lie at the heart of the left's political project. They should, and a renewed left ought to be paying more attention to experimentation than social democrats traditionally did. But these ideas are best presented in political form, freed from sectarian pragmatist--as much as from sectarian religious or sectarian Kantian--rhetoric. Well past his youthful incarnation as thrusting analyst, Rorty's political interventions still reveal a traditional philosophical concern for "depth." But while his deep views--for example, that truth is not the aim of inquiry and that objectivity is nothing more than intersubjective agreement--are entirely appropriate to philosophical argument, they do not belong to political argument under pluralist conditions. Not
is philosophical depth particularly helpful in political argument. And since it is
not—you got it—he should drop it.

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