

Achieving our Country  
Richard Rorty

Leftist thought in 20th Century America

Richard Rorty, a Humanities professor at the University of Virginia, is an old lefty. He published this thin, overpriced book through Harvard University Press. Presumably leftists in those precincts can afford to spend \$20 for such thin gruel. He is called "one of America's leading pragmatist philosophers."

For all that it is thin, little of the book is original. Rorty assumes he is speaking to the initiated. He compares leftist thinkers throughout the ages and especially the century. To his credit he considers communism a massive failure and says he is optimistic about America. He points out that these views separate him from many of his colleagues on the Left. Hooray.

The goals of the Left, as he tells it, include achieving a classless society, a casteless society, "social justice," which may be another name for the same things, and "an end to sadism" such as has been systematically experienced by women, gays, minorities, etc. etc.

Rorty and I are both white males. The implication would be that if I don't see and share his outrage about the sadism, sexism, discrimination etc. so prevalent in America, I must be one of the legions of sexist, sadistic white guys who have joined forces to hold everybody else down. Part of a vast white-wing conspiracy. I don't see myself that way.

This is the same sort of Communists-under-the-bed silliness for which the Left rightly lambasted McCarthy. Conspiracies are hard to sustain. A conspiracy among straight white men, maybe 30% of the population, is preposterous. The notion that any significant percentage of outwardly generous, employed, charitable, church-going, wife-loving, community-oriented guys are closet sadists is untenable. How can Rorty think that?

Generalizations. That's the key. You make the generalizations that "men dominate women", "straights dominate gays," "whites discriminate against blacks" and, whoa, you become guilty by the virtue of your gender, sexual persuasion and the color of your skin. It actually sounds suspiciously like prejudice. It is easy to convict a group of anything. The group probably doesn't recognize itself as such. I'm not part of the Aryan Brotherhood, but if being white throws me in with them, you can call me guilty of quite a bit.

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"As long as our country has a politically active Right and a politically active Left, this argument will continue. It is at the heart of the nation's political life, but the Left is responsible for keeping it going. For the Right never thinks that anything much needs to be changed: it thinks the country is basically in good shape, and may well have been in better shape in the past. It sees the Left's struggle for social justice as mere troublemaking, as utopian foolishness. The Left, by definition, is the party of hope. It insists that our nation remains unachieved. As the historian Nelson Lichtenstein has said, "All of America's great reform movements, from the crusade against slavery to the labor upsurge in the 1930's, defined themselves as champions of a moral and patriotic nationalism, which they counterposed to the parochial and selfish elites which stood athwart their vision of a virtuous society."?

Insofar as a Left becomes spectatorial and retrospective, it ceases to be a Left. I shall be claiming in these lectures that the American Left, once the old alliance between the intellectuals and the unions broke down in the course of the Sixties, began to sink into an attitude like Henry Adams'. Leftists in the academy have permitted cultural politics to supplant real politics, and have collaborated with the Right in making cultural issues central to public debate. "

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I said earlier that we now have, among many American students and teachers, a spectatorial, disgusted, mocking Left rather than a Left which dreams of achieving our country. This is not the only Left we have. but it is the most prominent and vocal one. Member of this Left find America unforgivable...."

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One way to convince oneself that the American Left could have gotten along perfectly well without Marxism is to look back to the best-known manifesto of the Progressive Era, Herbert Croly's *The Promise of American Life*. This book is filled with the same national pride that filled *Democratic Vistas*, but Croly makes a distinction Whitman rarely made: that between America before and America after the coming of industrial capitalism. Whitman was the first Romantic poet to celebrate an industrial and technological civilization, but he did not worry about the phenomenon that Marx and Croly recognized: the immiseration that would occur whenever the capitalists became able to maintain a reserve army of unemployed and thus to pay starvation wages to those they hire. In late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America, this reserve army was drawn from the endless supply of European immigrants -the people whose working and living conditions Upton Sinclair described in *The Jungle*, published three years before Croly's book.

Croly begins his book by saying that Americans are entitled to their "almost religious faith" in their country. But then he gets down to the problem which the Progressives wanted to solve, the problem created by the fact that "the traditional American confidence in individual freedom has resulted in a morally and socially undesirable distribution of wealth."<sup>4</sup> This new distribution of wealth, Croly realized, threatened to make nonsense of Hegel's suggestion that America might become something gloriously different from Europe, and of Whitman's hope that Lincoln's heirs would see an unending series of new births of human freedom. "So long as the great majority of the poor in any country are inert and are laboring without any hope in this world," Croly wrote, "the whole associated life of that community rests on an equivocal foundation. Its moral and social order is tied to an economic system which starves and mutilates the great majority of the population, and under such conditions its religion necessarily becomes a spiritual drug, administered for the purpose of subduing the popular discontent and relieving the popular misery."<sup>5</sup>

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THE REFORMIST American Left of the first two-thirds of the century accomplished a lot. But most of the direct beneficiaries of its initiatives were white males. After women won the right to vote, the male reformers pretty much forgot about them for forty years. Right up through the early Sixties, male leftists in the hiring halls and faculty lounges often spoke of women with the same jocular contempt, and of homosexuals with the same brutal contempt, as did male rightists in the country clubs. The situation of African-Americans was deplored, but not changed, by this predominantly white Left. The Democratic Party depended on the Solid South, and Franklin D. Roosevelt had no intention of alienating Southern white voters in order to help blacks. Trade union leaders like the Reuther brothers, who desperately wanted to integrate the unions, could not do much to diminish racial prejudice among the rank and file. Black Americans began to get a semblance of decent treatment only in the 1950s, when they started taking matters into their own hands. Most leftist reformers of this period were blissfully unaware that brown-skinned Americans in the Southwest were being lynched, segregated, and humiliated in the same way as were African-Americans in the Deep South. Almost nobody in the pre-Sixties Left thought to protest against homophobia, so leftists like F. O. Matthiessen and Bayard Rustin had to stay in the closet. From the point of view of today's Left, the pre-Sixties Left may seem as callous about the needs of oppressed groups as was the nation as a whole.

But it was not really that bad. For the reformist Left hoped that the mistreatment of the weak by the strong in general, and racial discrimination in particular, would prove to be a by-product of economic injustice. They saw the sadistic humiliation of black Americans, and of other groups, as one more example of the

selfishness which pervaded an unreformed capitalist economy. They saw prejudice against those groups as incited by the rich in order to keep the poor from turning their wrath on their economic oppressors. The pre-Sixties Left assumed that as economic inequality and insecurity decreased, prejudice would gradually disappear. In retrospect, this belief that ending selfishness would eliminate sadism seems misguided. One of the good things which happened in the Sixties was that the American Left began to realize that its economic determinism had been too simplistic. Sadism was recognized as having deeper roots than economic insecurity. The delicious pleasure to be had from creating a class of putative inferiors and then humiliating individual members of that class was seen as Freud saw it—as something which would be relished even if everybody were rich. With this partial substitution of Freud for Marx as a source of social theory, sadism rather than selfishness has become the principal target of the Left. The heirs of the New Left of the Sixties have created, within the academy, a cultural Left. Many members of this Left specialize in what they call the "politics of difference" or "of identity" or "of recognition." This cultural Left thinks more about stigma than about money, more about deep and hidden psychosexual motivations than about shallow and evident greed. This shift of attention came at the same time that intellectuals began to lose interest in the labor unions, partly as a result of resentment over the union members' failure to back George McGovern over Richard Nixon in 1972. Simultaneously, the leftist ferment which had been centered, before the Sixties, in the social science departments of the colleges and the universities moved into the literature departments. The study of philosophy—mostly apocalyptic French and German philosophy—replaced that of political economy as an essential preparation for participation in leftist initiatives. The new cultural Left which has resulted from these changes has few ties to what remains of the pre-Sixties reformist Left. That saving remnant consists largely of labor lawyers and labor organizers, congressional staffers, low-level bureaucrats hoping to rescue the welfare state from the Republicans, journalists, social workers, and people who work for foundations. These are the people who worry about the way in which the practices of the National Labor Relations Board changed under the Reagan administration, about the details of alternative proposals for universal health care, about budgetary constraints on Head Start and daycare programs, and about the reversion of welfare programs to state

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The principal motive behind the new directions taken in scholarship in the United States since the Sixties has been the urge to do something for people who have been humiliated—to help victims of socially acceptable forms of sadism by making such sadism no longer acceptable.

Whereas the top-down initiatives of the Old Left had tried to help people who were humiliated by poverty and unemployment, or by what Richard Sennett has called the "hidden injuries of class," the top-down initiatives of the post-Sixties left have been directed toward people who are humiliated for reasons other than economic status. Nobody is setting up a program in unemployed studies, homeless studies, or trailer park studies, because the unemployed, the homeless, and residents of trailer parks are not "other" in the relevant sense. To be other in this sense you must bear an ineradicable stigma, one which makes you a victim of socially accepted sadism rather than merely of economic selfishness.!

This cultural Left has had extraordinary success. In addition to being centers of genuinely original scholarship, the new academic programs have done what they were, semi-consciously, designed to do: they have decreased the amount of sadism in our society. Especially among college graduates, the casual infliction of humiliation is much less socially acceptable than it was during the first two-thirds of the century. The tone in which educated men talk about women, and educated whites about blacks, is very different from what it was before the Sixties. Life for homosexual Americans, beleaguered and dangerous as it still is, is better than it was before Stonewall. The adoption of attitudes which the Right sneers at as "politically correct" has made America a far more civilized society than it was thirty years ago.<sup>2</sup> Except for a few Supreme Court decisions, there has been little change for the better in our country's laws since the Sixties. But the change in the way we treat one another has been enormous.

This change is largely due to the hundreds of thousands of teachers who have done their best to make their students understand the humiliation which previous generations of Americans have inflicted on their fellow citizens. By assigning Toni Morrison's *Beloved* instead of George Eliot's *Silas Marner* in high school literature classes, and by assigning stories about the suicides of gay teenagers in freshman composition

tion courses, these teachers have made it harder for their students to be sadistic than it was for those students' parents. By favoring women in academic hiring and preferment, and by encouraging writing about the subjugation of women, colleges and universities have helped change the relations between men and women throughout American society. It is still easy to be humiliated for being a woman in America, but such humiliation is not as frequent as it was thirty years ago. The American academy has done as much to overcome sadism during the last thirty years as it did to overcome selfishness in the previous seventy. Encouraging students to be what mocking neoconservatives call "politically correct" has made our country a far better place. American leftist academics have a lot to be proud of. Their conservative critics, who have no remedies to propose either for American sadism or for American selfishness, have a great deal to be ashamed of. What these critics condemn as the politicizing of the universities is an expression of the same outrage against cruelty which moved the students and faculty of Charles University in Prague to resist the Communists in 1948, and the students and faculty at South African universities to resist apartheid laws. All universities worthy of the name have always been centers of social protest. If American universities ever cease to be such centers, they will lose both their self-respect and the respect of the learned world. It is doubtful whether the current critics of the universities who are called "conservative intellectuals" deserve this description. For intellectuals are supposed to be aware of, and speak to, issues of social justice. But even the most learned and thoughtful of current conservatives ridicule those who raise such issues. They themselves have nothing to say about whether children in the ghettos can be saved without raising suburbanites' taxes,

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### **If you don't know Leftist lingo and literature forget it**

Reviewer: **Graham Seibert** from Bethesda, Md United States

Rorty is talking to the initiated, people who know their Cornell West, Walt Whitman, JP Sartre, Marx, Chomsky, Croly et. al. True to his title, he compares leftist thinkers throughout the ages and especially the 20th century. To his credit he considers communism a massive failure and says he is optimistic about America. He points out that these views separate him from many of his colleagues on the Left. What should the Left's agenda be today? As best I can tell -- Rorty would rather use other's words than his own -- it includes achieving a classless society, a casteless society, "social justice," which may be another name for the same things, and "an end to sadism" such as has been systematically experienced by women, gays, minorities, etc. etc.

Rorty appears trapped in a time warp. He perceives groups, not the people of whom they consist, and society's ills as the evils (immiseration, to use his word) imposed on one group by another. Wasn't this the classic flaw in Marxist thinking? To deny the humanity of the individual by treating all as groups? Proletariat good, Kulaks bad, capitalists worse, and members of the Party, without flaw until we liquidate you?

The science of our day has been moving away from Rorty for several decades. The premise that people are in any way uniform in their innate abilities, character, personality traits and all other measures has been exhaustively studied and found to be untenable. Marx notes as much in saying "from each according to his abilities." Dramatic developments in the studies of genetics and evolution point to facts that were once observed and accepted as common knowledge, that there are meaningful differences among groups of people as well.

The core question is, given that people and groups of people are differently endowed with the talents that result in success in modern society, what is social justice?

Rorty does not take the first step, which is to recognize that inequalities in social position, wealth, etc. correlate at least to some degree to discrepancies in industry, intelligence and other personal traits. Instead he puts the blame on other groups in society: "Sadism was recognized as having deeper roots than economic insecurity. The delicious pleasure to be had from creating a class of putative inferiors and then humiliating individual members of that class was seen as Freud saw it-as something which would be relished even if everybody were rich." It's still kill the kulacks and capitalists time as far as Rorty is concerned.

The argument he needs to make, but cannot find, is to define what social justice means in a society whose individual members are differently endowed. It surely starts with legal justice: equal protection under the law. It surely also must go further, to provide some safety net for members of society whose talents are not in demand in the labor markets, whether due to genetic inheritance, injury, age or whatever. The nature and level of that safety net must be a matter of public debate, as must the question of what to do with sociopaths and others dangerous to their peers.

Rorty missed a turn on the road of philosophy. Those with something meaningful to say in this age are knowledgeable about science. Start with Darwin and go through Dennett, Dawkins, Gould, Hrdy, Summers, Carvalli-Sforza and others, at least see what Jensen, Murray and Herrenstein have to say, and wind up with Pinker's amazingly good "The Blank Slate." Poor Rorty is dealing with the cold ashes of dead philosophies.